

WOMEN AND MEN TEACHERS IN ITALY
FROM THE FALL OF THE OLD REGIME
TO THE RISE OF FASCISM.
BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSION

*Maestras y maestros en Italia desde el fin del Antiguo Régimen
hasta el ascenso del Fascismo.
Nacimiento y desarrollo de una profesión*

Ester de Fort*

Fecha de recepción: 30/07/2014 • Fecha de aceptación: 06/11/2014

Abstract. The article examines the slow process of professionalization of elementary school teachers, from the fragmented educational reality of the old regime to the emergence of a teaching body with a specific preparation and a collective identity. The Italian State played a significant role in this process because it concerned itself with the requalification of teachers and the education of new students up to the demanding task of fighting the high levels of illiteracy and promoting people's adherence to the new values on which it was based. Teaching, however, remained poorly paid and quite precarious and those aspects increased feminine recruitment: the job was considered a respectable and typically womanly occupation, even though the arrival of single girls in small provincial towns sometimes resulted in persecutions that found an echo in press and literature. The improvement of teachers' cultural level made untenable the contradiction between the rhetoric exaltation of the role of the teacher and the real conditions of the profession, which also contributed to the pedagogical press. In the new century, an increasingly combative association movement developed which obtained important results, but was undermined by deep internal divisions, between men and women, urban and rural teachers, catholic and secular teachers. Teachers were accused of defending corporative interests and neglecting the school system needs, and then called to order by the Gentile's education reform, one of the first acts of Fascist rule.

Keywords: Man and woman teachers. Teacher education. Teacher Associations. Elementary School.

* Dipartimento di Storia. Università di Torino. Via Sant'Ottavio 20. 10124 Torino. Italy.
ester.defort@unito.it

Resumen. *El artículo examina el lento proceso de profesionalización de los maestros de la escuela elemental, desde la realidad educativa fragmentada del Antiguo Régimen hasta el surgimiento de un cuerpo docente con una preparación específica y una identidad colectiva. El Estado italiano tuvo un papel relevante en este proceso, pues se preocupó de la recualificación de los maestros y de preparar a los nuevos estudiantes a la altura de la exigente tarea de combatir el alto nivel de analfabetismo y favorecer la adhesión del pueblo a los nuevos valores en los que el Estado se fundaba. La profesión quedó poco remunerada y precaria y por este motivo acogió numerosas mujeres, las cuales encontraban una ocupación digna y considerada adecuada a la naturaleza femenina; aunque la llegada de chicas jóvenes solas a pequeños pueblos estuvo acompañada a veces de persecuciones que encontraron eco en la prensa y la literatura. La mejora del nivel cultural de los maestros hizo insostenible la contradicción entre la exaltación retórica del rol del maestro y las condiciones reales de la profesión, favoreciendo la maduración de una conciencia de clase, lo cual contribuyó también en la prensa pedagógica. En el nuevo siglo se desarrolló un asociacionismo cada vez más combativo que obtuvo resultados significativos, pero que se vio socavado por las profundas divisiones internas entre maestros y maestras, maestros rurales y urbanos, católicos y laicos. Acusados de defender intereses corporativos y de no atender a las necesidades de la escuela, los maestros fueron llamados al orden en la reforma Gentile, uno de los primeros actos del fascismo en el poder.*

Palabras claves: *Maestros. Maestras. Formación de docentes. Asociacionismo docente. Escuela elemental.*

INTRODUCTION

The article aims to give an overview of how elementary school teaching developed into a profession in Italy, where, as in other European countries,¹ its development was tied to the creation of a public education system. Under the Old Regime, there was no precise teaching role in basic literacy learning, as explained further in the following paragraph; only slowly would the awareness grow of the economic and political utility of general elementary education. A pioneering role was initially played, at the end of the eighteenth century, by Lombardy under Habsburg rule, but the principles of free, compulsory education for both sexes, which would underpin the establishment of a widespread, public education system, were only affirmed in 1859 by a law enacted by the Kingdom of Sardinia, which Lombardy had

¹ See Agustín Escolano, «Las Escuelas Normales, siglo y medio de perspectiva histórica», *Revista de Educación*, 269 (1982): 55-59.

joined by that stage, and which would become the fundamental education law of the new Kingdom of Italy.

The urgent need to furnish the new schools opening across the country with teachers initially compelled authorities to rely on staff whose own level of learning and culture left much to be desired—but then they could hardly expect much more given the low wages that teachers were paid by local councils, due to their own shortage of funds and the widespread suspicion with which local landowners viewed public education. Moreover, school attendance by pupils still tended to be rather irregular, which explains the persistence of the old individual method of teaching, to which older teachers and parents themselves were attached.

Teaching standards would improve as the Italian government stepped up its efforts to enforce compulsory schooling. This was especially so once the Left (*Sinistra*) came to power and, convinced of the importance of schooling in establishing liberal institutions in the collective consciousness, introduced reforms to teachers' careers and wages, which attracted to the profession better teachers with specific training. It was above all women who made up the shortfall of teachers in the growing education system. As a profession, teaching was considered particularly suited to women, by virtue of their «natural» calling to motherhood, and although they were lower paid than their male colleagues, women teachers tended to be of higher social extraction, given the lack of employment alternatives for middle class girls, and more educated. Yet the hardships they faced were greater, due to tougher competition for teaching posts and the hostility that more backward, rural communities showed towards women who were often alone and without family nearby. The article, however, seeks to deconstruct the stereotype of women teachers as victims spread by popular fiction and the press, stressing that such an image was shaped by the literary fashions of the age.

After the liberal turn of the early years of the twentieth century, unionism among teachers began to take root, reflecting a growing trend at the international level.² It was both an expression and a trigger, through the workers' press and conferences, of the cultural and political growth of teachers and their esprit de corps.

² See, among others, Martin Lawn, *Servants of the State. The Contested Control of Teaching 1900-1930* (London-New York-Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1987); Jacques Girault, *Instituteurs, professeurs: une culture syndicale dans la société française: fin XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996).

ELEMENTARY TEACHING UNDER THE OLD REGIME

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the matter of providing education to the lower classes and training teachers came to the attention of learned elites and enlightened governments.³ The educational situation they had to deal with, however, was a fragmentary one, in which schools represented just one, and not the main, way of spreading literacy. Even the terms «school» and «teacher» themselves carried variously different connotations. «Official» schooling was generally assigned to clergymen, parish priests or their assistants, or, where permitted by a sufficient number of pupils and sufficient funding, to «professional» teachers recruited from the ranks of the ecclesiastical proletariat.

They were all paid from bequests and donations from clergymen, believers, brotherhoods and religious institutions or from contributions made by the municipality or private individuals. Such discontinuous funding could not guarantee the regularity of schooling and generally was only enough to pay teachers' wages and little else; next to nothing remained for the classroom and learning materials.

The cornerstone of teaching was Latin and Latin grammar; only occasionally was reading and writing taught. As the language of prayer and liturgy for the Counter-Reformation Church, Latin was the key to accessing higher levels of education and an ecclesiastical career.

