

**Pubblicato il: luglio 2024**

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Registrazione Tribunale di Frosinone N. 564/09 VG

## **Human rights on the move. The pedagogical legacy of Ettore Gelpi**

### **I diritti umani in movimento. L'eredità pedagogica di Ettore Gelpi**

*di*

Veronica Riccardi

Università degli Studi Roma Tre

[veronica.riccardi@uniroma3.it](mailto:veronica.riccardi@uniroma3.it)

#### **Abstract:**

In the modern global contest, the debate on human rights has emerged as a crucial issue requiring in-depth analysis and considerable, meaningful and radical engagement. In a rapidly changing world faced with complex challenges, the need to strengthen this commitment to defend and promote human rights is more pressing than ever. The increase in economic inequalities, the proliferation of armed conflicts, the environmental and health crises, the challenges posed by technological advancements raise critical questions about respecting human rights in every corner of the globe. Our reflection on human rights does not only concern the protection of individual rights but also the construction of fairer, more inclusive and resilient societies. In this paper, based on a text written by Ettore Gelpi on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the author considers the indispensable role a certain type of 'problem posing' education has in the struggle for realizing these rights throughout the world. This contribution presents a theoretical reflection and, at the same time, proposes a developmental line which may hold concrete consequences for a pedagogical practice focused on social justice.

**Keywords:** human rights, social justice, earth consciousness.

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QTimes – webmagazine

Anno XVI - n. 3, 2024

[www.qtimes.it](http://www.qtimes.it)

Doi: 10.14668/QTimes\_16313

**Abstract:**

Nel contesto globale contemporaneo, il dibattito sui diritti umani emerge come un tema cruciale che richiede un'analisi profonda e un impegno significativo, radicale e non banale. In un mondo caratterizzato da sfide complesse e mutamenti rapidi, la necessità di rafforzare la loro difesa e promozione è più pressante che mai. L'aumento delle disuguaglianze economiche, la proliferazione dei conflitti armati, la crisi ambientale e sanitaria, le sfide legate alla tecnologia sollevano interrogativi critici sul rispetto dei diritti umani in ogni angolo del pianeta. La riflessione sui diritti umani non riguarda solo la tutela dei singoli individui, ma anche la costruzione di società più giuste, inclusive e resilienti. In questo lavoro, a partire da un testo scritto da Ettore Gelpi in occasione dei 50 anni dalla Dichiarazione Universale dei Diritti Umani, si propone una riflessione circa il ruolo imprescindibile di un certo tipo di educazione (problematizzante) nella lotta per la loro attuazione in ogni parte del mondo. Il contributo presenta una riflessione teorica e, insieme, propone una linea evolutiva che possa avere concrete ricadute nella pratica pedagogica orientata alla giustizia sociale.

**Parole chiave:** diritti umani, giustizia sociale, coscienza terrestre.

**1. Introduction**

Even after more than 70 years since their proclamation, human rights, the foundation upon which the dignity and respect for each individual is based, regardless of origin, social affiliation, sexual orientation or religious belief, are still not yet the prerogative of all. Indeed, many people throughout the world continue to face systematic violations of their fundamental rights. In the dynamic and interconnected environment of the contemporary world, the human rights issue emerges as a crucial priority.

The title of this paper directly refers to an event organised on June 20, 1998 at UNESCO entitled “Fifty Years after the Universal Declaration, human rights on the move...”. In short it was a celebration of the anniversary of the Human Rights Charter, with particular attention to Article 13 (1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. 2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their own country), an article particularly topical given that human mobility which includes the rights of migrants, refugees, those seeking asylum and other people in movement, is still today an urgent and much debated issue. While adopting the title of the event, however, we would like to emphasize here that it is human rights themselves which are on the move towards a more widespread and equitable implementation.

To this end it would seem particularly useful to reflect on the words spoken on that occasion by an intellectual and pedagogue still little known in Italy, albeit a native of the country who worked in various educational initiatives (educational struggles) in remote areas of both the north and the south of the country. We are speaking here of Ettore Gelpi (Milan, 1933 – Paris, 2002), well known, especially internationally, for his commitment to education, always understanding it to mean a lifelong education which was part of an emancipation from every form of exploitation, a democratic and civic education and within a project of sustainable development.

