

## Continuity and Change in Italian Education, 1859 to 1923

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### Résumé de l'article

L'auteur étudie le problème de l'éducation en Italie à partir de l'unification du pays jusqu'à l'avènement du fascisme. Il y distingue deux grandes périodes : la première, qui correspond au gouvernement de la droite, couvre les années 1859-1876, alors que la seconde, qui commence avec la prise du pouvoir par la gauche, en 1876, s'étend jusqu'en 1923. Bien que ces périodes soient plus marquées par des éléments de continuité que par des disparités, l'auteur a choisi de faire ressortir ces dernières.

Sous la droite, on réussit à établir une certaine forme d'administration de l'éducation, et ce, malgré les failles de la procédure parlementaire et l'instabilité ministérielle. Pendant ces années, on se préoccupe surtout d'autonomie et de centralisation. Avec l'arrivée de la gauche au pouvoir, les politiques de l'éducation se retrouvent de plus en plus liées aux luttes sociales. On préconise alors l'établissement d'écoles élémentaires gratuites et obligatoires, l'élargissement du suffrage, une plus grande décentralisation et plus d'autonomie pour les administrations locales. Ces changements s'instaurèrent évidemment d'une façon très graduelle et l'auteur s'attarde à l'un et l'autre ministre de l'éducation de même qu'à leurs réformes respectives.

A la fin de la période, l'état est devenu de plus en plus omniprésent; l'école et l'éducation ont perdu de leur caractère social et semblent plutôt servir d'instrument aux politiques gouvernementales. Désormais, on traitera les institutions comme des entités placées au-dessus des professeurs et des élèves qui les constituent.

## *Continuity and Change in Italian Education, 1859 to 1923*

### ELMIRO ARGENTO

The approaches to the solution of educational problems in Italy between unification and the coming of fascism seem to defy characterization on the basis of any single consistent pattern or policy. Until 1876, when the Left came to power, one might speak of an educational policy of the Right, but that term would be valid only if one could establish that the policies implemented prior to 1876 were significantly different from those pursued after that date. The evidence would suggest that there was greater continuity between the two periods than contrast. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the first two decades following unification saw the establishment of a national educational structure while subsequent decades tended to slightly modify that structure within the context of growing industrialization does offer some basis for differentiation. Another significant difference between the two periods was the gradual shift of emphasis from administrative and bureaucratic concerns to social and class issues. That is, the first two decades were a period of construction, while the years between 1876 and 1923 were more characterized by changing expectations and vigorous demands for change in the performance of and access to the educational system.<sup>1</sup>

Unification had placed the question of national, regional, and municipal organization at the forefront of public debate.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of the rigidly centralized structure which was taking shape in public administration—in spite of the liberal descriptions attached to it—educational institutions occupied a posi-

1. For an introduction to the problem of education in modern Italian history, the following studies are particularly useful: L. Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946); Dina Bertone Jovine, *Storia della scuola popolare in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1954); also by the same author, *La scuola italiana dal 1870 ai nostri giorni* (Rome: Riuniti, 1958); Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sulla scuola* (Vol. V of *Opere*, edited by Lamberto Borghi and Beniamino Finocchiaro, 9 vols., Milan: Feltrinelli, 1960); Lamberto Borghi, *Educazione e autorità nell'Italia moderna* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1951).
2. For an analysis of the Italian system of education immediately after unification see Giuseppe Talamo, *La Scuola dalla legge Casati alla inchiesta del 1860* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1964); Giuseppe Allievo, *La legge Casati e l'insegnamento privato secondario* (Turin: Salesina, 1879); Edmondo De Amicis, *La Legge Casati* (Messina: Tipografia Internazionale, 1902); C. Hippeau, *L'instruction publique en Italie* (Paris: Didier & Cie, 1875); Angelo Broccoli, *Educazione e politica nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia, 1767-1860* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1968); and Mario Di Domizio, *L'università italiana: lineamenti storici* (Milan: A.V.E., 1952).

