

# AMI Journal

2016

archival treasure publication

## CULTURE AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORMATIVE PERIODS

**Maria Montessori**

*Fourth Lecture at the 7th Montessori Congress,  
Edinburgh, 1938*



published by Association Montessori Internationale

# MARIA MONTESSORI

## CULTURE AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORMATIVE PERIODS

### FOURTH LECTURE AT THE MONTESSORI CONGRESS, EDINBURGH, 1938

#### INTRODUCTION

In the year just preceding our 28th International Montessori Congress to take place in Prague, Czech Republic, we return to a past edition, almost eighty years ago: in 1938 the Montessori Congress was hosted in Edinburgh by the Scottish Montessori Society, from July 26 - August 2. One of the four lectures that Maria Montessori delivered on that occasion is entitled “Culture as a Means of Development in the Formative Periods”; a lecture with a subject matter as fresh as ever was never published in English before, although the lecture did find its way to Dutch and German readers in the past.<sup>1</sup>

Where Maria Montessori discusses culture in this lecture, she understands it to refer to ideas, customs, and knowledge of the world and, as usual argues passionately that the human being can never be too young to be offered culture in a structured and organised fashion.

Montessori points to a new challenge in society and education which she terms “scientific illiteracy”, which has almost replaced that previous major challenge of “simple and straightforward” illiteracy. In Montessori’s eyes, in 1938 people had to deal with a lack of knowledge of new ideas, how the modern world functioned and how society was structured. Perhaps in our times this plea is equally urgent: in spite of the fact that today’s children, generally speaking, enjoy a higher level of education than ever before, we as 21st century citizens have to continuously adapt to new developments, new insights and knowledge, and the pace at which they reach and impact our lives is formidable. Culture new and in flux is acquired through all external means.

Montessori argued that offering culture is essential and that the child absorbs it spontaneously from the environment in a disorganised fashion with the greatest ease, and wondered how offering culture in a structured fashion could possibly be tiring. Traditional schools apparently viewed offering culture to children such a strenuous exercise for them that it seemed to be a threat to their mental health; the audience laughed with Montessori when she joked that the remedy chosen by the schools was to rather remove certain subjects altogether from the school curriculum. Montessori also emphasised her ideas on the role of the hand in building intelligence in this lecture when she says that nothing can ever become material solely by exercising the power of the mind: the hand is a partner of equal significance in the realisation of concepts.

#### “ENVIRONMENTAL” BACKGROUND ON THE CONGRESS

The local newspaper *The Scotsman* of 2 August reported that all congress lectures were delivered in Craigmillar Park Church Hall, adjoining the Carlyle Hostel, East Suffolk. On the day that this lecture was given the sun was shining brightly, and at the wish of Maria Montessori the chairs were transferred to the lawn of the hostel where the delegates formed an open air “class”.



The day’s meeting was presided over by Lady Leslie Mackenzie (Helen Spence, 1859-1945). Together with her husband, Sir Leslie Mackenzie, she was a Scottish public health campaigner. Her husband was knighted for his work in improving the physical condition of Scottish school-children, and the couple influenced many important educational reforms in the early 1900s. Lady Mackenzie was known for her inspiring speeches, so we assume that her introduction to Maria Montessori gave evidence of her passion to defend the rights of children. Maria Montessori’s lectured in Italian; Mario M. Montessori translated verbatim.

(The photograph shows Maria Montessori and Mario Montessori awaiting their turn to start the lecture, while Lady Leslie Mackenzie gives her introductory talk.)

<sup>1</sup> This lecture was first published in the Dutch book “Door het kind naar een nieuwe wereld”, ed. by A. M. Joosten, Heiloo 1941 (tweede druk 1953), p. 86-96. The title of the text was modified by the editor of the Dutch book: “Kennis als middel tot ontwikkeling der persoonlijkheid”. The second publication was in German by Helene Helming in the magazine *Montessori-Werkbrief* 23/1970, S. 3-7. A German translation of the complete Dutch version was published in the book: Ludwig, H./ Fischer Ch./ Fischer R. (Ed.): *Verstehendes Lernen in der Montessori-Paedagogik*, IdR vol. 8, Muenster 2003, p. 73-79. The complete text on the basis of the English typescript of 1938 was published in volume 15 of the academic edition of Montessori’s Collected works: “Durch das Kind zu einer neuen Welt”, Freiburg 2013, p. 69-79 (see also p. 322-323).

