

School politics and innovative experiences in Italy (1861–2015)

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Abstract. *In my paper, I describe educational experiences carried out not in the name of political choices, but thanks to engaged educators or/and philanthropists. Official school politics have been dominated by conservatism and elitism, whereas educators and philanthropists tried different didactical ways, working out a different idea of a school. The core of the paper is to compare official political school-models and non-official models. At the end, two questions are raised: Why have these experiences not influenced political choices? Why have teachers, politicians and educational theorists not interacted?*

Keywords: *Education, History of Education, Pedagogy, Educational innovation*

Introduction

The most important peculiarities of Italian school politics after the national unification till nowadays are a lasting conservatism, an as much persisting lack of interest for popular education and strong centralism. However, we cannot affirm that Italy has been lacking in educational projects aimed at integrating, substituting, or, in some cases, even at modifying government guidelines. After the Italian Kingdom proclamation, the educational situation in the country, in which illiteracy existed at peak levels – especially in the Southern regions – of up to 99%, did not stimulate governments to take adequate decisions to overturn these statistics. The real educational project of the liberal government

was conservative, thereby hindering popular emancipation requests of socialists and the Mazzini. The liberal government provided educational incentives only for the hegemonic class, so to assure its existence. The dream of an interclass society based on the limitation of civil rights maintained schools in the frames established before 1861, trying to control the access to compulsory school and diversifying school programs: one reserved for the general culture to enter university, another for professional preparation. The majority of Italians had left school between the age of eight and nine years.

As the years went by, school politics had presented certain persisting features. Ministers change; the structural arrange-

ment of the country changes, too. Education, however, remains anchored to the principles of 1859 (the Casati Law). Recently, only formally though, governments and political parties have affirmed the centrality of school and education, but their fundamental orientations have not been substantially renewed. And it perhaps can be attributed to the ignorance of our ruling class, as it neglects *ad hoc* competences if one has to take care of specific areas of civil life. This also happens to a guilty indifference of all Italian governments, with rare and short-lived exceptions. And yet, in parallel with political choices, in Italy there have been interesting educational projects framed to give – according to times – full awareness of national identity or democratic consciousness: in a word, transforming Italian people into a national community of conscious citizens capable of exercising their citizenship in a society open to change. I will deal with these projects within the framework of my contribution, hoping to give evidence about the vivacity of the engagement of individuals and groups in real school transformation and education in my country. However, many of these projects and the names of their inspirers are almost unknown and only a few of these experiences succeeded in interacting with political and government choices, giving new orientation to the course of Italian educational politics. And, also in the case of a project succeeding, its influence would only last for a short time. So, the critical point of my exposition stands on an unavoidable question: why this failure? Why, in other words, did these projects, interesting and sometimes original as they were, remain – with the

exception of very rare cases – marginal with respect to the official educational politics? To answer this question, we shall not only briefly recall some of these projects, but also bear in mind an important preliminary tenet: educational activity should always be considered under theoretical and practical points of view, which are strictly connected, and with the understanding that any educational activity is insufficient if it is not rooted in the ideal of education.

From unification to the beginning of the new century

After 1861, education for people and teacher training were feeble points of the Italian educational system. Casati's Law neglected children's education and teachers' training, committed primary schools to the municipalities; moreover, Casati's Law committed the burden of organising professional training to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce. Lower classes obviously suffered from this situation, though they should have been the privileged receiver of education in order to overcome their illiteracy. Reading, in fact, is the basis for understanding the new national reality and for acquiring – by the use of the Italian language – the consciousness of national identity, as well as for sharing values and ideals. We have to do with a gap, filled, above all, by the Catholic Church, to which the task of education is offered, the opening of kindergartens and often elementary schools, and by the enlightened middle-class, the inheritor of the 18th century philanthropy. Mainly these philanthropists, too, provided the first innovative educational projects. Ladies, in compliance with the principle that women,

with their sensibility (as mothers or possible mothers), are *naturally* inclined to take care of children and education, were often the partners of these philanthropists.

These are the years in which Fröbel's ideas replace the Aportian model of *Kindergarten*. Based on playing, more than on rigorous learning (often mnemonic), the Fröbelian *Kindergarten* appears more suitable to develop children's hearts and minds. Adolfo Pick is the main figure of this national Fröbelism, which is characterised by the engagement and initiative of many women who give support, with their energy and money, to open a *Kindergarten*, in the meantime training teachers capable of applying Fröbel's "rules". Certainly, the inspirer of the movement is the German "philosopher" and educator, and surely these good women are a result and a manifestation of a long wave of paternalism, but beyond this there is the cultural orientation of the time.