Since only Latin schooling was considered true schooling, basic literacy teaching was delegated to a separate arrangement, which only in the big cities began to be formalized into a separate, preparatory class attended alongside colleges. For masters of Latinity, teaching literacy was considered a hard and vile task requiring, as one curate observed, «great patience», and it was «more a job for women than for men».⁴ The reference was to an undervalued figure who went largely unrecognised in the official records,

³ For an overall picture see Marina Roggero, *L'alfabeto conquistato. Apprendere e insegnare nell'Italia tra Sette e Ottocento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999). On teachers, see also Piero Severi, «Il buon maestro. Immagini di insegnanti nel XVIII secolo», in *Il catechismo e la grammatica, I, Istruzione e controllo sociale nell'area emiliana e romagnola nel 700'*, ed. Gian Paolo Brizzi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 171–224, and the overview provided by Giovanni Vigo in «Il maestro elementare», in *Maestri e professori. Profili della professione docente tra Antico regime e Restaurazione*, eds. Emanuele Pagano e Giovanni Vigo (Milan: Unicopli, 2012), 11–124.

⁴ Quoted in Roggero, *L'alfabeto*, 230.

consisting of generally poor, semi-literate housewives who would look after children and teach them prayers, Christian doctrine, some basic notions of reading and, for the girls, a bit of sewing or knitting.⁵

The standard of teaching provided by laymen who charged little to impart their scant knowledge was not much better. Otherwise unemployed or too weak for manual labour, or seeking to supplement the pittance they earned from their trade, these farmers, tailors, cobblers, sextons and other craftsmen were still reported to exist well after 1861, as evidenced by the first investigations into the matter after unification, although the scandal that such «indecent» pairings raised suggests that the role of the teacher was gaining greater respect, at least in the eyes of the school authorities of the time.⁶

Just like many other tradesmen, the teachers were sometimes compelled to travel far and wide, roaming from farmstead to farmstead or appearing at town fairs wearing hats with one to three feathers that indicated their level of competence: reading, writing and arithmetic. Besides more humble workers with a rudimentary education, for whom teaching was just another of the services they offered, there were also more specialized individuals who had the bargaining power to negotiate, thanks to their skills, the nature, duration and level of compensation for their engagement.

Governments did not always bother to conduct a census of the laymen and clergymen who worked privately as teachers. Towards the end of the century, however, growing political tensions led them to monitor them more closely. Thus it proved that their numbers were particularly high in Naples, fuelled by the expulsion of the Jesuits and high unemployment among the educated,⁷ although just how high their standard of teaching was is difficult to say, and according to some reports it appears to have been quite low.⁸

⁵ A portrait of such women on the eve of Italian unification, pieced together from the applications they submitted to be licensed to teach, held in the State Archives of Lucca, is given by Teresa Bertilotti in «Normalizzare il reclutamento: lo Stato e le “maestre dei tempi nuovi”», in *Per le strade del mondo. Laiche e religiose fra Otto e Novecento*, ed. Stefania Bartoloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 129–151.

⁶ Giovanni Vigo, «Il maestro elementare italiano nell'Ottocento. Condizioni economiche e status sociale», *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 61 (1977): 43–84.

⁷ Alberto Tanturri, «Dal precettorato alle scuole private. Il caso del Mezzogiorno sette-ottocentesco», *Annali di storia dell'educazione*, 20 (2013): 187–199. On laymen teachers working privately in Papal Rome, see Guerrino Pelliccia, *La scuola primaria a Roma dal secolo XVI al XIX* (Rome, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985), 63.

⁸ Alfredo Zazo, *L'istruzione pubblica e privata nel napoletano (1767–1860)* (Città di Castello: Il Solco, 1927), 277.

PRE-UNITY GOVERNMENTS AND TEACHER TRAINING

Such a situation served a wide range of needs. As such, it is understandable that the rationalizing efforts of governments seeking to widen the schooling net and, above all, improve and standardize teacher skills should have encountered resistance.

A pioneering role in Italy was played by Lombardy under Habsburg rule, where Enlightenment thinking brought new ideas on teaching and the introduction of Theresian and Josephine educational reforms. From there the Felbiger «normal» method spread throughout the Italian peninsula, disseminated by Francesco Soave, author of a number of popular manuals, and by other religious thinkers.⁹

While it is true that teachers were expected to do no more than follow the meticulous practical norms set out in the manuals to the letter, the idea began to hold sway that they should be selected by examination and given specific training, sanctioned in the form of a licence.

The «normal» method called for group instruction, rather than instruction to individual pupils as was usual at the time, following a procedure that progressed from the most simple to more complex notions of knowledge and entailed a very specific division of pupils by their level of education, along with various teaching aids, such as a teacher's desk, textbooks and learning tables. The efficiency gained by schools in this way would enable schooling to be extended on a much vaster scale than before.

The set up and cost of an education system organized in this way fell to local administrations, which responded variously depending on their own local schooling traditions and funding means. Central governments performed the task of supervising and steering the teaching body and municipalities —something they would do with all the more earnestness the more the task of public education was charged with political and innovative

⁹ Vittoria Bosna, *Ludovico Vuoli e la diffusione del «metodo normale» nel regno di Napoli* (Bari: Cacucci, 2001); Maurizio Piseri, «Un sistema educativo tra Sette e Ottocento e i suoi maestri. Il caso della Lombardia», in *Formare alle professioni. Sacerdoti, principi, educatori*, eds. Egle Becchi and Monica Ferrari (Milan: Angeli 2009), 361–397; Simonetta Polenghi, «Scuole elementari e manuali per i maestri tra Sette e Ottocento. Dall'Austria alla Lombardia», in *Formare alle professioni*, 398–418; Paolo Bianchini, «La ricezione della pedagogia austro-lombarda nel Piemonte sabaudo», in *La scuola degli Asburgo. Pedagogia e formazione degli insegnanti tra il Danubio e il Po (1773-1918)*, ed. Simonetta Polenghi (Turin: SEI, 2012), 149–178.

content, as happened under French dominion. Indicative of this was the increase in inquiries and statistics produced during that period, providing a rather dramatic picture of education and the standard of teaching at that time. Although such evidence has its limitations, due to the lack of a consolidated administrative tradition in most of the Italian states, the prejudices of functionaries asked to assess a world they did not always understand and, finally, the tendency of teachers themselves to evade inquiries,¹⁰ it shows that, especially in the countryside, basic literacy schools were lacking of unstable constitution, that the old, individual method of instruction still persisted and that time-honoured books such as the Latin *Charta*, the Book of Psalms and *Donato* were all widely used.¹¹

The individual method had its obvious flaws, such as class misbehaviour while the teacher dedicated time to each pupil one by one and the slow rate of literacy learning, based as it was on memorizing nouns and not the sounds of letters; on the other hand, it had the advantage of lending itself to different learning needs and irregular school attendance.

During the Napoleonic Age, due to economic constraints and the priority given to higher education, on the whole the situation was not good for basic schooling, despite the good intentions and principled declarations. As municipal finances dwindled, Church property was sold off, educational bequests dried up and religious orders were suppressed, access to schooling became more limited and teaching standards fell.¹²

The restoration of legitimate sovereigns did not, in general, undermine the consolidated acquisitions made in public schooling, which was considered a matter of public interest, a tool for instilling in subjects devotion to the monarch and a remedy against the spread of pauperism, an issue that had come to the fore in international debate. On the most part, rules requiring both public and private school teachers to be licensed and to sit an examination were confirmed, although such measures were

¹⁰ Roggero, *L'alfabeto*, 151–165.

¹¹ The first two were books of prayers and psalms, the third an adaptation of a fourth-century grammar book.