# MARIA MONTESSORI

## CULTURE AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORMATIVE PERIODS FOURTH LECTURE AT THE MONTESSORI CONGRESS, EDINBURGH, 1938

Lady Mackenzie, I wish to thank you very much for your talk, which has revealed that not only do you uphold our principles, but also that you have penetrated their deep essence, and made them your own. Therefore, we hope that you will not only continue your interest as Honorary President, but will be a collaborator in our work.



The Castle. Edinburgh:

Flood-lit in honour of  
Dr Montessori's visit  
August 1938

illustration by Robert Scott Irvine, Scottish watercolour painter

Culture forms a fundamental part of education; it is so fundamental that many people confuse the two.

The common school is devised to give the pupils the culture that is

necessary

if they wish to take part in social life. I don't think it is necessary to dwell on the tragedy of youths who have merely to absorb culture in order to live in the society of our times.

Culture thus given requires such an effort from the pupil that it becomes a real danger to his mental health. And such nervous and mental fatigue have formed one of the great problems of school life. Although these problems are of profound interest to doctors, they really should interest everyone. The

matter should not be considered only from the point of view of mental hygiene as it is today.

Many have tried to solve this with a simple approach, reasoning 'if study is mentally fatiguing, it must be diminished.' 'We will reduce the hours of work and intersperse them with periods of rest. We will lighten the study programmes.' In some cases the information brochures of modern schools state that the school has eliminated grammar, geometry or Latin. So, in these modern schools we see a process of "abolition". It is as if we offered a person who is exhausted a chair as the only remedy to rest. There is another side to this problem: the question of culture. The real problem of culture is that we have reached a stage in civilisation where we must intensify culture to the highest degree. If we merely wish to understand our own times, without any professional specialisation, we must be widely cultured. Otherwise, we are like people who do not understand what is going on around them, and there are so many developments that we must understand. A little while ago illiteracy was an important question, many people could not read or write; now we see scientific illiteracy, for we do not understand the life around us.

We have two problems: one, mental fatigue which is manifest everywhere, and two, the necessity of intensifying culture.

In all likelihood, we are the first to show a way of reducing, or even eliminating mental fatigue and of augmenting individuality by giving culture. This experience, which opens up a new path in education, has been offered by the children themselves.

The children in our first schools showed that they were indefatigable under those favourable circumstances. They were so persistent in their work that

we had to lengthen the school hours, beginning at eight and finishing at six. Nevertheless, the children wanted to continue their work at home, and the mothers, who were poor, asked us to give them the means of continuing. Often they said that the children fell asleep with some object for work, or paper and pencil still in their hands. Similarly, when the children were ill, the mothers came asking for help in giving things to their children. I also know examples of teachers in Holland who are asked to work at least an hour every day with children who are ill and cannot attend school.

The progress of these children was surprising. It surprised the whole world when children of four and a half years “broke out” into writing—not only writing, but arithmetic too. When the child reveals something very surprising, our first reaction is to admire and wonder. Later we are confronted with the fact that we must reason out these revelations. We realise that he has revealed new facts which were unknown to us before.

Now the human being is distinguished from all other beings by the fact that he has intelligence. Then surely we should realise that culture is not a burden for the human mind. Man—through the intelligence that distinguishes him—has been able to build up the civilisation by means of which we all live.

If this is so, it is clear that, as Tolstoy said, man does not live by bread alone, but also by wisdom and culture. It makes us realise that man has two kinds of hunger: the hunger that urges him to take material food, and the hunger that urges him to take “superior” food. Therefore, if man is not able to satisfy this “superior” hunger he is as miserable and near death as if refused material food.

We must visualise culture from the point of view of the child; it is one of the first things man needs in order to realise himself. If the acquisition of culture causes fatigue at school, the school must somehow be at fault, and it is the child himself who has shown us this. That is why we say that the child is the

“teacher of man”.