Reflecting upon the current relevance of Gelpi's thought, in particular in regard to human rights, is most beneficial on at least two grounds. Firstly, Ettore Gelpi worked for two decades at UNESCO (1972-1993 circa?). In 1972 he was nominated as the successor to Paul Lengrand. 1972 is also the year of the Faure Report (*Learning to Be*) which focuses for the first time on a concept that will influence future educational and training policies: an interest in the global development of individuals, seen as a crucial horizon in terms of a lifelong education which could meet the challenges of the future. At UNESCO, Gelpi is the greatest proponent of adult education not so much a *sine qua non* for a knowledge-based society (something that did not yet exist in the 1970s) nor in the sense of a means (through constant study) of becoming more flexible and therefore able to change one's work at will, to learn technologies which are rapidly changing but rather as a process which helps enhance self-development both in industrialised societies as a way of emancipation from inequalities, as well as in less-industrialised countries (and above all in these societies) as a way of breaking out of underdevelopment and poverty and of struggling against inequality. In Gelpi's thought the focus is on political engagement as well as on a scientific and educational programme.

Secondly, room number 3014 of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris was, for Gelpi, the starting point for devising his "Meccano International" (1987), the title of a very important text but also, probably, his conception of global relations, his consistent *modus operandi*, trying to understand the why of things and to go beyond appearances. Although nowadays a rarely available volume, the text contains one of Ettore Gelpi's most careful and suggestive analyses of the world-system. Beginning with his account of a hobby he has had since childhood for watches and the mechanisms that move them, Gelpi manages to interpret, following a similar logic, the complexity of international relations. Just as observing inside a watch case and finding screws, wheels, gears that, working together, can provide us with the perfect time, looking behind the systems of international relations we find "a tangle of interests; ambitions, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic; of fear and of certain repressed desires". Interdependence is a necessity for all, even if states often continue to transform themselves only as a late response to crises: initiatives should be put in place to create an international democracy where all individuals and all countries can contribute to find positive solutions.

## 2. Human Rights on the Move

Therefore, keeping in mind the notion of the 'Meccano International' cited in the previous paragraph, we can read several words of Gelpi's speech at UNESCO, cited at the start of this paper:

"This conference is on 'Human rights on the move'. Next year we will organise another conference and we, the speakers, will put ourselves in other's shoes who are on the frontline and hence there will be:

- 1) child prostitutes and women prostitutes. I do not know why children who can work, who have been prostituted, are never present in our Conferences to pay witness to the meaning of the violation of human rights.
- 2) prisoners. Half of those detained in prisons are innocent. And the other half have some responsibility but are often ill-treated, let them be here with us, let us listen to them.
- 3) those unemployed since birth. Now we have a second generation of unemployed: there are children of the unemployed who are set to become unemployed themselves. They are here with us. Or there are the unemployed who have been made redundant due to efficiency savings.

- 4) those who have been expelled. We expel people because they are clandestine immigrants, but we also expel American ‘indians’ in both North and South America, because they have always been too autochthonous.
- 5) those sentenced to death [...]. We are still in alliances with countries where the death penalty is still in use! Casamayor<sup>1</sup>, a great writer and judge, had proposed in his introduction to Cesare Beccaria’s book on the abolition of the death penalty, to abolish the death penalty. I pay homage to Casamayor who was a great writer and a great judge. Intellectually, we are ready to free ourselves from the death penalty and yet we still use it. Well, let those sentenced to death be here among us, to tell us what the respect of human rights means in countries which celebrate human rights.
- 6) we can also have peasants from Chiapas, and of the thousands of Chiapas’ which exist throughout the world
- 7) of those creative artists who have been reduced to silence by mass media. It is terrible to travel in Europe, the TV is the same everywhere [...]
- 8) we need, too, to invite the dead and even the dead of “clean” wars (this may be a little difficult, but all the same.... because we fight clean wars and don’t know how clean wars can cause deaths. They will be there, and I believe that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have a debate. But this is a proposal for next year!”.

The words with which Gelpi begins his speech are divisive words, deliberately provocative but also words of real depth which pin us down to the truth of the matter requiring us to highlight the contradictions permeating global society, while keeping in mind the lofty and broad principles contained in the Charter. As in Franco Fortini’s famous poem *Lontano Lontano*<sup>2</sup> (1994), the risk of those who find themselves “in the centre of the world” is precisely that of being only remotely aware of the problems that those who, in other parts of the world, are experiencing tragic emergencies and violence, and of experiencing a detached and restrained compassion. Our attention and empathy remain remote, especially when the mass media spotlight fades, if that is there ever was one. I would note that the narrative regarding armed conflicts is often superficial and emotive: an excess of information about some wars is counterbalanced by an absolute silence about many others.