On the one side, we have the positivistic pedagogy, which allies itself with Herbartism to defend didactics as a necessary part of the educational process, and supporting that it is a governmental duty and collectivity which warrants school for all – though distinguished in various sections with different fields of teaching and educational objectives. Fröbelian schools have a remarkable support, so that in the *Regolamento* of September 30, 1880 (n. 5666) it becomes mandatory that at each Scuola Normale, i.e., a teacher training institution, there should be an added *Kindergarten* for the future training of teachers. On the other side, we have the diffuse and the spreading of discontent for the results of the Country unification process; it is firstly manifested

by intellectuals, and then is shared by the middle and aristocratic classes that had greatly contributed to Italy's union. While the Ministry of Public Education takes limited initiatives, civil society stimulates the Ministry, which seems encouraged to act, even partially, but always interestingly. The range of measures begins from the increase of compulsory schooling, the introducing of sanctions for defaulting parents (the Coppino Law, 1877), to the institution of the so-called *Conferenze Pedagogiche* (Pedagogic Conferences), issued by De Sanctis and Baccelli, for updating teachers; from the revision of elementary school programs – which culminates in 1888 with Gabelli – to the introduction of apprenticeship in teachers' training schools, ratified by Gianturco in 1896. These decisions do not change the shape of Italian schools, but emphasise central questions about education in the country, like teachers training, popular education and the modernisation of didactics. Culturally speaking, the merit is to be attributed to Positivism and its interests for didactics and education. But we cannot disregard the socialist thought, which, just in that time, is moving towards affirmation. In order to control this situation, the government granted some concessions. However, people of the working classes remained marginalised.

From Giolitti's age to 1945

For the Italian school, Giolittian age could be considered a sort of a "Golden Age", as it marks a moment of equilibrium and collaboration, one never known before, between pedagogy and politics. While the engagement of private people continued,

the government, including the Ministry of Public Education, seemed to be finally eager to change the shape of the Italian school. The political plan was one of transforming and modernising Italy. It was not a case that, despite the plague of emigration, the initial fifteen years of the eighteenth century showed the first economic Italian boom. It is really a *belle époque*. Another step was that of enlarging suffrage.

The unavoidable consequence is the prolongation of compulsory school. This is contained in the Orlando Law (1904) and, above all, in the Daneo Credaro Law (1911). This latter Law not only transfers elementary school to the government, but establishes the rules for *Patronato Scolastico* (aid for poor families) and the recovery of illiterate adults. These are the years of enthusiasm: among other approved measures, recalled should be the initiatives for the Pedagogic Schools to update and improve the culture of elementary teachers, who previously attended their insufficient training courses. The wise intention is that of transforming school for training elementary teachers because of its cultural and professional inefficiency (Tomasi, Bellatalla, 1986 and Bellatalla, 1995). Moreover, the modern secondary school is launched, destined to become, with Gentile's reform, the *Liceo Scientifico* – a secondary school with an emphasis on sciences and modern languages, together with the traditional secondary school, where humanities and classical languages are taught more than mathematics and scientific training. In the meantime, teachers of all schools, for the first time in their history, began to organise themselves in professional associations. These associations

have proved to be very useful. They did not only defend the legal state and rights of teachers – like modern trade-unions – but also improved teachers culture and the didactic renewal through dialogue and comparison of experiences, which were reported in specialised magazines or communicated in *ad hoc* meetings. Among all associations, I here mention the *Federazione Nazionale Insegnanti Scuole Medie* – FNISM (the Teachers National Association of Primary School), founded at the beginning of the 'new century' by Gaetano Salvemini and Giuseppe Kirner. Yet out of school politics and *militant* teachers we have the same enthusiasm. Examples are Giovanni Cena and his popular school in the *Agro Pontino* (a flat country in the Region Lazio), the efforts of Sisters Agazzi for pre-school children with the model research of a different from that of Aporti or Fröbel; the well-known Montessori's *Casa dei bambini* (Children Houses), which opened in 1907 and certain popular universities, which started their activity in the beginning of 1900 (Ferrière, 1927).