Our society is erroneously orientated, especially with regard to the question of work. We see this misconception even in the Bible, where it is suggested that man suffers while he works. By this I mean that if we do suffer while we work, or if the child suffers when he studies, it is not because work and study are true causes of fatigue but because our conception of work and study is fundamentally wrong. How can we correct this formidable error? The only help available to us is by observing the natural life of the child. The observations and experiences that we carry out with the child will furnish guides that will lead to a reform in Education. As usual, the revelations made by the child mean a complete reversal of our conceptions.

There are several points on which I should like to dwell. The first is that a basic need of the child is to know things. As everybody has discovered, sometimes to their annoyance, the child wishes to touch everything and is always asking questions. This shows that he wishes to know things, but we cannot give a direct and satisfactory answer to all that he demands to know. We must create a world of culture around him, and then we will see that he does not receive directly [the answers] from us, but absorbs them from the world around him. When the child is given this chance to absorb, we see culture developing in a marvellous way. While the child is absorbing, we see that he is also active. This shows that the acquisition of culture is a human function with different aspects, as has every synthetic action of life.

Now when one has had this experience, and is persuaded by these facts, one must be brave and put at the disposal of the child those things that we have considered difficult. We need not fear that the child is too small to understand; we must give lofty matters, but always with the condition that we must give them in a form they can absorb and which will lead to functioning. If after the culture is given he does not absorb and function, and nothing happens, then

no harm has been done. I would say 'be brave', but remember to make sure that what you offer to the child is in a form that can be assimilated.

How it can be assimilated varies according to the phase of the child's life. In the case of the small child it is through the sensorial motor senses; at a later stage the child has a formidable memory, which means that it needs much information for it to be satisfied. At yet another time, the child's powers of reasoning are developing. We must give culture in such a way that along the path of life the child is following he finds the food he needs. It is not the culture that tires out the child, it is the way we present and offer it that is contrary to the laws of life.

It may come as a surprise to hear that before the child can read or write he is capable of absorbing biology; even more, the giving of biology actually helps him to read. Mathematics can be absorbed by the child at a very early age: geometry can be given in the nursery school. The child has intelligence, but we fail to offer the right means of development. We have a preconceived idea that because these matters are tiring for the child at a particular age, they should be unfit for childhood altogether.

The child, in the process of development, takes from nature and the environment all these things in a disorderly way, just by the process of living. If taking these things in a disorderly fashion causes no fatigue, why then should the child find it tiring if they are offered in an orderly manner?

Science enters the environment very early. The child never learns in a passive way. He has shown us very clearly, leaving no room for doubt, that the intelligence is developed by an external organ. It has often been said that the brain is the inner organ of the intelligence, and that another important organ, especially in childhood, is the hand. The child learns not only by mental energy but also by the use of his hand.

As I have said, it is the child who gives us a guide to understand the facts of life. All around us we find

products that are the result of human intelligence, but we need to realise that it was not mere thinking power that gave shape to them, they also depend on activity. The real cosmic mission of man seems to be the close collaboration of intelligence and hand. Something achieved by human hands truly is a function of the intelligence.

There is one more point on which we must dwell. In certain periods, there is a great capacity to learn in certain ways. There is a tendency to delay the offering of culture. Let's look at biology, for instance. I do not know what is considered the correct time to offer it here [Scotland, ed.], but often it is done at the age of twelve years. The child must start right from the beginning of the subject, although by then he has lost all the urges of the sensorial period; he has lost his tremendous power of memorising, and therefore he starts with a great handicap. He is told, 'you must remember these things!' 'You must observe in order to make progress.' And because this is precisely what he cannot do, people say, 'if it is too difficult, let us eliminate it.' If, instead, his study had begun during the sensorial stage, when his memory was capable of retaining facts, he would be well prepared when the time comes for study. In addition, if the child['s intelligence] had been satisfied during the sensorial and memory periods, his entire intelligence would have been better developed.

The vital point is: if the child has a natural attitude or aptitude, it must be fully developed, if there is to be progress. If these faculties are not developed in the child of twelve, we can liken him to a person with a paralysed hand and without powers of memory, hence without any interest in the subject. Not only that, he is undeveloped. Scientific observers, seeing these reactions, make more of it, but there the matter ends.