We cannot, on the contrary, disregard the fact that we continue to perpetuate, every day, in places closer to home, great violence often involving people who cannot, by age or circumstance, assert the same rights that we talk about. Their authority, somehow, is not as “powerful” as ours. Gelpi has given examples of several categories of the excluded, some of them are still valid and we could add many others.

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<sup>1</sup> The pseudonym of Serge Fuster (Algeria, 1911 – Paris, 1988), a judge and writer.

<sup>2</sup> The poem *Lontano lontano* (From Afar) is part of a group of compositions written by Franco Fortini during the first Gulf War in 1991: the Seven Songs for the Gulf. These writings were included in the 1994 publication *Composita Solvantur*. Here is the poem: Far, far away they make war./The blood of others is shed on the earth./This morning, I was injured/By a rose stalk,/Sucking on that finger, I thought of the war./Oh poor people,How sad the world is!/I can be of no use, I cannot speak/I cannot depart by sea or by sky/And even if I could,oh defenceless people,/I speak not a word of Arabic! And my English is poor!/Could I under the head Of the lying bodies place a thick volume/Of my verse?/I don’t think so. Let us cease this poignant irony./Let’s put on a jumper, the sun is going down.

Unable to make an exhaustive list of all forms of exclusion existing in the world, I would like simply to cite some data. The 2022 WeWorld Index<sup>3</sup>, for example, confirms that we still live in a deeply unequal world, characterized in many countries by low levels of inclusion of women and minors; a world where one in two children and over one in three women live in countries where there are different forms of exclusion, in terms of economic, social and basic human rights.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index<sup>4</sup>, published in July 2023 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and by Oxford University's Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative highlights how five out of every six people in poverty worldwide live in sub-Saharan Africa (534 million people) or in South Asia (389 million people). The most serious forms and pockets of poverty concern developing nations, but economic poverty also exists in the most advanced nations.

According to a recent Eurostat report, in 2022 one in five European citizens, with a population of just over 95 million, were living below the poverty line and suffering social exclusion. Women, young adults, people with a low level of education, the unemployed, with significant differences between the different members of the European Union<sup>5</sup>, are most at risk of poverty.

Homing in on the Italian national context, the WeWorld Index (2023) claims that the country is still unable to guarantee full protection and promotion of the rights of women, girls, boys and adolescents. Some indicators have been cited which help us understand the dimension of certain phenomena, but we must consider that many injustices often simply cannot be measured. In any case, it is not just a question of quantification but of the right to express one's opinion and one's experience, to represent oneself and not to be represented by others. To return to the list cited by Gelpi, we can think of how, in our discussion, there are still many missing, those sentenced to death (according to Amnesty International data, twenty states carried out death sentences in 2022), prostitutes, male and female prisoners, those who suffer and sometimes die at sea, to arrive on our "shores of salvation". Just when, as educators, we have just celebrated the centenary of the birth of Don Milani, we must take note that the famous phrase of a *Letter to a Teacher* "It is the language alone that makes one equal. Equal are those who know how to express themselves and can understand the words of others. Rich or poor it makes no difference. But they must speak" (The School of Barbiana, 1967) is still disregarded, especially if we avert our eyes from our own centre of the world.

### 3. An educational challenge (too)

The promotion of human rights is a shared commitment that involves us all, individually, socially, collectively and politically. As educators and pedagogues, what can we do? In the spirit, again, of

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<sup>3</sup> The WeWorld Index is an indicator, developed by the independent humanitarian organization WeWorld, that makes a global assessment of the level of social inclusion and exclusion of women, girls and boys, photographing the living conditions in about 170 countries throughout the world. The Index consists of 30 indicators grouped into 15 dimensions, which refer to four key areas for the implementation of the rights of women, girls and boys: health, education, economy and society, to which is added the environmental and cultural context, the quality of life of these two social categories.

