

EDUCATION, SCHOOL AND CULTURAL PROCESSES IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

By ROBERTO SANI. Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2018, 245 pages. ISBN 978-88-6056-569-3.

This book brings together seven studies by the renowned historian of education Roberto Sani, of the University of Macerata. The role played by the Catholic Church in Italian education constitutes the central theme of the different chapters. In focusing on the Church, Sani sets out to question certain commonly accepted tenets of Italian historiography on the subject, and he does so in the line of P. Scoppola, whose influence is present throughout the book. This revisionist approach is evident from the first chapter – dealing with the education of the masses after the country's unification – in which the author describes a liberal educational project based on a public elementary education that is secular and separate from religion. Sani questions the democratic need for this project, emphasizing the way that it actually hampered the extension of the social foundations of the Risorgimento State, pointing to the theory that this objective was actually one of the main causes for the failure of the liberal educational project. In the second chapter, the author describes the importance of the Church's contribution to the Italian educational system. In the decade prior to the Unification, male and female religious teachers made up 26% of all teachers, while in 1875 this percentage was 21% (36% if we only consider males). The presence of the Church was even greater in secondary education: in 1881 only 15% of the *ginnasi* (lower secondary schools) were state schools, while two decades later only 24% of the *licei* (upper secondary schools) were public. Sani then goes on to the increasing role of the religious orders in those aspects of education that had been abandoned by the liberal state, in particular that of special education, but also in preschool and girls' education. Despite this effort, 1879 saw the imposition of "those (...) who showed

themselves to be hostile towards a progressive and peaceful inclusion of Catholic Schools within the school system of the unified State". In other words, the educational system of the newly unified state was being erected against rather than with the Church. The dismal results only reaffirmed the error of the initial premise.

The Sani-Scoppola thesis, insofar as it calls for a revision of some of the principle hypotheses on the history of education in Italy, is extremely compelling. However, two objections might be posed. The first has to do with some overlapping of the normative and descriptive realm, which risks leading to a revision based on a nostalgic lament – a historiographically sterile one – about what could have been but was not. The second objection has to do with an international perspective. The conflict between the liberal state and the Catholic Church, far from being exclusive to Italy, was a phenomenon common to all of Catholic Europe and, by extension, to Latin America. Could the establishment of a national educational system that integrated the Catholic Church have been attempted in all of these countries? In theory it could have been done, and in Spain the first vein of liberalism even pointed in this direction, but in practice this kind of system did not prosper in any of these countries. In much the same way, none of the states built upon the Napoleonic model adopted in practice systems very different from the Italian one in terms of the public/state versus private/denominational opposition criticized by Sani. It is important, therefore, that we not lose sight of this general framework when revisiting specific scenarios. With these observations we do not mean to question or invalidate the intuition behind Sani's approach, but we believe it needs to be expanded and incorporated into a much more ambitious international context in order to reinterpret the complex historical relationship between the liberal state and the Catholic Church.

After these first two chapters, notable for their historiographical significance, Sani undertakes studies of concrete aspects of the Italian educational panorama in the 20th century. The third chapter addresses the issue of teacher training, a matter that had been ignored during the modernization of the educational system that took place in the Giolitti period that preceded World War I. The author gives an overview of the renovation of the *scuole normali* and of the teacher training reform of 1918, which Gentile and Radice substituted for their own reorganization in 1923. Of particular interest are the university pedagogical schools,

created at the start of the century; these programs, which were meant to provide a university-level formation to potential school directors and inspectors, were abruptly discontinued by Gentile in the name of a more static, traditionalist conception of teacher training.

The fourth chapter focuses on policies regarding textbooks under the Fascist regime. Sani studies the activities of the commissions in charge of approving textbooks during the first years of Fascism and describes the attempts to modernize and improve the quality of publishing. In 1929, this practice of oversight was discarded in favor of a single-text policy, which led to a radical reorganization of the Italian publishing market. This publishing market also comprises the subject of chapter five, which deals with the Catholic educational publications for the masses that were produced between the wars. Born in the context of a cultural struggle against the socialists, this editorial sector made considerable advances in subject matter as well as in business practices and distribution. The most noteworthy aspect of this area, however, is the idea put forward by Sani that these Catholic mass publications were not part of the Fascist propaganda, but that they were propagated within a self-referential framework that adhered to ethic and cultural values that were quite distinct from those of Fascism.

Chapter six deals with the study of civic education under the Italian Republic which followed on the heels of the Fascist defeat. For the author, this type of education sprang from the concerns of the allied military authorities regarding the importance of teaching and instilling democratic ideals in a country that for two decades had been subjected to dictatorship and anti-democratic propaganda. This explains, for example, the inclusion in post-war elementary school programs of Dewey, an author who was opposed by the powerful communist movement. In a context of political and cultural confrontation between communists and Catholics, Sani relates the attempts by the Christian-democrats then in power to formulate a viable civic education project. In keeping with his penchant for questioning commonly accepted notions, he also poses the insidious question of whether this civic education negotiated among the parties really responded to a sense of nation. At this point, Sani turns again to Scoppola, alleging the persistence of a Christian-inspired ethical backdrop running beneath the ideological confrontations.

The final chapter, dedicated to educator and priest Don Lorenzo Milani, centers on the internal debates of the Catholic movement under the Italian republic. For Sani, in the context of a struggle against the communists for cultural predominance, Don Milani represents the radical questioning of one of the premises of the Italian republic: the role of the Christian-democratic party as the political delegate of the Catholic masses. The author concludes the book, therefore, posing a weighty, thoughtful question about the relationship between Catholicism and the Italian state.

In general terms, Sani's book is gladly received. On the one hand, the study and exposition of key processes and aspects of the history of Italian education, carried out with the historiographical thoroughness of one of Italy's outstanding education historians, justifies in itself the volume's publication. Added to this is the fact that its publication in English makes it readily accessible to an international audience. But even more importantly, as we have pointed out in this review, the author goes several steps further, posing far-reaching, interpretive questions with a decidedly revisionist aim that are sure to incite intense historiographical debate that should reach well beyond Italy's borders.

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