This was a choice of the Socialist Party in the principal cities of Italy. Two were the aims: the alphabetising illiterate adults and, above all, the forming of a class conscience. The mentioned is not all: in 1910, the *Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* – ANIMI is founded: its Honorary President is Pasquale Villari, the President – Leopoldo Franchetti. Salvemini and Fortunato took part in this association, but, above others, Zanotti Bianco (Serpe, 2004) did too. We are still, certainly, in a philanthropic surrounding, but this Association is engaged in defending school rights, fighting illit-

eracy, spreading reading (with itinerant libraries), defending fishers and farmers from abuses, arousing, by adequate cultural tools, the consciousness of their rights, together with the sense of appurtenance to a community. Thereafter, the war and the dark period of Mussolini's dictatorship destroyed all that had been done. ANIMI is reduced to silence, FNISM is closed, the *scuole nuove* (i. e., schools grounded on "new education suggestions") are marginalised (Genovesi, 2010). Moreover, pedagogical suggestions coming from abroad are – as in the case of Dewey (Bellatalla, 1999) – misrepresented, reduced and closed in academia. Maria Montessori leaves Italy after a brief collaboration with Mussolini. The *Riforma Gentile* (the Gentile Reform) is misrepresented with alterations imposed by the government to adjust it to Fascism's wills.

The most interesting experiences, as that of Maria Maltoni, who originally applied the "creative" instances of *Riforma Gentile*, are tolerated, because these were often placed in the cultural periphery of the Country and so out of the vital trends of the Italian society of the time. Practically, Maria Maltoni was unknown until the end of the Second World War (Maltoni, 1949 and 1964). Politics prevail again on pedagogy and on the more innovative educational ideas. If it is true that Mussolini did not succeed in his project of homologating minds (Genovesi, 2010), it is evident, however, that in the period of his twenty-year dictatorship, particularly the teachers, not always convinced of Mussolini's *gospel*, but worried for their future and survival, reduced schools within the limits of mere education. So, any genuine

educational project were halted, losing the impulse and eagerness from which they had originated.

The Republican period (1945-1994)

After two long decades, not only were the Italian educational projects stagnant, but also the few meaningful events in the educational universe remain unknown until 1945, when Italy is touched by innovation and hope for a real change.

But it was to be a short dream. School politics resumed according to usual directions, not only following their original aristocratic, conservative and centralist principles, but getting stuck in unending discussions about the opportunity for school reform. Even in this new season of Italian society, while governmental politics proceeded very slowly – from 1945 to 1977 only two or three measures were relevant, i.e., the unification of secondary schools, the nationalisation of *Kindergarten* and the introduction of disabled subjects into schools for the so-called normal students – here the educators and teachers began to actively fight again.

The starting point is Codignolas' *Scuola Città Pestalozzi* (the School City Pestalozzi), in which an education experiment of *learning by doing* for the democratic growth of pupils was planned, to the *Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa* (the Educational Cooperative Movement, simply indicated as MCE; Bini, 1971, Alfieri, 1976, Di Santo, 2015), which initially moves from Codignola's neo-idealistic educational theory and socialist, secular ideals, also trying to update didactics in

elementary schools through the application of Dewey's theories, intertwined with Freinet's techniques.

Also, experiences of lifelong education are not lacking not only for fighting against the permanent illiteracy (especially in the South of Italy), but also for trying, with success, to work on social consciousness and educational needs. This is – as Lamberto Borghi describes (1962) – a very important period: on the one side, the *Centro Olivetti* (Olivetti Center) is opened at Ivrea (near Turin), a kind of learning community, created by the manufacturer Adriano Olivetti to meet educational and social needs of the workers in his factory; on the other side, we can stress Danilo Dolci's educational and political engagement at Partinico (in Sicily, near Palermo), where, with an educational project, he fought poverty, social exclusion and the Mafia with a non-violent approach to problems and difficulties. The former experience will soon end, whereas the latter will last for the remaining life of the Educator, leaving important traces in his followers. These are the experiences which intend to exploit formative meanings of activities in a community, sometimes helping workers and giving space, together with moments of support for their jobs to moments of cultural refinement – from theater to museum – sometimes mobilising an entire community for the defense of freedom and social justice. We evidently deal with educative efforts that, in some ways, go together with the defense of social welfare, to which Italy is moving with more and more consciousness.

While Italian society is changing, schools do still remain anchored to the

past, without instigating any action toward social amelioration, but rather restraining the ambitions of – until then – less fortunate classes. The protest against this tradition and the predominance of politics is entrusted – before students – to some difficult priests. To say nothing about la *Comunità Educante* of Nomadelfia (in Tuscany, near Grosseto), we shall mention the already even too famous Don Milani, who however begins to work for education long before his arrival at Barbiana (a village in Tuscany, buried deep in the mountains, near Firenze) in 1954, and the less known, but not less important Don Nesi, a promoter of the community of Corea (a district of Leghorn, in Tuscany), transformed in a sort of a social educational laboratory.

We have an increase of consciousness that not only education is a fact, which necessarily interests and involves all society, but that the future of coming generations is based exclusively on education. This is also proved by the experiences (in Emilia, a region in the North of Italy) of the *botteghe culturali* (cultural shops), centers of permanent education. The intent of those activities was to start building integrated educational systems, which, centered on school, can succeed in transforming a whole community to an educational micro-society.