¹² See Roggero, *L'alfabeto*, 151–194; Sante Bucci, *La scuola italiana nell'età napoleonica: il sistema educativo e scolastico francese nel Regno d'Italia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1976); Paolo Bianchini, *Educare all'obbedienza. Pedagogia e politica in Piemonte tra Antico Regime e Restaurazione* (Turin: SEI, 2008), 87–258; Maurizio Lupo, *Tra le provvide cure di Sua Maestà. Stato e scuola nel Mezzogiorno tra Settecento e Ottocento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 61–80; Emanuele Pagano *La scuola nelle Marche in età napoleonica* (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2000).

promoted more to assure the morality of the teaching body than the level of training. Whether such rules were respected was another matter, as seen in the tenacity of the resistance shown to the exclusion of Latin from the elementary school curriculum, something that enlightened sovereigns had attempted to do in their day and age and was now being raised again in an effort to keep lower class pupils out of Latin schools; they were to be reserved an education befitting their social condition, which would not fuel aspirations that could destabilize the social order.

The wave of revolutions between 1820 and 1848 heightened ever-present fears of the subversive character of education, as demonstrated by the decline of mutual instruction schools, which liberals in particular had hoped would defeat illiteracy rapidly and at little cost. Such a goal proved illusory due to the poor training of monitors, that is, the pupils who assisted the teacher, highlighting the problem of teacher training standards well before anti-liberal repression spread to the monitorial system.

As for rulers, they believed that only by tightening the Church's oversight of schools and teachers or by handing control of the education system directly to the Church could the dangers of insufficiently moralizing instruction be averted.¹³

In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, in 1831 Ferdinand II ordered the reduction of teachers' wages and the closure of girls' schools, resulting in a sharp drop in the number of schools and pupils; at the end of the 1850s, their number was still lower than it had been in the 1820s.¹⁴

The situation was entirely different in Lombardy–Venetia, where government efforts to set up a well-organized school system render, as one insightful scholar has observed, the term «Restoration» rather inadequate to describe this period of history in this corner of Italy.¹⁵ A regulation in

¹³ For the education situation in the various states prior to unification see the various essays in Luciano Pazzaglia (ed.), *Chiesa e prospettive educative in Italia tra Restaurazione e Unificazione* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1994). See also Angelo Gaudio, *Educazione e scuola nella Toscana dell'Ottocento: dalla Restaurazione alla caduta della destra* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2001); Angelo Bianchi (ed.), *L'istruzione in Italia tra 700' e 800'. Studi e carte storiche*, (Brescia: La Scuola, 2007), and *L'istruzione in Italia tra Sette e Ottocento. Da Milano a Napoli: casi regionali e tendenze nazionali* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2012).

¹⁴ Lupo, *Tra le provvide cure*, 155, 207–209.

¹⁵ Simonetta Polenghi, «La formazione dei maestri nella Lombardia austriaca», in *La scuola degli Asburgo. Pedagogia e formazione degli insegnanti tra il Danubio e il Po (1773–1918)*, ed. Simonetta Polenghi (Turin: SEI, 2012), 45–89.

1818 introduced a progressive system, consisting of minor schools, with two forms, to be opened in every parish, followed by major schools, consisting of three forms, after which pupils could go onto higher education at a gymnasium school or enrol in a fourth form offering vocational training for commercial and lower level clerical posts.

This was the start of far-reaching changes to teacher training and their professional status, with a training programme involving courses on method, theoretical and practical exams and qualification certificates.

After some delay, the example set by Lombardy was followed by the nearby Savoy kingdom, where in 1844, with the consent of King Charles Albert, the Austrian functionary Ferrante Aporti was invited to give a course on method; he was known for his initiatives with nursery schools, which reactionaries had strongly opposed. Aporti's arrival in the kingdom assumed political significance due to his friendship with Carlo Boncompagni and other members of a pedagogical movement and group of thinkers which since the 1830s, in Lombardy, Piedmont and Tuscany, had championed the possibility of ushering the poor towards civility and progress, under the guiding light of religion and in deference to the existing social order. Through action in the social and educational sphere to improve the conditions of the working classes, they sought to encourage gradual but significant reforms, in which they saw the key to overthrowing the old order.¹⁶

The creation of a professorship in teaching method at the university and the opening of method schools in various provinces gave final implementation to the provisions of the 1822 regulation, which introduced the compulsory licensing of teachers via examination by the provincial reform board (the highest local school authority).

Even clergymen were obliged to undergo examination. Among the first to comply with the requirement were the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who had arrived from France in the 1820s and were charged with elementary schooling in the capital and other important cities in the kingdom. That would not suffice to keep them in charge of municipal schools, however, which they were forced to leave after being the target of a heated press cam-

¹⁶ Giorgio Chiosso, *Carità educatrice e istruzione in Piemonte: aristocratici, filantropi e preti di fronte all'educazione del popolo nel primo 800'* (Turin: SEI, 2007), 15–66; Ester De Fort, «L'istruzione», in *Il Piemonte alle soglie del '48*, ed. Umberto Levrà (Turin: Comitato di Torino dell'Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento italiano, 1999), 241–279.

paign accusing them of siding with the Jesuits, considered an emblem of reactionaryism, and thus of not being compatible with the new liberal order introduced in 1848.¹⁷

The secularizing efforts of the d'Azeglio and Cavour governments, aimed at modernizing state institutions and eliminating their denominational characteristics, greatly downsized the Church's influence over public schooling and suspended the privileges that Catholic schools enjoyed.¹⁸

That contrasted greatly with the situation in other Italian states. Even in Lombardy–Venetia, collaboration between Church and state in education had, until then, been subject to Habsburg jurisdictional tradition, which assigned responsibility for schooling to parish priests, considering them functionaries of the state, while exercising strict control over religious colleges. The concordat of 1855, made to strengthen the crisis-hit monarchy, granted the Church greater room for manoeuvre and influence even in education, with elementary school teachers subject to inspection by clergy nominated by bishops, in the name of tighter ties between the Church and state.¹⁹

The issue of education being in the hands of a power perceived hostile by liberals would emerge again after Italian unification, when a souring of relations with the Church fuelled government mistrust of ecclesiastical teachers, who in 1863–1864 accounted for approximately one-third of the public teaching body.²⁰

¹⁷ Fratel Marco Paolantonio, *Profilo storico delle istituzioni della Provincia piemontese*, <http://lasalliana.it/ricerche-lasalliane/profili-storici/40-profili-storici/68-provincia-di-torino-fsc.html> (accessed 7th July, 2014).

¹⁸ Maria Cristina Morandini, *Scuola e nazione. Maestri e istruzione popolare nella costruzione dello Stato unitario, 1848–1861* (Milan: V&P, 2003).

¹⁹ Erminio Lora, *Enchiridion dei Concordati: due secoli di storia dei rapporti Chiesa-Stato* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2003), 233.

²⁰ Statistica del Regno d'Italia, *Istruzione pubblica e privata. Istruzione primaria, anno scolastico 1862–63* (Florence, Tip. Tofani, 1866). Such mistrust was expressed in a contemporary report on elementary education: «Relazione sullo stato della istruzione elementare nelle province meridionali e settentrionali d'Italia», in *Documenti sulla istruzione elementare nel regno d'Italia*, I, (Florence: Eredi Botta, 1868), 1–29. According to the report, «for many of those ecclesiastical teachers, proven devotion to the royal or imperial government and to the ordinary diocesan took the place of a licence of qualification» (*Documenti*, 16).

AFTER UNIFICATION. A PROFESSION TAKES SHAPE

The primary education system of the new Kingdom of Italy

The Piedmontese and Lombard schooling systems, where elementary schools were an established institution distinct from the Latin schools, provided the model for the lawmakers who drafted the Casati Law. Introduced in November 1859 under emergency powers, at a crucial stage of the unification process, it would become the fundamental education law of the new Kingdom of Italy.