tion somewhere between an extended degree of autonomy and a rigidifying centralization.<sup>3</sup> To the exponents of greater centralization (anti-Catholic conservatives), decentralization meant the multiplication of universities, the lowering of educational standards, and a depletion of resources. In their view, the reasons why decentralization had to be rejected were similar to those levied against universal suffrage: the constitutional movement leading to unification had emerged among the intellectual bourgeois class who distrusted both the working and peasant classes as well as the clergy who had assumed a hostile stance against the new state.<sup>4</sup> This view was understandable given the context in which it was voiced. Later, however, centralization, while still based on an intransigent anti-clericalism, became more closely tied to economic issues. Only the state, its proponents would argue, could finance a national system of education. Toward the end of the century, there would be a restatement of the state's role in education and an increased level of centralization became acceptable even to spokesmen from the Left. Indeed, it became apparent that centralization was often an indicator of the state's interest in a given area of education: those institutions which were ignored by the state—i.e. granted autonomy—usually suffered most financially.<sup>5</sup>

Secular conservative proponents of a strong centralist administrative structure such as Filippo Linati suggested that only in the largest cities could local authorities safely undertake the establishment of educational institutions without rigid state supervision. There, they added, secular forces would presumably be sufficiently developed and organized so as to contain the clerical threat. But these same conservatives pointed out that the Italian urban population represented merely one-tenth of the whole population. Therefore, decentralization, in education or in any other sphere, could not be considered as a safe policy.<sup>6</sup> In their opinion, decentralization would have given more power and influence to the clergy, a power and influence which was already very extensive.<sup>7</sup>

3. Alberto Caracciolo, "Autonomia o centralizzazione degli studi superiori nella età della Destra", *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento*, XLV (1958), p. 573.

4. Giuseppe Talamo, *La Scuola dalla legge Casati alla inchiesta del 1864* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1964), p. 39.

5. For example, this was the case with the so-called "free universities". Cf. F. Vassalli, "La questione delle università libere", *Nuova Antologia*, LXXVIII (1912), pp. 242-61.

6. Filippo Linati, *Le leggi Minghetti et la pubblica istruzione. Considerazioni* (Parma, 1861), p. 62.

7. For an assessment of the schools administered by the Church and their relationship to the state system, see Giuseppe Allievo, *La legge Casati e l'insegnamento privato secondario* (Turin: Salesina, 1879); Amato Amati, *La preponderanza clericale negli istituti privati di educazione e di istruzione in Italia* (Milan: C. Rebeschini, 1903); S.F. De Dominicis, *I seminari e la concorrenza clericale nell'istruzione pubblica* (Milan: Dumolard, 1881); "Del diritto della Chiesa sopra l'insegnamento", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, XI (1885), pp. 18-29; "Alcune questioni relative al diritto della Chiesa sopra l'insegnamento", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, XI (1885), pp. 269-83; "L'assassinio morale della gioventù", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, XI (1885), pp. 517-532; "L'influenza nelle università italiane", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, XVI (1890), pp. 5-21; Giuseppe Calandra, "I rapporti fra Stato e Chiesa nella legge Casati", *I problemi della pedagogia*, V (January-February, 1959), pp. 118-26.

Conversely, exponents of decentralization from the Left such as Guido Baccelli, Mauro Macchi, Carlo Cattaneo, and parts of the local press accused the early governments and bureaucrats of having compromised liberal principles by implementing an excessively centralist policy.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically enough, however, some of these early critics of centralization such as Baccelli, Coppino, and other members of the Left would themselves practise some of the most notorious forms of ministerial centralization.<sup>9</sup> At first, centralization was associated with the Casati Law and with the fact that it had been an extra-parliamentary measure. Many non-Piedmontese saw in it a reflection of Piedmontese resistance to the forms of educational reform which had evolved in other regions. Therefore, some felt that they could not abide by such a "foreign" law. It was seen as excessively weak and provincial by nationalists, and as too rigid and centralizing by exponents of local self-government. Writing in *La Nazione* in 1860, Raffaele Lambruschini noted that the new state of Italy was composed of a large number of provinces with distinctive traditions. Therefore,

