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TEACHING METHOD'S INNOVATIONS AND STATE CONTROL IN ITALY

The introduction of compulsory handbooks in schools (1860—1900)

Textbooks and handbooks are almost as old as the press itself going back to XVIIth century reading books. Nevertheless in the beginning they could not be defined as school handbooks in a proper sense, as they were not written for schools but for some "youth of a noble family", as it was mentioned in their title, a statement which is indicative of the limited public they had¹. Proper school-books appeared only in the XVIIIth century, connected with the increased attention and commitment of the State towards the educational system and structures².

Yet there was not a wide use of handbooks in Italy neither in State nor in Church schools until much later. Instead of referring to precise books, teachers tended to dictate notes, which the children usually had to learn by heart, following the old catechism tradition of the question-answer pattern. The most significant effort to abolish this method of free teaching was made by the national State. It tried, immediately after 1860, both to introduce the compulsory use of school-books and to control them through special committees nominated by the highest educational authority, the Consiglio Superiore della Pubblica Istruzione, which had to choose between the enormous amount of school-books which invaded the market after the Casati and the Coppino laws, which sanctioned compulsory elementary education³.

¹ See *Editoria per la gioventù. Mostra di testi scolastici stampati a Parma dal 1748 al 1847*, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1979.

² There are no enquiries on this topic for Italy. The most detailed research made is the one about Germany. See H. Rommel, *Das Schulbuch im 18. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, Dotzheim, Deutscher Fachschriften Verlag, 1968.

³ According to unpublished statistics compiled for the Ministry of Education in 1881, there were already 1303 school-books for primary education (L. G. Pessina, *Relazione sull'origine e sullo sviluppo della questione dei libri di testo*, A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore, II versamento, B. 15, p. 34). Yet those books had a wider circulation also outside schools, as fa-

Although it is rather obvious that some books were used in some Italian schools even before that date, this paper argues that the pressure towards their general use introduced a real innovation. In fact, the social historian of education should consider innovations in a broader sense, focussing not only on the first appearance of a new element, but also concentrating rather on its extensive use, implementation and incorporation as a stable part of the school system and of the teaching methods. In this specific case, it is necessary to follow the State efforts towards a broad acceptance of the use of school-books over the long time needed before this new (or relatively new) item filters down from the peak of the school pyramid (educational authorities such as the ministry's top people) to the more remote schools of the Kingdom. It also means that two different kinds of sources are to be examined: first of all the legislation (decrees but also circular letters of the minister of education)⁴, in order to point out the government opinions and the specific problems that it aimed to solve; secondly, inspections, letters of teachers and enquiries, in order to show the teacher's reactions to the new item introduced and their willingness to accept it⁵. To measure the time of this innovation would require a great number of local enquiries, which I have been able to do only about a few areas, choosing some sample towns and provinces of different parts of Italy. Unfortunately the lack of systematic sources makes every statistical effort impossible, even though it gives some very interesting hints. Nevertheless, a broader analysis in this direction could help to trace a more general map of literacy and cultural backwardness, and even such a small sign as the use of school-books could be an indicator of much broader phenomena like teachers' mentality, state of education, willingness or even possibility of the people to buy school-books for their children, etc.

There is a need to explain the sense of this innovation, that is the reason why the new State tried so hard to impose the handbooks' general use in schools. The main issue of this paper is that the introduction of controlled school-books, approved by the ministry, was a key instrument in controlling the teachers, reducing their autonomy, to found a general and unified national culture, to establish a solid basis for a broad cultural political operation, aiming to impose the use of the common language, to stimulate socialization, integration in the new Italian readings. On the speculation on school-books see also „La Nazione”, 23 settembre 1861; „La scuola e la Famiglia”, XII, 1875, no. 10, p. 5; „Bollettino Ufficiale della Pubblica Istruzione” 1874—75, p. 262.

⁴ The most important were the Circolari Bonghi 1. 11. 1874 and the 30. 1. 1875 one.

⁵ This kind of sources, available only up to the beginning of the nineties, justify the chronological room of this paper.

lian State, loyalty to the dynasty; last but not least, to reduce the influence of the Church in such a delicate matter as education, especially in a moment of crisis between State and Church.

In order to understand better the Italian situation we must remember that the conditions of education in Italy after the unification were extremely different and fractionalised, whereas in the sixties and seventies France showed a remarkable homogeneity in education and Germany, which was going to become a model for all Europe, especially after 1870, already a steady one. The long tradition of political division, the bad conditions of education, especially in the south, the difference of school systems and legislation left over from all the pre-unitarian States were enormous problems to be faced by the Government. Even the extension of the piemontese Casati law on education was not accepted until the late sixties in every part of the new State.