That in part explains the relatively advanced, even Utopian, nature of the law, when compared to the laws of the European nations it sought to emulate. It introduced free education and compulsory schooling for all boys and girls, and required municipal councils to establish a sufficient number of schools to cover their school-age populations.

The Casati Law, and the implementing regulations introduced by the minister Mamiani on 15th September, 1860, thus took its distance from the former regimes, but also from the magma of diverse forms of education that existed. It gave shape, in principle at least, to a elementary education system conceived as an end in itself, rather than as preparatory to further study, and organized according to rules strictly controlled from above, with uniform class groupings, standardized curricula and specifically trained teachers paid set, minimum wages. Precise instructions were also given on the tasks to be performed by teachers and how to conduct classes; although less stringent and detailed than Habsburg regulations,²¹ such instructions nevertheless attracted accusations of wanting to subject the country's schools to the blanket imposition of the pedantic methods in use in Piedmont and strike at local customs and traditions.

Mass education, as it was intended to be at least, was meant to transform Italians into virtuous, economically productive citizens who were obedient to the country's new institutions and morally regenerated—in contrast to

²¹ Fabio Pruneri, *Oltre l'alfabeto. L'istruzione popolare dall'unità d'Italia all'età giolittiana: il caso di Brescia* (Milan: V&P, 2006), 67. On the Casati Law and Italian education policy, see Ester De Fort, *La scuola elementare dall'unità alla caduta del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), and «La scuola e il progetto della formazione degli italiani», *Le Carte e la Storia* 17 (2), (2011): 45–59; Giuseppe Talamo, *La scuola dalla legge Casati all'inchiesta del 1864* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1960).

the Lombard example, which despite its unquestionable efficiency was accused of being repressive and anti-national in spirit. Raising literacy among the lower classes, however, proved an expensive affair, as was soon realized given the extremely thin coverage of the schooling network, while the spread of the values underpinning the liberal state faced hurdles in the hostility of the clergy and the indifference of the population and of local administrators, who were jealous of their prerogatives in education but reluctant to invest their scant funds in elementary schooling.

With the priority placed on education for the middle-classes, seen as the lynchpin of society and a vehicle for spreading a shared culture, the Historical Right (*Destra Storica*), in government at the time, stepped cautiously in the field of public education, considered more properly to be of municipal competence. It sought not to upset old arrangements too much and not to heighten pressures on local notables, even granting them in some areas, such as in Tuscany, a certain freedom of action.²² Such a stance was called into question by political developments, especially in the south, with the spread of banditry and growing apprehension over the fate of unification. Ultimately the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by local governing classes would be reined back, as they were criticized for protecting their own selfish or provincial interests and of being incapable of rising to the task of meeting the country's effective needs.

It was also a shock to «discover» that in 1861, 17 million people, out of a population of 22 million, were illiterate, although the figure actually overestimated the problem as it included children under the school age—something paradigmatic of the gap separating Italy from Europe's more progressive nations. Disaggregating the general average by «compartments» (*compartimenti*), a statistical partition of the nation into groups of provinces, illiteracy in Italy fluctuated between rates as low of 42 per cent for males in Piedmont and as high as 97% for females in Calabria.²³

²² In Tuscany the Ridolfi Law of 10th March, 1860, in force until 1877, did not contemplate compulsory schooling or free education, or even a minimum wage for teachers; see Pietro Causarano, *Combinare l'istruzione coll'educazione. Municipio, istituzioni civili ed educazione popolare a Firenze dopo l'unità 1859–1878* (Milan: Unicopli, 2005).

²³ Average illiteracy in the kingdom was 69 per cent for males and 75 per cent for females; see Giovanni Vigo, *Istruzione e sviluppo economico in Italia nel secolo XIX* (Turin: ILTE, 1971), 119. On the *compartimenti*, see Silvana Patriarca, *Numbers and Nationhood: Writing Statistics in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202–203.

Population surveys were affected by the weight of older age groups, but even among children of compulsory schooling age, namely six to twelve years, attendance rates were low, with an average of 43% across the kingdom (1863), and regionally differentiated, falling to just 14 and 17 per cent in areas such as Sicily and Basilicata and rising to 83 and 93 per cent in Piedmont and Lombardy respectively.²⁴

The snapshot of Italian schools resulting from the field surveys conducted by school inspectors, a body of specially tasked functionaries, was a dramatic one, and it would remain so for years to come, if we are to believe the reports they filed, all unanimous in their content and tone, ranging from pity to indignation.²⁵ The patriotic spirit and innovating impulse that drove them, along with a certain hypercriticism typical of their role, explains the harshness of certain judgements and the unkind eye with which they viewed local administrations, which were generally highly conservative and sparing in their funding of public education (though less so with elite schooling).

The few schools there were in the countryside and suburbs were insufficient for the local population of children of compulsory school age. Overcrowded, especially in the colder months, the kids themselves were of disparate age, unruly and quick to take off at the minimum need of their families.

Recruiting teachers for public education

Even the inspectors' notes on the teachers were a sore point. It was reported that their own level of learning was low, beatings were used to keep order and that they knew no method, but also that their wages were low, forcing many of them to work two or even three jobs, and their posts were unstable, exposed as they were to threats of dismissal by local administrators.

Yet, given the ineffectiveness of other education channels (such as the Church and families), the enormous task of defeating illiteracy and preparing the population to be good citizens fell to public teachers. One of the fundamental tools for achieving that task was the Italian language, a «pow-

²⁴ Vigo, *Istruzione*, 119.

²⁵ On school inspectors, see Giorgio Chiosso, *Alfabeti d'Italia. La lotta contro l'ignoranza nell'Italia unita* (Turin, SEI, 2011), 199–203.

erful vehicle conveying patriotic ideas, the basis of Italian civilization»,²⁶ but a language spoken fluently by only around 10 per cent of the population (although that does not mean it was not understood) and barely mastered by teachers themselves.²⁷

Teachers needed to be retrained and a new generation of trainees introduced to the profession with the preparation for and awareness of the vital importance of their task, and with a devotion, or at least bearing no hostility, to the country's new institutions. The title of «modest soldiers of knowledge and freedom» by which teachers were addressed in the Natoli circular²⁸ expresses both the emphatic prominence placed on the role of teachers, as the custodians of the unified nation's founding values, and at the same time their implicit relegation to being minor figures, who would not be granted any substantial improvement in terms of pay and employment conditions.

The normal schools established by the Casati Law to provide teacher training²⁹ were considered inferior to other secondary schools, with admission to the schools determined by an entry examination, which for males

²⁶ Antonino Parato, *La scuola pedagogica nazionale: Scritti educativi teorici e pratici* (Turin: Tip. Botta, 1885), 466. Regulations for normal schools and teacher colleges dated 24th June, 1860 required that at least one person on the teaching staff at schools should have been born or educated in Tuscany and «be capable of teaching good pronunciation and the properties of informal speech». On the question of the Italian language and its teaching in schools see, among others, Nicola De Blasi, «L'italiano nella scuola», in *Storia della lingua italiana*, vol. I, *I luoghi della codificazione*, eds. L. Serianni, P. Trifone (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 383–423; Maria Catricalà, «Questione della lingua e scuola nell'Italia unita», in *La lingua nella storia d'Italia*, ed. Luca Serianni (Rome: Società Dante Alighieri, 2002), 531–546.