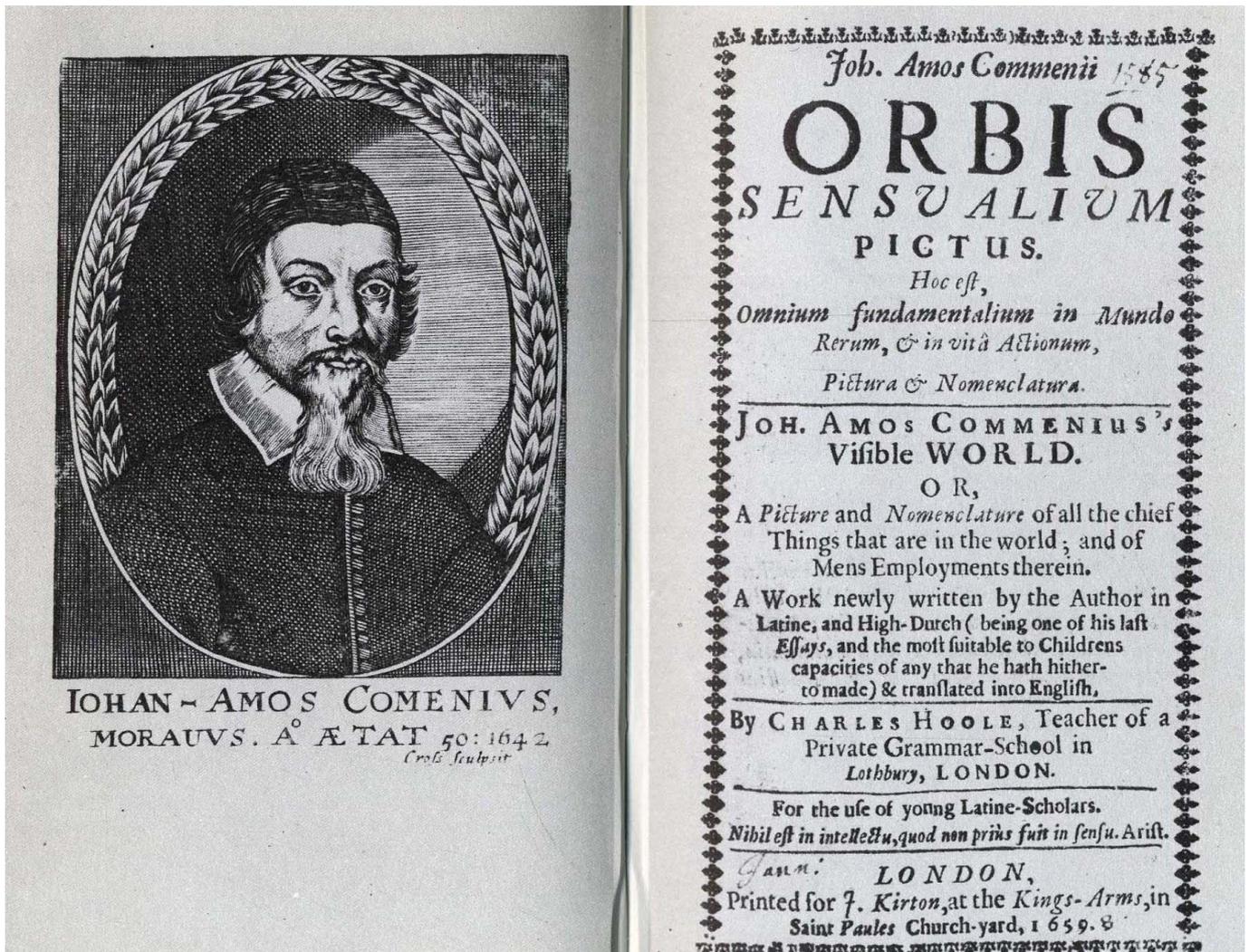
I believe that at university something similar happens; the young person undertakes a new branch of study and has to do work more appropriate for a child of three years, which subsequently he finds

himself unable to do. And so, university studies are considered difficult. I went to university at a time when it was thought that women were incapable of any study; yet I was struck by the fact that the first things given to us were at a level suited to a child of four or six years, not to mature beings. Study at university is difficult because they make the students go back in time; they, however, have lost interest and are indifferent to such an approach. The student starts out determined because he must complete work in order to reach what he is aiming at. But look, he has lost interest and enthusiasm, the sacred fire of culture. We all know that some people are cynical in their sentiments, and I venture to say that the students are the intellectual cynics at university.