This obviously happened because of a desire, a belief and hope that future must be better than the present and the too recent “hated” past. Also, with the help of in-progress social and economic transformations, a generalised demand of education, of renewal of social behaviour, the dream of growth and emancipation is created. This explains why – during this period –

Don Milani may become a “case” and a best-seller with his *Lettera a una professoressa* (Betti, 2009).

With our discussion, we are nearing the years of the students’ movement. If, at the beginning, politicians incorrectly react to the 1968 students’ protest – see the decree on the liberalisation to enter university – gradually, the interest and attention of teachers and civil society developed, also permeating the governmental level. Even if sometimes followed with demagoguery, or emptying the meaning of some protesting instances, however, from 1969 to 1997, the Italian school changes thanks to some legislative measures. It is not the case that each time Franco Frabboni describes the years from 1975 to 1995 he speaks of the “Golden age” of the Italian school. If we recall Giolitti’s engagement, and that of his Ministers of Public Education, we should conclude that for the second time we try to describe an interaction between politics, educational instances and civil society.

In fact, speaking of this period, we begin with the *Decreti Delegati*, which introduced joint management of schools and encouraged waiting for real autonomy of the system; stimulating full-time school education, which is the real innovation of the contemporary Italian school, and laying foundations not only for a school dedicated for all, but also for a school that teaches citizenship and democracy. During these twenty years, we were also presented with the institution of university courses for the initial training of teachers for all types of schools; the formulation of new programs for elementary schools and the passage from insertion to the progressive integration of disabled subjects in the

school for the so-defined normally intelligent students. Finally, during these years, we experienced the abolition of a unique teacher in the elementary school, substituted by the team teaching practice.

The present time (1994-2015)

Yet in the abovementioned “Golden age”, early elements of dissolution insinuate public schools, which soon destroy the slow conquests and, in the turn of less than twenty years, bring back school (and, in general, education) to old conditions, pushing it towards the present marsh. The minister Berlinguer’s Reform (1997) comes to break the equilibrium between politics and education, which, for the good fruits it would have given, reveals itself, in conclusion, as precarious and scarcely successful.

The reformative *trend* of these last twenty years hides – unfortunately starting just from Berlinguer – the will of restraining any innovation. The keystone of the present time is the explicit attack aimed at the public school, an attack that does not stimulate any reforms, but the restoration of ideas, didactics and educational models of the past. The school autonomy, intended in a company-oriented sense, the United States model for didactics and assessment, the prejudices of local policies and the increasing curricular provincialism, the idea of students as clients, the progressive, always increasing space for families and privates, the continuous and always increasing cuts to school resources, both economical and in reducing the number of teachers; the closing of teacher specialisation schools – all these elements, applied

to the Italian educational system without any interruption from 1997, have not only lead again to the primacy of politics on education, but have also slowed down the interest for new and innovative experiences.

With full time impoverishment and the offenses at planning school activities and didactical contents – the two pillars of contemporary school – teachers cannot put wide-ranging experiences into effect, as well as apply oriented projects to some particular aspects of their own activity. But wide-ranging projects and “revolutionary” instances are effectively discouraged. Only Kindergartens in Emilia (a region in the North of Italy) remain in good evidence. The rest are poor and desperate.

The new prime minister, Matteo Renzi, has realized a new project of school reform in 2015, defined by him as the “Good school” (“La buona scuola”). However, even though this new trend meets the contingent needs of young people, the wishes of families and the peculiar features of our time, as Angelo Luppi arguments (2015), this Law does not define a really renewed school system for Italy.

Conclusion

From my exposition, necessarily concise, two meaningful facts emerge: firstly, in spite of shaky and mostly negligent school politics, Italy can boast a conspicuous number of experiences and wide-ranging educational projects. In some cases, for example, the work of Loris Malaguzzi’s *Kindergartens* in Reggio Emilia has been considered as a model all over the world. All these experiences take their origin from teachers’ will and critical consciousness –

as in the case of Agazzi Sisters, Mario Lodi or Maria Maltoni – or from certain intellectuals of the most various ideologies, encouraged by strong, civil engagement. We go from the moderate Zanotti Bianco to more or less fervent socialists, like Giovanni Cena or Danilo Dolci, or to priests who make education for all – like Don Milani – an important part of their catechesis; secondly, all these experiences, if and when they succeeded in touching politics, coming to a sort of rich and reciprocal interaction, had very soon lost their creative impulse: politics has been renewed, giving space to some interesting instances, however withdrawing very soon, in the past because of the war and dictatorship, and in the present because of the coming of restorative and conservative times both at the cultural and social levels.