²⁷ Arrigo Castellani, «Quanti erano gli italofoeni nel 1861?», *Studi Linguistici Italiani*, 8 (1), (1982): 3–26.

²⁸ Quoted in Carla Ghizzoni, «Il maestro nella scuola elementare italiana dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra», in *Maestri e istruzione popolare in Italia fra Otto e Novecento. Interpretazioni, prospettive di ricerca, esperienze in Sardegna*, eds. Roberto Sani and Angelino Tedde (Milan: V&P, 2003), 24, to which reference can be made for a general overview. On teachers see also Giorgio Chiosso, «Istruzione primaria e condizioni dei maestri tra Otto e Novecento», in *Maestri, educazione popolare e società in "Scuola Italiana Moderna" 1893–1993*, eds. Mario Cattaneo and Luciano Pazzaglia (Brescia: La Scuola, 1997), 25–52; Ester De Fort, «I maestri elementari italiani dai primi del Novecento alla caduta del fascismo», *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 68 (5-6), (1984): 527–576; Antonio Santoni Rugiu, *Maestri e maestre. La difficile storia degli insegnanti elementari* (Rome: Carocci, 2006).

²⁹ On normal schools, see Carmela Covato and Annamaria Sorge, *L'istruzione normale dalla legge Casati all'età giolittiana* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 1994); Teresa Bertilotti, «Tra offerta istituzionale e domanda sociale: le scuole normali dall'Unità alla "crisi magistrale"», 2 (1995): 379–392, e «La formazione degli insegnanti e la riforma delle Scuole normali», *Annali di Storia dell'educazione*, 10 (2003): 37–55; Susanne Wilking, «Die Berufsausbildung der Volksschullehrerinnen und Volksschullehrer in Italien von 1860 bis 1900», *Paedagogica Historica* 26 (3), (1990), 47–73. More generally on teacher training, see Chiosso, *Alfabeti*, 177–220, Giovanni Genovesi and Paolo Russo (eds.), *La formazione del maestro in Italia* (Ferrara: Corso Editore, 1995). For an international overview, see Escolano, «Las Escuelas Normales», 55–76.

was based on the fourth-year elementary school curriculum and for females on the third-year curriculum.

To bridge the time it would take for the new schools to become fully up and running and cover the shortfalls of the pre-existing situation, given that so few teachers were formally licensed, now a requirement for entering or keeping a teaching post, the government was compelled to run teacher training courses lasting just a few months. The urgent need for teachers, and perhaps the pity felt for individuals who would otherwise be reduced to abject poverty, led the examination commission to turn a blind eye on rudimentary or improvised training and the inspectors to hush up cases of unlicensed teachers (approximately one-quarter of the total in 1872) in places where their dismissal would have forced the school to close. The situation would continue until the end of the century and well into the twentieth in mountain areas —so much so that the idea of sending itinerant teachers was repeatedly discussed, until the depopulation of mountain districts ultimately minimized perceptions of the problem.³⁰

Given the profession's poor appeal, normal schools for boys were never destined for great success, primarily attracting pupils not accepted by classical and technical institutes or not capable of undertaking such studies. Moreover, they tended to be established in minor urban centres to make up for the lack of more prestigious secondary schools —a policy that catered for the humble ambitions of the local ruling class, but did not ensure a sufficient user base for the new schools. Finally, the few school leavers to have earned a diploma generally preferred to move to larger urban centres offering better employment conditions, thus abandoning country schools.

A NEW SOCIAL FIGURE: THE WOMAN TEACHER

Making up the shortfall were women, who flocked to teaching in ever greater numbers.³¹ Staff were needed for the new elementary schools open-

³⁰ Marco Cuaz, «Le “maestrine d'en bas”. Maestri elementari e conflitti culturali nella Valle d'Aosta fra Otto e Novecento», *Histoire des Alpes – Storia delle Alpi – Geschichte der Alpen*, 12 (2007): 69–81; Ester De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo nell'Italia del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 182.

³¹ The literature on Italian women teachers has become quite considerable. Here we cite: Simonetta Soldani, «Nascita della maestra elementare», in *Fare gli Italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, eds. Simonetta Soldani and Gabriele Turi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), I, 67–130, and «S'emparer de l'avenir: les jeunes filles dans les écoles normales et les établissements secondaires de l'Italie unifiée

ing throughout the country providing compulsory education for girls and curricula comparable to those for boys —a big change for a society that previously had completely neglected girls' education, as reflected in illiteracy rates, or relegated it to convent schools, nunneries and charity institutions of various kinds, which offered very basic literacy learning and training in women's jobs for lower-class girls, along with arts d'agrément, such as drawing, dancing and embroidery, for noble and middle-class girls so as to make a good impression in society and on the marriage market.

Although hampered by popular mistrust, which considered education of no use or even dangerous for women, ultimately nothing could stop the spread of elementary schooling. It led to the growth of literacy among girls and by 1911 the female literacy rate for girls aged 10–15 years, although on average still not very high, matched the male rate in many areas of the country, even in some southern regions.³²

Hand in hand with the spread of schooling, and as a consequence of it, women progressively began to enter the teaching profession. As in the case of male teachers, a makeshift teaching body had to be formed at first, calling up even private teachers whose own level of education was rather low.³³ Not that a solid cultural background appeared particularly necessary for ladies designated to teach lowly peasant girls, for whom it was feared education might «go to their heads».³⁴ As can be gathered from the replies given to the Scialoja inquiry —an important document recording the views of the learned classes

1861-1911», *Paedagogica Historica*, 40 (1-2), (2004): 123–142; Marino Raicich, «La maestra di campagna», in *Storie di scuole da un'Italia lontana* (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 2005), 29–79; Teresa Bertilotti, «Le “sdegnosette che masticano Dante”», *Parole Chiave*, 26 (2001): 281–296, and *Maestre a Lucca. Comuni e scuola pubblica nell'Italia liberale* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2006); Carmela Covato, *Un'identità divisa. Diventare maestra in Italia fra Otto e Novecento* (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1996); Giovanni Genovesi (ed.), *Donne e formazione nell'Italia unita: allieve, maestre e pedagogiste* (Milan: Angeli 2003); Susanne Wilking, *Mutter, Missionarin, Meisterin: der Beruf der Lehrerin in Italien von 1860 bis 1914* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996). See also, for comparative purposes, James C. Albisetti, «The Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective», *History of Education*, 22 (3), (1993): 253–263; Mineke van Essen and Rebecca Rogers, «Écrire l'histoire des Enseignantes. Enjeux et perspectives internationales», *Histoire de l'éducation*, 98 (2003): 5–35.

³² De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo*, 152–153. Even the schooling rate for girls aged 6–12 years was at 62%, close to the rate for boys (66%).

³³ Bertilotti, «Normalizzare il reclutamento», 130–131. The ministry nevertheless insisted on the licensing of teachers from religious orders, thus promoting their professionalization: Giancarlo Rocca, «La formazione delle religiose insegnanti tra Otto e Novecento», in *Cattolici, educazione e trasformazioni socio-culturali in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. Luciano Pazzaglia (Brescia: La Scuola, 1999), 419–457.