The school question, a very central one in political debates in those years was a field of battle for all the pre-unitarian local élites, the Toscan one in particular, which did not want to accept the piemontese hegemony on the Kingdom and reacted very strongly against the application of piemontese laws and systems. In the absence of a clear educational policy, made even more difficult by the continuous changes of ministers of education, there was a broad tendency to repeat the different traditional pre-unitarian models of education and of teaching, often influenced by ideologies and guidelines which were out of date and even dangerous for the new State. In addition to that, the teachers of primary and secondary schools in the sixties and also in the early seventies were people who all had very different experiences, often very limited knowledge (in the case of primary schools they were mostly people who could hardly read and write, artisans, sacristans, shoemakers which no pedagogical or cultural preparation at all⁶. Even secondary school teachers had no regular training: in most cases, they would reproduce the mentality and the methods of their teachers, they would continue to teach the old lessons. Last but not least, quite often they were ecclesiastics. In fact, the influence of the Church over education was still enormous, because it was mostly the church which produced literate people, controlling many primary schools as well as seminaries and religious institutions: an aspect which was particularly dangerous after the unification because of the resistance of the Church to legitimize the new State. Religious schools would escape the control of educational authorities and risked educating the new generation with

⁶ Satisfactory enquiries on this topic do not exist yet. But see S. Ulivieri, *I maestri*, [in:] AA. VV., *L'istruzione di base in Italia 1858-1877*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1978, p. 174.

antiunitarian feelings. This risk was doubled by the fact that the teaching staff in the State schools included ecclesiastics⁷.

In the absence of a teaching personnel loyal to the new State and of homogeneous formation, the diffusion of new programs was not enough to guarantee a change. The diffusion and control over school-books was a sensible and perhaps the only successful means to control the dissemination of knowledge in all schools.

Incidentally, we can point out that such a policy of school-books diffusion and control, up to the point to induce university lecturers and top political figures to write adequate school-books, in order to filter down knowledge according to the same guidelines from university to elementary schools, had first started ten years before, in the so called preparation decade, in the Sardinia Kingdom, which was to have the leadership in the unification process and in the formation of the new State⁸. Already in the early fifties the Torino bureaucracy made this effort against the dominating influence of the church and the reactionary forces which were against the unification: a leit-motive which was to last even after 1860. The dominant idea was to guarantee homogeneity and the diffusion of the new political topics through the use of the same didactic instruments. Even more, the intention was to give the people a real "hand-book", a book for ever, which should accompany them all through their life, an object of *Wiederholungslektüre*⁹. This was true especially in the case of primary schools reading books, which should remind the people of the glorious events of the unification and of the dynastic history, and reinforce social ethics. The educational authorities believed that those books should be owned by the children, reread many times at home, or during workbreaks¹⁰, an idea which was illusory and too advanced, but not without political intelligence.

This need was quickly taken up after the unification. The *consigli provinciali scolastici* were asked to send precise lists of the books used in the schools which they controlled¹¹. One question of the Scialoja

⁷ According to some inspections, in most of the religious schools contemporary history was not treated at all, nothing was said about the Italian Kingdom and the Savoia dynasty, even the portrait of the King lacked. See A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Divisione scuole secondarie, B. 58 and 59.

⁸ See A.C.S. Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore, B. 4.

⁹ For a definition of *Wiederholungslektüre* see R. Engelsing, *Die Perioden der Lesegeschichte in der Neuzeit und Zur politischen Bildung der deutschen Unterschichten 1789—1863*, [in:] *Zur Sozialgeschichte deutscher Mittel- und Unterschichten*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978.

¹⁰ See *Libri di storia per le elementari*, anonymous, without date but probably written in 1875—76, A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore, II versamento, B. 15, p. 7, and „L'avvenire educativo”, 1889—90, p. 417.

¹¹ The lists, very uncomplete, are now in A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore II versamento, B. 5 and 6.

enquiry was about school-books¹². Yet these questions were never answered by all the schools of the Kingdom, and often answered incompletely, which shows how little attention school directors paid to the control of these aspects of the teaching, and how strong the real autonomy of the teachers themselves was. For instance no school sent precise data on this question, and some indicated a large list of the best known hand-books only to keep ministry quiet.

The need to establish conformity and conformism on this matter resulted in the publication of false statistics, tending to show that school-books were really used in most of the schools, with the aim of convincing the reluctant teachers to follow the attitude which was presented as the dominant one, with a certain psychological cleverness. In fact, the statistics published in the official educational Review ("Bollettino Ufficiale della Pubblica Istruzione") do not correspond to the manuscript data contained in the ministry of education series now in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome¹³.

Together with the imposition of school-books, the problem very quickly arose of how to control them. Recalling the history of the committees which had to choose between the existing books, a member of the ministry spoke about the duties and needs of the nation, to remove the seeds and roots of ignorance and bad knowledge amongst the people, all of which was a danger to the security of the new State¹⁴. As the unpublished papers of the first committee show, the polemic was directed against the Church rather than against left-wing movements. The notations about the overcritical positions of some hand-books are extremely rare and anyway they were rejected¹⁵.