Therefore, a question may arise: Why all these experiences – and they were many – that from 1861 to the present have, at the end, failed? It is certainly not the case that, presently, many of the nouns, experiences and facts I have recalled are unknown to the majority in Italy. Even if – and it is the case of Don Milani – we would still recall them, this belated fame implies an emptying of meaning. Presently, in fact, Don Milani is cited with appropriateness or inappropriateness, signaling a neutralisation of his message. In order to explain the reasons of this failure it is not enough to recall the fact that media, both in the past and in the present, have always shown scarce attention to the universe of education, and, when it has been demonstrated, they did not help the cause with conviction.

It is no doubt that we may have found more profound reasons at the root of this

phenomenon, for which I can formulate two hypotheses:

- a. We need to recognise that a clear and distinct educational idea rarely exists or has existed at the basis of these experiences: the political dimension has been explicitly programmed and privileged or the input of each project, especially at the beginning of our Unification, has been philanthropic. Educational consciousness, grounded on a clear, scientifically justified idea of education and school is very rare, appears lately and, in most cases, is limited to those projects of which teachers are charged with;
- b. Generally, moreover, we deal with experiences connected to the exemplariness of an individual who has been the promoter and who, afterwards, has published and diffused procedures, characters and results of the project put into effect. Even when, as is the case of Giovanni Cena and the activities of his team in Agro Pontino or the ANIMI, we find a working-group, only one figure emerges and becomes charismatic, to the degree that the other members of the group vanish altogether with the project the group is going to realize. The merit is generally ascribed to the promoter of the project, to his abnegation, dedication and intuitions. If this is particularly true for projects of the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it is not less evident for teachers nearer to our time, as Dolci, or the teachers of the MCE, from Ciari to Lodi and Bernardini. Although these teachers relate efficaciously to their activities and ideas, not for perpetuating their memory, but for transmitting

a didactical model of which somebody else could be a follower, yet we shall recognise that the didactical activities and results are bound to their presence. It is discouraging to admit – as in some cases it has happened while interviewing old pupils of these “special” and charismatic teachers – how their traces have weakened, even within people who have been their close acquaintances for a very long time, or how their messages are repeated schematically and with simplification, invalidating ideals and hopes from which they were moved.

From these points, we can deduce certain conclusions:

- i. If Science of Education could constructively speak with politics, it would be necessary that projects and experiences be supported by the entire scientific community and not the outcome of individual choices, or, even worse, of a singular person; the success of a long lasting experience, or of an educational project, can not be founded on a contingent need or even on an ideal, but must extraneous to education itself, even if this ideal is noble and shared. In fact, the efficacy of an educational model strictly depends on the clearness of the educational idea to which it lies upon;
- ii. In other words, for all educational projects, we must look at school and education as autonomous principles, because they are founded on and from the conceptual apparatus of education and not as tools for purposes external to them;

This implies two important factors: firstly, all scholars of the educational universe community, from 1861 until recent

years, have been closed into academy research and this has obviously precluded the real comprehension of actual education. A symptom of this dualism – i.e., between the research dimension and the practical engagement – are the recurrent accusations aimed at the political world, which accompany the course of our national history, but, at the end, result inefficacious. However, it should not be forgotten that many ministers – such as De Sanctis or De Mauro, taking two examples very far in time – even though make acute analyses of the Italian formative system, they have not left meaningful traces in the Ministry of Education.

Secondly, after 150 years – the time has come that educationists are charged of their responsibilities. Theorists – I would prefer to define them as scientists of education – and historians of education (as I am) have rightly criticized the poor Italian school politics in our country, but, in front of the disasters operated by incapable ministers, have often accepted the fact as ineluctable. But if we are or strive to be good scientists of education, namely ca-

pable of elaborating an educational conceptual model, we will admit that certain contingences – the economic crisis, the demographic decrease and others – are not enough to justify inauspicious choices of school politics. Nobody was listening to what the educational research had to say: nor yesterday, neither today. And that shall be held account for, because, at times, the so-called theorists of education have lowered their guard, allured – from 1861 until now – by fashions and contingences, forgetting that an intellectual's task is that of placing himself in front of traditions and existing data with a critical look, a doubting attitude and a rushing towards future.

If we really wish to change matters for the next decades, as I hope and I would like, it will be necessary that true scientists of education, instead of pursuing aspects and contingent problems, apply themselves to their real object of study: the educational paradigm, from which any approaches to the practical dimension will be logically and epistemologically founded and therefore efficacious.

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