³⁴ Bertilotti, *Maestre*, 151–153.

of the time on the features and purposes of secondary schooling, many preferred women teachers to be of modest origin, even from peasant families, who would be satisfied with the limited social advancement and low pay afforded teachers, better still from the local area, as they would be known by the community and able to understand the local mentality.³⁵

Not everyone agreed, however, highlighting the persistent ambiguities and uncertainties that began to surround the ideal model of the teacher. That teachers, whether male or female, should have such strong ties to the local community was a source of concern, as it was feared they would not take sufficient distance from local customs and «superstitions». Even the minister Coppino, who had proposed recruiting teachers from orphanages and poorhouses, providing they were capable of adapting to the rigours of rural life, observed that certain behavioural traits, concerning the «discreteness of ways, the prudence of advice and action, zealousness in the fulfilment of [...] duties», and certain educational qualities, able to ensure the shaping of «citizens honest in and of themselves and for others, hard-working for the benefit of their family and useful to the common homeland», could only be acquired in government normal schools.³⁶

Meanwhile, growing numbers of women were entering normal schools. They made up for the lack of secondary schools on offer for girls, given that access to gymnasium schools and vocational institutes was socially, if not legally, off-limits for girls. Even the establishment of high schools in certain big cities, at the initiative mostly of the municipal council, offering upper and lower middle-class girls a more modern, secular education, albeit still focused on marriage and family life, would not undermine the primacy of normal schools for girls' education. Their success was clearly evident when, towards the end of the century, even convent schools, traditionally the most insular to change, began to introduce their own teacher training programmes —a sign that even the daughters of well-to-do families no longer disdained a school diploma that would allow them to be financially independent, if the vicissitudes of life should so require.³⁷

³⁵ L. Montevocchi and M. Raicich, *L'inchiesta Scialoja sulla istruzione secondaria maschile e femminile (1872-1875)* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 1995); Bertilotti, *Maestre*, 145–153; Valeria Miceli, «L'inchiesta Scialoja e le scuole normali», *History of Education & Children's Literature*, 8 (2), (2013): 293–332.

³⁶ Circular of 23rd September, 1867, No. 211, quoted in Miceli, «L'inchiesta Scialoja».

³⁷ Soldani, «S'emparer de l'avenir», 130.

Throughout the Italian peninsula, women flooded into elementary school teaching—a phenomenon seen not only in Italy. While various prospects of employment were open to men with a certain level of education, from office posts to commercial jobs, women had few other opportunities besides manual labour, and none as dignified. Teaching, in fact, seemed particularly suited to women, as it involved the application of «innate» feminine virtues, tied to the «natural» calling of motherhood. This was the stereotype that local councils would promote to introduce women teachers, initially confined to girls' schools, gradually into co-educational schools and the lower levels of boys' schools. The reason they did was to save money, as the teaching wage for women was by law one-third lower than for men, but it was also for moral concerns, in the belief that it was safer to entrust the education of the young children to women. Moreover, the tough competition faced by women to access teaching roles encouraged a higher standard of teachers compared to their male colleagues.

The boom in teacher numbers attracted the national media spotlight and literary attention, with the emphasis generally placed on the more dramatic or piteous aspects of a life, especially for rural teachers, shut up in remote, backward communities, where the arrival of women on their own stirred up gossip or even incited persecution. Many teachers came from the towns and their habits, even their attire, topped off by a «bonnet and bun», were seen as unusual and indecently coquettish. For girls of country origin, it was feared that normal schools, given their location in sprawling cities (another recurring theme in conservative thought), would corrupt their ways by blighting their inborn simplicity. As one principal put it, «Many first come to the school wearing a headscarf like peasant girls, but then leave with a bonnet, and parents unsatisfied».³⁸

Their superiors called on them to be discreet in their ways and to dress soberly and austere so as not to stand out and attract the attention of the town's squires or the irritation of families, as sometimes it took very little to ignite a scandal.

A particularly great stir was caused by the case of Italia Donati, a 23 year-old teacher who committed suicide in 1886 following slanderous rumours of an alleged relationship with one country gentleman, the mayor of

³⁸ Quoted in Raicich, *La maestra*, 35.

Lamporecchio, in the Tuscan countryside, an impenitent womanizer, and the character assassination suffered at the hands of the local townspeople, who had spread rumours of an abortion.

Many more stories of this kind would emerge in the wake of the interest and general outrage stirred by the Donati case, which the *Corriere della Sera* championed to the point of obtaining the exhumation of the body for a grand funeral which, it was said, around 20,000 people attended. Some exaggerated the facts, others altered them, as in a less dramatic case concerning a teacher from the Marches region unfairly accused of theft, who was heralded a sacrificial victim despite her behaviour not being entirely above board.³⁹ Such subservience to preconceptions would almost seem to want to deny the emergence of women who through education and teaching encountered new opportunities for emancipation.⁴⁰

TOWARDS THE EMERGENCE OF A «CLASS» CONSCIOUSNESS

The persecution of women teachers was a newspaper story that sold well, as the elements invariably involved —sex, a defenceless victim and a powerful, abusive rogue— would always elicit a strong emotional response. Writers also latched onto the stories for the same reason, with Matilde Serao (*Come muoiono le maestre*, 1886), Edmondo De Amicis (*Primo Maggio*), and, later, Renato Fucini (*La maestrina*) all publishing stories inspired by the Donati affair.⁴¹ But rather than uncritically accepting the literary descriptions they provide as an objective window on the condition of teachers, it is interesting to see how they reflected and shaped at the same time the perception of teachers and how they were conditioned by the literary canons and tastes of the time.⁴²

³⁹ The accusation was presumably in retaliation to the revelation, by the teacher, of an awkward family secret. The affair involving the teacher is recounted by Augusta Palombarini in *Storie magistrali. Maestre marchigiane tra Otto e Novecento* (Macerata: EUM, 2009).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Rosanna Basso, *Donne in provincia. Percorsi di emancipazione attraverso la scuola nel Salento tra Otto e Novecento* (Milan: F. Angeli, 2000).

⁴¹ In truth, interest in the affair is still alive and well in our own time. An article by Enzo Catarsi, «Il suicidio della maestra Italia Donati», *Studi di storia dell' educazione*, 3 (3), (1981): 28-55, has provided the basis for a novel —Elena Giannini Belotti, *Prima della quiete. Storia di Italia Donati* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003)—, and a stage show, and there was talk of a feature-length film.

⁴² See the pertinent considerations of Rosa Casapullo in «Maestri e maestre nella prosa letteraria dell'Ottocento» in *La nazione tra i banchi. Il contributo della scuola alla formazione degli italiani tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. Vittoria Fiorelli (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2012). On the topic of teachers in literature,

The desolate picture painted by Serao in her novel *Scuola normale femminile* —«Some of us were poor, some had an idiot brother, some a paralytic father, some an evil stepmother, others some carefully concealed wound or a shameful disgrace hidden behind noble piety»— although offered as a social critique, is imbued with a sentimentalism that reflects the style of the French *fin de siècle* novel in vogue at the time she was writing.⁴³

Novels and plays show that awareness was spreading among growing swathes of public opinion of the contradictions between the rhetorical extolment of the teacher's role and the wretchedness of a profession often characterized by solitude, when not by abuse, which men and women of modest social background were embracing out of need. While they denounce the faults of the local and national ruling classes, they do not fail to offer teachers role models their own examples to follow. This can be seen, for instance, in the various works of De Amicis that take schooling as their theme, notwithstanding the diversity of their registers, and in the interpretive complexity of his most famous novel *Cuore*, which focuses on teachers and school as a microcosm of the new Italy. While it is only in *Primo maggio* that he goes so far as to offer the socialist cause as an element of redemption for a persecuted woman teacher; in general he presents the teacher as an educative example of civic virtue and love for a non-belligerent homeland. In *Romanzo di un maestro*, for instance, he contrasts «the improvement of the nation by means of public schooling» with the extolment of war, instead considered «an abominable slaughter that we poeticize from habit or self-interest».⁴⁴

Rather than reflecting the habits and mentality of the teaching body, De Amicis in his works seeks to shape them, praising enthusiasm, through

initiated by Giorgio Bini in his «Romanzi e realtà di maestri e maestre», in *Storia d'Italia, Annali 4, Intellettuali e potere*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), 1195–1224, and explored extensively in the literature after him, see the more recent work of Anna Ascenzi, *Drammi privati e pubbliche virtù. La maestra italiana dell'Ottocento tra narrazione letteraria e cronaca giornalistica* (Macerata: EUM, 2012). Insight can also be had from memoirs; see Giovanni Genovesi and Anita Gramigna, *La scuola come romanzo: immagini e ideali di scuola e di insegnanti nella memorialistica e in De Amicis* (Ferrara: Annali dell'Università degli studi di Ferrara, 1995).