Was it not merely reasonable and just to expect that the special inclinations, needs, and traditions of each locality be understood? Was it not equally just that each region be allowed to preserve something of its own which was distinctive of its character and needs?<sup>10</sup>

Lambruschini called for "diversity in unity". The state should not impose uniformity; rather, local authorities should be given sufficient freedom to resolve their own problems in accordance with their own preferences. But few ministers listened.

Nevertheless, during the sixteen years in which the Right was in power, it accomplished much, in spite of the flaws in its parliamentary procedures and ministerial instability. It succeeded in establishing an educational administration and it did not provoke organized widespread discontent through any policy which might be described as outrightly oppressive. The apparent constructive aspect of

8. Cf. Guido Baccelli, *La scuola popolare et l'autonomia delle università* (Genoa: Fratelli Verardo, 1881); Carlo Cattaneo, *Epistolario*, edited by Rinaldo Caddeo, 4 vols., (Florence: G. Barbera, 1949-56); Carlo Cattaneo, *Scritti sull'educazione e sull'istruzione* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963); Mauro Macchi, "La nuova legge sul pubblico insegnamento", in Giuseppe Talamo, *La Scuola dalla legge Casati alla inchiesta del 1864, op. cit.*, pp. 83-87. Carlo Cattaneo, for example, was a popular exponent of more radical reforms. For him, the Casati Law had not produced a system of education which aimed at what he considered to be the true objective of education: the preparation of youth in practising its newly acquired citizenship and the formation of a true civic consciousness. He agreed with Mauro Macchi that the new law contributed to the perpetuation of a hierarchic, class-oriented, and bourgeois system of education which failed to incorporate a national ideal and an open-door policy toward the lower classes. Its excessive centralization and bureaucracy were interpreted as results of back-room arrangements rather than as measures issuing from the needs and ideas of a broad spectrum of the Italian public. Cf. Carlo Cattaneo, *Scritti sull'educazione e sull'istruzione, op. cit.*, p. 187.

9. Silvio Spaventa, *Lettere politiche* (Bari: Laterza, 1926), pp. 110, 168.

10. Raffaele Lambruschini, "De' principi che devono regolare una legge sulla pubblica istruzione", *La Nazione* (July 6, 1860).

its policy, however, may have been due more to the lack of vigorous external challenges to its programs and less to any conscious desire to transform education into an effective mechanism for social mobility.

The characteristics of the educational policy between 1859 and 1876, that is, its perennial concern with autonomy and centralization, seem to reflect the internal divisions of the Italian middle and upper classes on the basis of regional interests.<sup>11</sup> After 1876, educational policy became an *explicit* focus for social conflict. The organizational phase was over and a genuine concern with the relationships between the educational experience and the individuals receiving an education gained more prominence. Isolated strata now communicated with each other more effectively than had hitherto been the case. The vigorous demands for "democratic" education made during the last decades of the century suggested that a new stage in educational aspirations was being attained by some of the less privileged sectors of society.