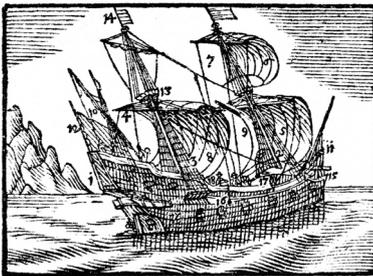
The teacher of the secondary school will confirm the same fact when asked. They say, 'The child arrives unprepared, he has lost interest, he is ignorant and understands nothing.' There cannot be but a formidable error in the distribution of culture if

all these people are judged as being unprepared. Their development has been arrested. They have not been able to develop themselves. This destitution, this poverty, is the problem of our times, but it cannot be "cured" as easily as material poverty, which can be remedied by social measures. It is an intellectual problem that can only be solved by education.

Now let us take a look at the history of the methods of education. From the earliest times the school was a closed room, where culture was transmitted by the voice of the teacher to the children who have to listen. And this is against life itself, something we need not illustrate for it is generally understood. Comenius of Prague was the first to realise that it was difficult for children to grasp things purely by voice instruction and gave them pictures. He created and offered his famous *Orbis Pictus*. And this reform was very successful; using pictures in books spread all over the world.



Navis oneraria. Das Lastschiff.



<p><i>Navis</i>, 1 impellitur, non remis, sed solâ vi ventorum. In illo erigitur <i>Mastus</i>, 2 undiq; ad <i>Oras</i> Navis funibus 3 firmatus; cui annectuntur <i>Antenna</i>, 4 his, <i>Vela</i>, 5 quæ ad Ventum</p>	<p><b>Das Schiff</b> 1 wird fortgetrieben/ nicht durch Rudern/ sondern von den Winden. In demselben wird aufgestellt der <b>Mastbaum</b>/ 2 ringsum an den <b>Wort</b> des Schiffs mit <b>Seilen</b> 3 befestet; an welchen gehängt werden die <b>Segelstangen</b>/ 4 an diese/ die <b>Segel</b>/ 5 welche gegen dem Wind expan-</p>
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Subsequently, people said, 'Why not give children real objects instead of the representations. As a result Object Lessons were developed. This in turn was followed by the realisation that all these objects were inanimate, which is why it was suggested to rather offer animate things,

as are studied in laboratories, or machines, aquariums and school gardens. And now what more do we want? Surely now we should realise that the growing man is still passive. It is ironical to give all this to a man who finds himself in prison. First the child must be set free; he must come into contact with the world. To my mind, this will be the last step. Just as we set out with such enthusiastic energy to make things for the passive child, we must make this fresh effort to create a world for the child. The whole of society must help.

At last we find that culture is identified with life. One becomes cultured just by living. Life will be reformed on a scientific basis, so that to live means to become cultured.

Today the preconceived idea still prevails that if the child goes out into the world there will be no time for study; but I argue the very opposite, that by going out into the world the child will become cultured. We feel it is our task to make this idea understood, so that a start can be made in its realisation. Soon we will understand that in such a world culture is life itself, meaning that culture will never finish.

Let us greet the sun and the beautiful life around

us, and imagine the school as St Francis of Assisi imagined the Church might be. At the height of his mystical experiences he said, 'I see a great vision for our Church: it must be formed by the Apennines that surround our city.'

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From the answer by Maria Montessori in response to the addresses of welcome at the inaugural meeting of the congress.

We shall understand one another, in spite of differences of language because we have at least two common principles that unite us: the love of the child and the love of freedom.

The child awakens us. In him, small and helpless we feel a great potentiality.

[...] It is our hope to make Humanity better. This becomes a faith that unites children and adults, and raises childhood to a very high level of power. In order to understand, we must see the child from a fresh angle.

He is to be our teacher, not we his.

What is important is for all of us to serve the child.

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ISSN: 1877-539X

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