⁴³ Giovanni Galasso, «Riflessioni su Matilde Serao» in *Matilde Serao: le opere e i giorni: atti del convegno di studi, Napoli, 1-4 dicembre 2004*, ed. Angelo R. Pupino (Naples: Liguori, 2006), 155–164. A more nuanced interpretation is given by Ascenzi in *Drammi privati*, 29–76.

⁴⁴ Edmondo De Amicis, *Il romanzo d'un maestro*, Parte prima, *Miserie ed amori* (Milan: Treves, 1908), 23. A new edition of the novel was recently released, edited by Anna Ascenzi *et al.* (Genova: De Ferrari, 2007), with an introduction by Roberto Sani.

his various teacher characters, but at the same time self-control, the ability to peer into the souls of pupils and teach them to think with their own minds and the understanding of families; these same qualities were all recommended by the pedagogue Aristide Gabelli in his 1888 syllabuses.⁴⁵

This was the height of a new wave of reappraisal of schooling, fuelled by the growing spread of positivist thought in cultural circles. Riding that wave of belief in public schooling was the liberal Left government that rose to power in 1876, which dedicated much more energy than its right-wing predecessor into promoting schooling as a means of integrating the masses into the nation. Accordingly, the Coppino Law of 1877 enforced compulsory schooling for all six to nine year-olds, introducing penalties for non-compliant parents and councils,⁴⁶ while electoral reforms introduced in 1882 tied the right to vote to the completion of compulsory schooling, and not just income criteria, as was formerly the case.⁴⁷

Against a backdrop shaped by the conflict between clericalism and anticlericalism, for progressive thinkers teachers were to be the apostles of a secular and civil faith whose transcendental roots lay in a sacred idea of the homeland, so as to counteract the obscurantism of the clergy in country areas.⁴⁸ More prosaically, the education of the future voter base was in their hands, and they themselves were voters (the men, at least).

To improve employment conditions, the government introduced a pension fund, raised the minimum wage and introduced safeguards for appointments and promotions, removing such decisions from the arbitrary power of municipalities and assigning them to the oversight of a provincial education board—not without fierce resistance from local councils.⁴⁹ Many councils were reluctant to hire teachers on a permanent basis in the fear

⁴⁵ Enzo Catarsi, «I programmi del 1888 di Aristide Gabelli», in *Aristide Gabelli e il metodo critico in educazione*, ed. Gaetano Bonetta, (L'Aquila–Roma: Japadre, 1994), 73–95.

⁴⁶ The Coppino Law also replaced the compulsory teaching of the Catholic religion with basic notions of the duties of man and the citizen (article 2), without expressly abolishing it. The ambiguities of the text and arrangements granted to state administrators, especially at the local level, hindered the article's full application. See Carmen Betti, *La religione a scuola tra obbligo e facoltatività, I, 1859–1923* (Florence: Manzuoli 1989), 78–110.

⁴⁷ De Fort, *La scuola elementare*, 113–130.

⁴⁸ See the penetrating considerations of Francesco Traniello in «Nazione e storia nelle proposte educative degli ambienti laici di fine Ottocento», in Pazzaglia (ed.), *Cattolici*, 61–91.

⁴⁹ The boards were chaired by prefects, local level representatives of the executive and the main means by which administrative tasks were centralized.

that tenure would encourage poor productivity, and in some cases they resorted to expedients or secret pacts to prevent them staying on.

Measures were also taken to improve teacher training through the establishment of special schools to prepare girls for normal schools and through reforms to normal schools themselves, introduced in 1880 by the education minister Francesco De Sanctis. De Sanctis was a leading intellectual of his time; he sought to enrich the syllabus with general knowledge content and update it with new pedagogical concepts that built on the (inductive–experimental) scientific method—the same method that a few years later Gabelli would introduce into new curricula for elementary schools. De Sanctis (and Gabelli after him) sought to overcome the shortcomings of the schooling system of their day, such as its verbalism and excessive use of rote learning, to promote the formation of character and the mental habit observing and reasoning.

The new approach to method was never implemented in full, according to education authority reports at least, either at normal schools or among working teachers, despite the large number of pedagogical conferences held to spread the new methods. As was observed, teachers tended to remain within the confines of «a minor knowledge, strictly serving the practical needs of a school system with rather simple aims».⁵⁰

More success was obtained in providing teachers with better general knowledge, giving them a stronger grounding and in a broader range of fields. Under the Gianturco reforms of 1896, normal schools became more like secondary schools, although the introduction of school fees and cut-backs to scholarships raised barriers to poorer students. At the same time, the conversion of training courses into complementary schools, even where school fees were introduced, helped spread the dual nature that girls' normal schools had assumed over time, namely that of providing a general education and vocational training.

The raising of the general educational standard of teachers in the final decades of the nineteenth century helped bring about the emergence of a professional identity, or «class» identity, as it was called at the time, sharpening awareness of the discrepancy between the importance of their task and conditions in the field. A fundamental role in this process came

⁵⁰ As says Giorgio Chiosso, who examines the documentation on the conferences in *Alfabeti*, 193–199.

from the educational press.⁵¹ As early as the Risorgimento era, intellectuals concerned with renewing education and «civilizing» the people had begun writing journals that debated educational topics and that disclosed and disseminated the outcomes of their considerations and teaching trials.⁵² After Italian unification, especially as of the 1870s, the number of papers of lower calibre and more modest ambition mushroomed, offering practical advice for everyday teaching, assistance in preparing for public examinations and information on schooling regulations.⁵³ As the net of contributors broadened to include pedagogists, principals and teachers themselves, the journals became, besides an indispensable work tool, important opinion leaders, which interpreted but also steered the aspirations and tendencies to be found among teachers, both in and out of school, and helped shape government policy. The journals covered a wide range of topics, from the education policy debate to matters of domestic and international politics, literary columns and readers' letters, while maintaining a firm focus on teaching, which was their strength.⁵⁴

Their success was not immediate, however. Despite the widespread ignorance of «good methods» found by the 1864 and 1870 inquiries, the interest shown in everyday work guides presupposed an awareness of one's own limitations, a desire for self-improvement and a professional consciousness that was still struggling to emerge in full, especially in the countryside. Set back by low wages, the lack of learning materials and evasive, rowdy, slow-witted pupils, teachers worked in communities marked by poverty, where it was difficult to find decent housing, where those from out of town struggled to understand the dialect or local idiom and where even the word «homeland» was understood to mean something very different to what teachers meant by it.

Social relationships were hindered by the fact that teachers had little in common with the local population, with its coarse ways, and with lo-

⁵¹ Besides the numerous works authored or edited by Giorgio Chiosso on the educational press, see the collection edited by him, *La stampa pedagogica e scolastica in Italia 1820–1943* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1997).