<sup>4</sup> The index measures the level of poverty of a family or population based on the notion of deprivation. It is developed from three fundamental dimensions: health, education and living standards. The degree of deprivation of a family and/or one of its members is therefore measured by the presence of one of the ten indicators developed: a family experiences deprivation if a child has died in the previous five years, or if any member is underweight due to poor nutrition, or if a school-age child does not attend an educational institution, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The highest percentages of people at risk of poverty and exclusion were recorded in Romania (34% of the population), Bulgaria (32%), Greece and Spain (26%) while in the most 'virtuous nations', such as the Czech Republic and Poland, only 12% of the population is at risk.

Gelpi, we can say that, often, we offer young people a study of history, civic education, citizenship, “and this is all very good. Yet they are always given to understand that real significance lies in the ideas of competition, competence and productivity: these are often terms of war rather than of peace. Or the emphasis is on the need to be employable. When one thinks about employability, one assumes one is talking about employment. But rather employability can often end up meaning unemployment and jobs with lower wages” (Gelpi, 1998). There is more than ever a need for an awareness, without deceiving oneself, that considers to what extent injustices are linked to the international division of labour and the economy, and to how these are derived from the inequalities connected to the international division of education and training, as Ettore Gelpi would have put it. And it is these inequalities that must be fought. It is also for speeches like these that Gelpi was, at certain stages, bitterly opposed at UNESCO.

Gelpi, after speaking of the duty of memory –understanding this, however, as an imperative obligation to shape a universal memory - in which no one is forgotten, even if they are part of peoples considered to be “peripheral” or minorities, and he goes on:

“I think that if we really want to develop human rights, we must, starting from school (beyond citizenship and civic rights), encourage the right of deviance, the right of heresy, the right to differ and the right of a true multiculturalism. We should not just pay reverence to different cultures. Above all, I think that we can relaunch certain strong ideas of universality in the face of globalization models. Because there is a risk that, with globalization, universality will be done away with”. Universality, like identity, is a very complex and multifaceted concept, it does not eliminate uniqueness and differences, and it is not about being able to understand each other in every way: It is the will to communicate and cooperate with all the inhabitants of the Earth without exception, but knowing how to proceed in the presence of those who can act and who have the right to act differently (Marshall, 2002). It is universality itself, also understood as the universality of rights, that puts us all on an equal footing beyond individual and cultural differences, that allows us to acknowledge that we are all bearers of the same rights and duties” (Gelpi, 1998).

It is a question as pedagogues and educators of opposing the pedagogy of deviance (Tolomelli, 2022), intercultural pedagogy, problem-posing education (Freire, 1971) also within a perspective of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), to the pedagogy of *cous cous*, a merely apparent tolerance, of a subordinate integration. It is interesting, to this end, to continue reading Gelpi’s speech, arriving at these final lines:

“A more rigorous analysis is needed, because it is often the most powerful states who establish what constitutes the violation of human rights. They make a speech about human rights, but in the end, it is them, through their economic policies, through military actions, through the media that define violence and the violations of rights. [...] I think we should start to make more stringent analyses within the most powerful countries. The wolf and the lamb. We always say the lamb is responsible. And currently there are new lambs which are certain small countries in the South, which are always deemed the villains. And it is true that they are villains, but the real villains are, rather, the wolves and not the lambs. I think that in this climate it would be important to start building this earth’s consciousness, which is not a utopia. Earth’s consciousness is the future of Human Rights. If we are not engaged in the same undertaking, there will always be violence. If we start this project, then maybe in ten years, twenty years, in a couple of centuries, if we think that we are all in the same boat, Human Rights will be respected. Because within our countries we do not commit the same crimes

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QTimes – webmagazine

Anno XVI - n. 3, 2024

[www.qtimes.it](http://www.qtimes.it)

Doi: 10.14668/QTimes\_16313



that we do in other countries. So, if our homeland is deemed the Earth, then maybe we can advance a little.

Gelpi's final proposal is a very interesting and topical one. It seeks to combine political commitment (at the level of individual states but also at a supranational level), and individual commitment of those who take part in the same undertaking with a view to contextualising it within a global future. The earth's consciousness is, indeed, the culmination of Gelpi's thought that contains, in two simple terms, two deep and interrelated meanings: the Earth as the first homeland of man, the first Heimat and the first native place to which an individual belongs, even before being part of a specific continent, a specific nation, a region, a city, a family; the earth in an ecological sense, as nature insofar as the human species, with its immense diversities, is part of its infinite variety, That is why it must be respected.