The educational policies pursued by the Left, however, were not a complete antithesis of those of its predecessors. Post-1876 policies also were hesitant and slow, but due less to a conscious effort to preserve the status quo<sup>12</sup> than to the difficulties encountered in arriving at an effective consensus among the new groups which were beginning to participate in the political process. Moreover, the Right and the Left were manifestations of the middle and upper classes which included landowners and entrepreneurs. The difference between those two "parties" during the age of *transformismo* depended more on the internal variations within those groups or classes, and to the varying degrees of contact which they had with the rest of the country, and less on deep ideological and socio-economic contrasts. The Left's educational policies were not dramatic reversals of those of its predecessors. Indeed, given the strong similarity between the two parties, it is almost paradoxical that the Left was able to accomplish so much that was new. For example, its policies were often aimed at the modernization of education by establishing closer ties with local needs, granting more autonomy to educational institutions, and renewing efforts to eradicate illiteracy.<sup>13</sup>

The Left was not a new phenomenon; rather it was a continuation of the old republicans and radicals who had worked with the moderates in unifying the country. The years between unification and 1876 had tempered even further their revolutionary ideals. Gradually, in order to oppose effectively the power of the Right, they had been forced to come to terms with the intricacies of parliamentary and administrative procedures. In order to win elections, they could not voice utopian revolutionary principles; rather they were now forced to address themselves to a population which was basically "conservative". Consequently, the Left did not challenge the liberal foundations of the Italian state: a secular state, religious freedom, and constitutional government.

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11. Alberto Caracciolo, "Autonomia o centralizzazione degli studi superiori nella età della Destra", *op. cit.*, p. 573.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 599.

13. Giovanni Giolitti, *Memorie della mia vita* (Milan: Garzanti, 1945), p. 64.

Once in power, the Left claimed, among other things, to stand for free and compulsory elementary education, an extension of suffrage, decentralization, and more local self-government.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent debates and policy documents indicate that the Left did attempt to implement programs which reflected those objectives. In fact, it was this progressive "democratization" encouraged by the Left until the First World War that was in part responsible for the formulation of more rigid and defensive reactions on the part of traditional interests who were beginning to see their cultural, social, and economic position threatened by what they considered to be non-conventional and dangerous social and educational experiments.

When Michele Coppino became minister of education in 1876, for example, his main concern was the upgrading of elementary education. That shift in focus from secondary and higher education was in itself an indication of the Left's more "popular" concerns. With a law passed in 1877, elementary education became compulsory, but the minister failed to provide the necessary measures with which to ensure attendance. On the one hand, this negligent enforcement led critics to accuse Depretis and Coppino of trying to appear progressive without in fact being so. Catholic opinion as expressed by the Jesuit *La Civiltà Cattolica*, on the other hand, felt that the expansion of secular education would threaten the faith, especially if that expansion were to occur at the elementary level.<sup>15</sup> Southern landowning interests also opposed Coppino's law since they believed that it would draw children away from useful work on the land and because they feared that if the peasant population began to appreciate the benefits of literacy it might conceivably turn against the landowning class.<sup>16</sup>

In 1878 and 1885, Coppino proceeded to redefine the role of secondary education. He felt that between the working masses and those exercising the liberal professions there was a vast number of persons who were employed in a variety of activities in the public as well as in the private sector: secondary education was to be for this more modest class of individuals.<sup>17</sup> Although himself a member of Italy's ruling class, Coppino was attempting to place secondary education within the reach of a less exclusive sector of society than the Old Right would have been willing to accept.

More specifically, Coppino sought to unify secondary education at the pre-*liceo* level (i.e., before senior high school). He maintained that the *ginnasio* (junior high school) and the technical schools differed little in their instruction, and that they should be combined into a common *ginnasio* leading to the *liceo* and to the technical institutes. He considered the bifurcation or streaming which occurred immediately at the end of elementary school as taking place too early

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14. Denis Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 107.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

16. Angelo Broccoli, *Educazione e politica nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia, 1767-1860* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1968), p. 231.