Nevertheless, most of the critiques are directed against ascetic and clerical ideologies, that is against books which tended to advocate respect and obedience to the Church rather than to the State¹⁶ and against books which tended to use dialectalisms, a critique which reminds one of the importance of teaching the national language, a basic link between the subjects of the national State and a necessary element of national consciousness¹⁷. Also rejected are volumes clearly not made for schools, gigantic editions or monographs of many hundred pages which were proposed by their authors as school-books, in the hope of good business; an element which shows how much confusion there

¹² A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Divisione Scuole Medie, B. 5—14.

¹³ See *Prospetto dei libri di testo che si usano nei regi licei e ginnasi*, „Bollettino Ufficiale della Pubblica Istruzione”, 1874—75.

¹⁴ L. G. Pessina, *Relazione*, quoted, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Libri di lettura per le scuole elementari*, anonymous, without date, A.C.S., Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Consiglio Superiore, II versamento, B. 15, p. 5.

¹⁶ A.C.S., Divisione Istruzione primaria e normale, B. 4, tit. 3, Cagliari, 15 gennaio, 873.

¹⁷ *Revisione dei libri di testo della storia sacra*, anonymous, 1878, p. 22.

still was about what a school-book should look like, because the modern school system was not deeply rooted in tradition. But how far were these results actually applied? The data of the general catalogue of Italian publication show quite clearly that in spite of the opinions of the assessors, many of the rejected books were republished many times after those reports, which means that they had a large market. The repetition of the same circular letters about the use of school-books and the works of other committees with the same task of control¹⁸ already show that the efforts of the ministry of education had no immediate success. The bureaucratic structures were too weak to control such a chaotic situation as was the Italian one, and the communication links of the educational authorities were not solid enough.

Yet clearer evidence is to be found in primary sources about teachers' attitudes: inspections, enquiries, reports that teachers had to write every year about their classes, which unfortunately are not all preserved (but one could also assume that they never existed for all the schools)¹⁹. They show that even until the late eighties teachers (especially in secondary schools) tended to dictate their lessons. This was true in some schools of every region, but seemed to happen especially in the south and in the islands, the traditional backward regions, whereas the situation was better for northern Italy, both in the ex-piemontese Kingdom, thanks to the past efforts on this matter, and in the ex-Austrian territories, where the Austrian school system had deeply penetrated. A comparison between those letters of teachers and the inspections is in some ways a more objective test, and shows that in many cases the teachers justified their hostility to textbooks "because a textbook could not develop critical faculty", but were in fact much less progressive. They actually had in most cases a scarce preparation and preferred not to be confronted with the organised knowledge of a handbook, with its precise dates and facts; and they liked to lecture in a more emphatic way, following the model of the early nineteenth century Italian *letterato* more than patterns of a professional model. Some of them even pretended to overcome the boundaries of their

¹⁸ See also E. De Fort, *Storia della scuola elementare in Italia*, Vol. I, *Dall'Unità all'età giolittiana*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1979, pp. 225 and following. The works of the two later committees were published in 1883 (*Commissione sopra i libri di testo per le scuole elementari e popolari, per le scuole tecniche e le normali, per gli istituti tecnici e per le scuole ginnasiali e liceali, Relazione generale a S.M. il Ministro*, Roma, Sciolla, 1883) and 1894 (*Relazione della Commissione Centrale per i libri di testo*, Roma, Elzeviriana, 1894).

¹⁹ The material which we based the following considerations on is the Scialoja enquiry, A.C.S., Min. P.I., Div. Sc. Med., B. 5—14. There is not enough room here to quote it in detail. Even more interesting are the inspections and the reports, *ibidem*, B. 24—40, 112—115; 125—128; 76—83, for Milano, Bologna, l'Aquila, Venezia, Roma, Salerno, Messina.

profession, and to lecture in a way which would have been more appropriate to a university audience. Typical enough of this attitude is the case of the Salerno *liceo*, the pupils of which decided to answer directly to the Scialoja enquiry on the state of secondary education protesting against their teachers who expected them to do research on their own about Italian history, using monographs and sources instead of a summary²⁰: one more evidence of the confusion of the teachers. The sources available do not let us come to statistically reliable data, as is obvious if we think of the confusion of the Italian school system at that time. Yet they confirm that even in the late eighties the use of hand-books was not yet widespread, and show how long it took to incorporate this innovation. To take up the definition of a well known German scholar, the "people without books" still existed²¹.

²⁰ A.C.S., Ministero della P.I., Divisione Scuole Medie B. 12.

²¹ R. Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe 1770—1910*, München, DTV, 1977.