There is a clear congruity here with the thought of other great intellectuals, above all with Edgar Morin: Morin's concept of "Homeland-Earth" (1994) and Gelpi's "Earth's consciousness" are very similar because both evoke the common identity of all human beings who, in each part of the world, live the same existential problems of life and death. Humans must learn, therefore, to live on the planet, to communicate, to share with other human beings, to be part of an exclusive culture but to be, above all, part of a "terrestrial" one. We can also mention, without claiming to be complete, the term "ecological conversion" used, albeit with slightly different nuances, both by Alexander Langer (1994) and, more recently, by Pope Francis (2015).

How do we attain earth's consciousness? Or also, how do we inculcate earth's consciousness? Always following Gelpi's thought, in line with that of other contemporary thinkers such as, for example, Erich Fromm (1976), Carl Rogers (1978), the already mentioned Edgar Morin and Paulo Freire, to mention just a few, we can catch a glimpse of the advent of a new humanism as the pathway to attain this "earth's consciousness", a new humanism that can only develop as a fitting alternative to consumerism and materialism, through a return to authentic human values and struggles to respect human dignity against direct or indirect physical and moral violence inflicted upon humanity:

Are new forms of humanism necessary? Yes, provided they are not the projection of one civilization onto another. Humanism is built day by day in the fields of farmers throughout many countries, by those who simply seek to win the right to live for all, in the cities and poor neighbourhoods, by the unemployed and the underemployed who often have to invent "arts of survival" to be able to exist; not forgetting those who belong to the different "firing squads" and yet refuse to shoot, and the creatives who hinder the actions of those who want to "normalize" and "prescribe pedagogically" the daily life of each. To resist this pedagogical enforcement and to fight for culture means to conduct some very tough struggles, because this "pedagogical prescription" is practiced through various means: through consumption and/or imposed ideologies, the omnipresent bureaucracy, intellectual conformism.

The humanism of a planetary civilisation is above all a question of daily freedom and democracy for all and through the action of all, without conceit and without rhetoric" (Gelpi, 1987, pp. 8-9).

Therefore, it is a matter of valuing human dignity, respecting the dignity and intrinsic value of every individual, promoting equality, social justice, the holistic development of the individual (and not only from a material perspective), and sustainability and respect for the environment, an increasingly robust culture of peace and solidarity (both intragenerational and intergenerational). Earth's consciousness and planetary civilization will lead to the construction of a "global identity", as "a

consequence of the necessary cooperation between all countries regarding ecology, health, the regulation of the economy, demography” (Gelpi, 2000, p. 31). If there is a common destiny then people’s struggle to defend their homeland should also be common, as should the defence of their actual well-being and that of future generations, and their (human) rights. In this the role of education is crucial, especially in promoting critical awareness and social responsibility. Ettore Gelpi warns us about the very harmful illusion of being able to prescribe pedagogically the life of each and proposes, instead, to free individuals, through a critical sense (that he calls “learning to unlearn”) from “models based on competitiveness, individualism, exclusion, the primacy of a race or a people” (Gelpi, 2000, p. 111).

#### 4. Conclusion

This contribution began with very strong and provocative words, but words that were profoundly real and urgent. As we know, however, good pedagogy also needs words of hope to generate a fairer future. Ettore Gelpi spoke of “daily concrete utopias” (2000, p. 26), precisely to argue that it is hope that leads us to do something differently, step by step, to teach in a different way, to work so that the dream is more real than the real. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire also stated that “The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve that world... is a frivolous illusion... hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice... in order to become historical concreteness” (Freire, 1994 pp.8-9). Hope and utopia are essential in pedagogical practice because nothing can be done without yearning to change the current state of things and without being willing to commit, starting from oneself, to be something “more” and to ensure that human rights move towards being increasingly realized on a global scale. The final concluding words are borrowed from Leonardo Zanier (1935-2017), a poet, educator and trade unionist from Friuli who is very close to Ettore Gelpi, with the poem “Domani” contained in his famous collection of poems “Libers... by scugnî lâ. Poems 1960-1962” (1977), which highlights the importance of hope as a driving force for change and resilience. Hope and our tomorrow can make our intentions operational in a concrete movement, transforming words into actions, becoming hands that build, eyes that see opportunities and an invaluable rage in fighting injustices and overcoming difficulties.

tomorrow...is not a word,  
tomorrow is the hope,  
we have nothing but her  
let’s use her,  
make her become  
the hands the eyes and the rage  
and then we shall conquer fear.

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