17. G. Saredo, *Vicende legislative della pubblica istruzione in Italia dall'anno 1859 al 1899* (Turin: UTET, 1901), p. 253.

and thus perpetuating established class divisions. The postponement of the decision as to whether a student would enter a technical or an academic career, he felt, might facilitate a more rational decision and perhaps more frequent exchanges between the classes which traditionally entered the liberal professions and those which were forced to enter the technical or manual occupations. Coppino's measures were passed by Parliament and the *ginnasio* did become a level of education common to both streams.<sup>18</sup>

Coppino's progressive policies were further encouraged by his successor, Guido Baccelli, who in 1881 introduced a bill calling for the recognition of the "juridical personality" of universities. By this Baccelli meant the allocation of endowments to self-governing universities allowing them to function as corporations and recognizing their full autonomy in the areas of administration, discipline, and academic affairs.<sup>19</sup> This bill was discussed in Parliament in 1884 and, while some criticized it for being too vague, it did draw enough support to pass by a vote of 143 to 135.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after, however, when the attempt was made to introduce the bill into the Senate for final approval, the conservative opposition was strong enough to defeat this attempt to establish university autonomy.

Meanwhile, the evolution of Italian social and political thought, the impetus of socialist activities, and developments in empirical social research led to the elaboration of new social and educational policies. Pasquale Villari was among the first in Italy to initiate programs intended to make the bourgeoisie rethink its responsibilities to society and to speak of education as a major factor in facilitating upward social mobility and thus help to direct society toward more egalitarian and democratic conditions. As a university professor, as a critic of society and education, and as minister of education, Villari called for a new type of education *as well as* the improvement of the economic conditions of the lower classes:

Of what use is the alphabet to an individual who lacks air and light, and who lives in damp and foul-smelling surroundings . . . ? You will inevitably fail, and if you should succeed to teach him how to read and write, and at the same time leave him in the same condition in which you found him, you will have prepared one of the most violent social revolutions imaginable.<sup>21</sup>

He was among the first in Italy to express the educational question as a "social" issue. Not only was education good in itself, but it might also be useful as a means of establishing social and political stability.<sup>22</sup>

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 261-298.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

20. Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1968), VI, p. 271.

21. Pasquale Villari, "La scuola e la questione sociale in Italia", *Nuova Antologia*, XXI (November, 1872), p. 493. Also see his *I disordini universitari* (Rome: Tarzani, 1897); *Le facoltà giuridiche e le scuole di scienze sociali: loro indole e loro scopo* (Florence: Salvatore Landi, 1903); "L'insegnamento universitario e le sue riforme", *La Nazione* (December 3-6, 1866); "L'istruzione secondaria e il nuovo disegno di legge approvato dal Senato", *Nuova Antologia*, VII (1868), pp. 657-65; and *Nuovi scritti pedagogici* (Florence: Sansoni, 1891).

22. Pasquale Villari, "La scuola e la questione sociale in Italia", *op. cit.*, pp. 508-9.

Referring specifically to curricula, Villari pointed out that Italian schools were the product of the cultural conditions of society, and at the same time they helped to create those conditions. He noted, however, that a new social profile had emerged since unification. New groups had come into existence with new interests and needs. These new groups were not interested in the traditional educational system inherited from the pre-unification states and from the Right:

They are impatient and wish to live in the present and not in the past. They want modern languages, modern history, natural sciences and their respective applications.<sup>23</sup>

In his view, the importance of the *licei* lay in their function in preparing the backbone of society: first, by educating that part of the ruling class which proceeded to the universities and, secondly, by preparing that segment of the population which would terminate its studies upon graduation and enter the labour force (approximately forty thousand out of fifty thousand graduates annually). This second group constituted a relatively large class which served as a buffer between the masses and the "ruling class". Villari maintained that this middle group was "the cement which gave unity and cohesion to the body of the nation."<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, however, Villari and the parliamentary Left accepted the view that there was to be a parallel between the country's educational and social structures. They agreed with the current opinion that there were to be three levels of education: primary-technical, secondary, and higher education. These levels had in part already been established to meet the needs of three general levels within the bourgeoisie: the lower, middle and higher bourgeoisie. The masses were to be given access only to elementary education and to the schools of arts and crafts. This was the general pattern of Italian education as it had evolved since unification, and Villari and the Left accepted it as a useful means with which to ensure upward mobility to the lower ranks of the bourgeoisie. Even Villari, a foremost spokesman for the Left, believed that this cautious and gradual elevation of the various groups of society toward a better cultural and socio-economic condition was the safest and most certain avenue to democracy:

Democracy and equality are desirable, but the embankments and restraining forces which can render democracy long-lasting and beneficial to the nation's welfare are too often ignored . . . . If we cannot elevate the mediocre members of society to the more advanced ranks of society, of what benefit will it be to democracy to lower the latter to the level of mediocrity? . . . Making classical education accessible to all, *that* would be democratic. But to suppress or to alter it in order to make it acceptable to those who do not want, cannot, and do not know how to benefit from it, that is neither democratic nor just. Whenever all artificial differences and privileges are removed, it is still necessary to let those differences which Nature has created to continue to exist. . . .<sup>25</sup>

During the 1890's and until immediately after the First World War, Villari's

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23. Pasquale Villari, *Nuovi scritti pedagogici, op. cit.*, p. 218.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 227.



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educational ideas were adopted by Gaetano Salvemini and by the socialist movement in general. Between 1891 and 1900, the Socialist Party claimed to represent the forces of progress, the defence of oppressed masses, and genuine Italian culture. Hence it sought to elaborate further the "moral" content of Villari's vision. Yet Italian socialists were in many ways a moderate party and their adoption of Villari's modest educational program suggests that they were not prepared to revolutionize the Italian educational system.

Echoing the words of Villari and Salvemini, Italian socialists maintained that elementary education was the only level of instruction which could be meaningful and useful to the working class. Consequently, they were willing to leave secondary and higher education in the hands of the middle and upper classes. Socialists defended this position by maintaining that the contemporary stage of Italian economic development necessitated a subordinate role for the working class until the historical process brought them to power. By accepting a utilitarian education for working-class students and a more classical and advanced form of education for the middle and upper classes, Italian socialists avoided severe clashes with the traditional parties and were thus able to exert some influence on educational legislation.<sup>26</sup>

Also, during the first decade of this century, the condition of the Italian working class underwent some improvement so as to enable secondary school enrolments to increase. Boys from the upper ranks of the working class and from the lower bourgeoisie increasingly enrolled in technical schools, technical institutes, and occasionally in some university faculties. Gradually, classical secondary schools also began admitting more working-class students.<sup>27</sup> These developments tended to unsettle the traditional school system, which until then had been open only to a privileged minority, and resulted in cries from the Right and from traditional interests to "purify" secondary education.<sup>28</sup>

For their part, democratic and socialist educators also felt that there ought to be greater distinction between the schools intended for working-class students and those intended for the middle and upper classes. They called upon the government to open more vocational schools and were quite willing to give access to classical and higher education only to those who could afford it. It was only after the First World War, under the pressure of a more vigorous and revolutionary wing within the Italian Left, that socialist educators ceased to defend the class-oriented educational policy which they and the government had advocated before the War. After the War, it seemed that conditions were ripening for a working-class victory. Therefore, socialists began opposing their old policy and advocated

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26. Lamberto Borghi, *Educazione et autorità nell'Italia moderna, op. cit.*, p. 99.

27. Cf. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, *La riforma della scuola classica* (Rome: Nuova Antologia, 1905), p. 10; also see Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sulla scuola, op. cit.*, p. 390.

28. On the quantitative growth of the *ginnasi* and *licei* between unification and the First World War, see Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Sommario di statistiche storiche italiane, 1861-1955* (Rome: Istituto di Statistica, 1958), p. 76; and Elmiro Argento, "Italian Education, 1859-1923: A Study in Educational Expectations and Performance", (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975).

equal educational opportunity for everyone. In doing so, they branded their old educational program as reactionary.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, however, socialist educators consistently defended state control of education. They believed that a state-controlled educational system could better ensure education for all members of society while inculcating in them the principles of freedom and democracy. Yet they seemed to have ignored the possibility that a state system of education could also serve as an instrument of political control, as Agostinone suggested had been the case during the First World War:

We have seen the effect of state education. During the War, all forms of spiritual perversion were practiced. Youths were poisoned in spirit, and educated in violence and in everything which is repulsive to the human spirit. It will be a long time before the psychological effects of that education will have disappeared. A whole generation will be needed for its effects to wear off. For a whole generation we will have violence because a whole generation has been taught to glorify hatred and violence.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of this warning, the majority of socialists continued to advocate a state-controlled system of education. Thus, when Gentile "purified" the system and placed it under even more firm state control, he was in fact implementing a policy which in theory was also favored by the Left, moderates, and the Right.

Officially, Italian governments during the first decade of this century were aware of the need to educate the masses at a time when the electorate was expanding and the country was in the midst of industrialization. Government policy often was more "open" or progressive than conservative bourgeois sectors would have preferred. By seeking to preserve their own cultural and socio-economic position, however, conservative interests may themselves have unintentionally contributed to the rise of political currents seeking to "purify" the political system as well as the educational structure. In view of the hesitant and gradual evolution of the Italian educational system since unification, it is difficult to see how it could in itself have given rise to the violent criticisms that it received from the Left and from the Right. The educational policies advocated by the long series of governments from unification to the turn of the century faithfully observed a moderate line which successfully avoided radical measures favoring either the extreme Left or the extreme Right. That moderate policy was best defined in 1872 by Maiorana Calatabiano:

It is futile to formulate radical conclusions and organic policies, and to seek refuge in omnibus solutions. This is a noble aim, as is that of trying to free the Department of Education from political influence. But that department is part of the political process. That is a fact . . . the situation cannot be rectified merely through theory . . . It should be remembered that the real Good for us is the Possible, although we should never cease aspiring for the Ideal. We must accept the world as it is, including its vicious and erroneous

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29. Lamberto Borghi, *Educazione e autorità nell'Italia moderna*, op. cit., p. 101.

30. Camera dei Deputati, *Discussioni* (1919-1920), p. 2849.

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aspects, while at the same time we should apply ourselves to improve it gradually.<sup>31</sup>

This gradualism had, in varying degrees, benefited all classes. Yet, while it had enabled more students from all levels of society to receive an education, it had also helped to produce a dramatic increase in the number of *liceo* and university graduates.

With the social, economic, and political turmoil which appeared immediately after the First World War, exponents of stability looked to the educational system as one of the means of regaining that stability. Nationalists, conservatives, and a wide segment of the population which sought to return to some form of normalcy began to criticize what they believed to have been the disruptive aspects of the educational system.<sup>32</sup> Nationalist educators, for example, lamented the trend toward the democratization of elementary education, the expansion of secondary education, and the general sympathy of the teaching profession for socialist and neutralist stances. At a congress of secondary school teachers held in May, 1919, Ernesto Codignola voiced the Gentilian thesis that it had been the secondary schools of Italy that had caused the defeat at Caporetto.<sup>33</sup> Secondary school teachers were accused of being "friends of Freemasonry" and of having instilled an anti-clerical and anti-patriotic outlook among their students. It was in this atmosphere, in 1919, that Codignola, Gentile, Lombardo-Radice and Varisco founded the *Fascio di Educazione Nazionale*. This group would be the circle surrounding Gentile which helped to draft some of the provisions of the Gentile Law. Their outlook is best described by Lombardo-Radice's appeal to teachers to "purify" the generation which was then being educated:

We must renew the conscience of the new generations, if we want to reap suitable benefits. . . . The bitter ordeal of the War—notwithstanding the marvelous spontaneous gifts of our people, second to none—has laid bare serious gaps in the spiritual framework of the nation. This has been particularly the case among those classes whose education should have given them a more devout feeling for the law and for the subordination of the individual to the supreme collective interests, an active faith, moral discipline, a realistic view of things, and a sense for the concrete.<sup>34</sup>

This, in short, was also Gentile's position. As minister of education after the fascist take-over, he introduced few changes which could be described as extremely reactionary or in complete contrast with previous policies. Like traditional conservatives, he introduced financial economies intended to limit the expansion of higher education; perhaps the outstanding novelty which he introduced was that of religion at the elementary level. Indeed, this was the most conservative aspect of the reform of 1923. In the higher grades, religious instruction was to be

31. Camera dei Deputati, *Discussioni* (1871-1872), pp. 926-27.

32. *Corriere della Sera*, April 8, 1919.

33. H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 160.

34. Quoted in Edward R. Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience: Italian Society and Culture, 1922-1945* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1972), p. 153.

given “historically” while at the *liceo* it was replaced by philosophy. Like Charles Maurras in France, Gentile was a non-believer who favored the stabilizing and disciplinary influence of Roman Catholicism on the young. Both abhorred the laic, materialistic, and socialist tone of public education in their respective countries and were prepared to use religion as a means with which to restore traditional values. For example, Gentile explicitly maintained that he and his associates were striving to restore state authority. That authority, however, could not be restored without retrenching the underlying forces of the state, and by this he meant the schools and the family.<sup>35</sup>

These objectives differed very little from those which had been voiced by De Sanctis, Matteucci, Bonghi, Spaventa, and to some extent by Villari and Salvemini. Gentile's reform, therefore, far from being unpopular, coincided with traditional liberal as well as with constitutional Left-wing educational policies. His own style as minister differed little from that of his “liberal” predecessors. Nevertheless, the Gentile reform did have a dramatic impact on the educational structure of the 1920's, for it stemmed the rapid expansion of classical instruction as a means of introducing some balance in the supply and demand for traditionally educated graduates. Vocational and scientific schools were expanded and access to the *licei* and universities was limited. But the *spirit* in which this was done differed dramatically from that of previous ministers. The “State” now became a more pervasive concept than before. Schools and education lost some of their “social” character and became outright extensions of state policy and ministerial objectives. For the next two decades, educational institutions would be treated as entities which were somehow above the teachers and students who constituted them.

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35. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

## Résumé

L'auteur étudie le problème de l'éducation en Italie à partir de l'unification du pays jusqu'à l'avènement du fascisme. Il y distingue deux grandes périodes: la première, qui correspond au gouvernement de la droite, couvre les années 1859-1876, alors que la seconde, qui commence avec la prise du pouvoir par la gauche, en 1876, s'étend jusqu'en 1923. Bien que ces périodes soient plus marquées par des éléments de continuité que par des disparités, l'auteur a choisi de faire ressortir ces dernières.

Sous la droite, on réussit à établir une certaine forme d'administration de l'éducation, et ce, malgré les failles de la procédure parlementaire et l'instabilité ministérielle. Pendant ces années, on se préoccupe surtout d'autonomie et de centralisation. Avec l'arrivée de la gauche au pouvoir, les politiques de l'éducation se retrouvent de plus en plus liées aux luttes sociales. On préconise alors l'établissement d'écoles élémentaires gratuites et obligatoires, l'élargissement du suffrage,

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une plus grande décentralisation et plus d'autonomie pour les administrations locales. Ces changements s'instaurèrent évidemment d'une façon très graduelle et l'auteur s'attarde à l'un et l'autre ministre de l'éducation de même qu'à leurs réformes respectives.

A la fin de la période, l'état est devenu de plus en plus omniprésent; l'école et l'éducation ont perdu de leur caractère social et semblent plutôt servir d'instrument aux politiques gouvernementales. Désormais, on traitera les institutions comme des entités placées au-dessus des professeurs et des élèves qui les constituent.