⁵² Giorgio Chiosso (ed.), *Scuola e stampa nel Risorgimento. Giornali e riviste per l'educazione prima dell'Unità* (Milan: Angeli, 1989).

⁵³ Chiosso, *Alfabeti*, 203–205.

⁵⁴ According to a retrospective survey of teachers born between the turn of the century and 1910, 88% of male teachers and 95% of female teachers made use of them for their lesson plans: Marcello Dei, *Colletto bianco, grembiule nero. Gli insegnanti elementari italiani tra l'inizio del secolo e il secondo dopoguerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994).

cal bigwigs, who were reluctant to stoop to their level. In any case, school authorities suggested it was best not to be too familiar with the locals, so as not to stir up gossip or tarnish teacher prestige, and to be exemplary in one's behaviour, given that teachers were under the constant observation of pupils and families, in what has been called a «never-ending job».⁵⁵ On the other hand, teachers who managed to win the trust of the local people came to represent an important figure of reference and source of knowledge—being able to read, to write a letter, do arithmetic and speak the national language—which could be relied on to face the challenges presented by a modernity that was beginning to permeate into even the remotest of villages.

In towns, the more numerous teaching body had better opportunities for intellectual enrichment and stimulus—the best schools were there, wages were higher, recruitment stricter and school principals provided constant mentoring, as well as severe, and often overbearing control—like one of the characters of a De Amicis novella, «a sort of sergeant at arms» who demanded that the teachers be irreprehensible in their conduct, austere in their dress and it was said she had them watched by the local police and secretly interrogated the postman about their correspondence.⁵⁶

Such divergences, existing not only within the teaching body and certainly not new to an Italy «of a hundred cities and towns», were exacerbated by the faster pace of change, in the last quarter of the century, in urban districts and certain areas of the country.⁵⁷ They would eventually strain relations among teachers, although for the moment teachers in towns still played the leading role for the profession as a whole, speaking for their more humble rural colleagues. Unsurprisingly, plans for an all-encompassing national association were launched from Milan, Italy's economic powerhouse, where the teaching body was more active and more politicized,⁵⁸ the publishing sector more varied and educational journals more lively.

⁵⁵ Jacques Ozouf, *Nous, les maîtres d'école, autobiographies d'instituteurs de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, 1967), 103–104.

⁵⁶ Edmondo De Amicis «Un dramma della scuola», in De Amicis, *Fra scuola e casa. Bozzetti e racconti* (Milan: Treves, 1892), 24.

⁵⁷ On the risks posed by representing teachers as a homogenous body, without considering the influences and specificities of local situations, see Jean-François Chanet, «Pour la Patrie, par l'École ou par l'Épée ? L'école face au tournant nationaliste», *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 19 (1), (2001): 127–144.

⁵⁸ A significant account of this is reconstructed by Fabiana Loparco in «La Sezione Maestre e Maestri della Camera del Lavoro di Milano (1893-1898)» *History of Education & Children's Literature*, 8 (1), (2013): 675-712, and 8 (2): 497–545.

UNIONISM. FROM THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE GREAT WAR

Teacher associations first began to develop around the mid-nineteenth century. Although generally restricted to mutual aid societies, in some cases, where political conditions permitted, pedagogical clubs or societies emerged, which sought to involve teachers in a movement to modernize teacher training and schools, but which remained the expression of circumscribed clubs of intellectuals.⁵⁹

Later, however, mutual associations would gradually embrace agendas of a more markedly trade union nature and begin to focus on education policy issues, driven by the extension of the franchise to teachers. The spread and vitality of teacher societies, a third of which were established in the last decade of the century, is evidenced by the growth of association papers and newsletters, which came to account for around 20 per cent of education sector publications in the kingdom.⁶⁰ Despite the efforts of some journals, teacher associations and groups of teachers to mobilize teachers nationwide through conferences and proposals for a federation, teacher societies remained confined to the municipal, or at most regional, sphere and their aims were primarily of a corporatist nature.

Things would change after conservative forces, fearing that social tensions could sour further, were defeated in their efforts to have the constitution construed in a very narrow sense and to have strikes and popular demonstrations against the rising cost of living put down by repression. In the more liberal political climate of the early years of the twentieth century, teachers of a socialist and democratic leaning, in favour of a more militant stance, stepped up their support and calls for a review of budget spending to redress the disproportionate amount of funding earmarked for military budgets, to the detriment of public education.

⁵⁹ On teacher associations and unionism see the in-depth reconstruction of Alberto Barausse in *L'Unione Magistrale Nazionale. Dalle origini al fascismo 1901-1925* (Brescia: La Scuola 2002); see also Ester De Fort, «L'associazionismo degli insegnanti elementari dall'età giolittiana al fascismo», *Movimento operaio e socialista*, IV (1981): 375–404, and «I maestri di scuola» in *Il sindacalismo federale nella storia d'Italia*, eds. Franco Della Peruta *et al.* (Milan, Angeli, 2000), 184–218. On Catholic teacher associations, see below.

⁶⁰ Chiosso, *La stampa pedagogica*, 9.

Nevertheless, teachers still did not feel they were strong enough to act without the support of authoritative members of parliament who could voice their needs with the government. Thus it seemed natural for teacher groups and principals linked to certain important journals to turn to Luigi Credaro, a Radical Party MP and renowned pedagogue, to lead a new national teachers' association. Besides being particularly open to the problems faced by schools and teachers, the Radical Party was in favour of the emergence of trade unions and associations for public servants and professionals, along the lines of the big workers' federations, not only for the votes it might bring but out of the conviction that the union movement was compatible with its own agenda of promoting a political sphere able to bring potentially subversive forces under its wing and channel their energy into reforms.

The creation of the National Teachers' Union (UMN in Italian) in April 1901 marked a clean break with the associations that had come before it. Its membership numbers, totalling some thirty thousand teachers out of a teaching body of sixty thousand, bear witness to the reach of the educational press and its ability to work together to raise membership and make the UMN one of the biggest middle-class organizations in Italy. Although its members, especially the men, were generally of humble origin and their wages similar to those of workers, they were nevertheless perceived to be intellectual workers, closer to the lower middle-classes. This explains the diffidence and prejudices with which they were eyed by at least one part of the Socialist Party, tied closely to the workers' movement. The orderly spirit of the majority of the union's rank and file was ultimately accepted by the leaders of the UMN, who rejected strikes as a means of industrial action⁶¹ but did not want to continue along the obsequious and non-political line formerly taken by the various teachers' associations, restricted to municipal and corporatist circles.

Prejudicial antagonism was not, therefore, a feature of the UMN and how it worked, but that did not mean it was not independent in its action, placing constant pressure on the government and on parliament. It quickly built ties to MPs sensitive to the interests of education and through public demonstrations sought to bring the question of school policy to the fore of

⁶¹ The reluctance of teachers to take strike action was connected with the ideology of public service, which did not tolerate direct confrontation with the state, and with the desire for respectability, which they felt was undermined by a form of action so closely associated with workers. See, among others, the considerations of André D. Robert and Jeffrey Tyssens in «Pour une approche sociohistorique de la grève enseignante», *Education et sociétés*, 2 (2007): 20, accessed 20th July, 2014, DOI: [10.3917/es.020.0005](https://doi.org/10.3917/es.020.0005).

public opinion, in the awareness that to do so the key goals of improving the legal status, pension benefits and pay conditions of the profession had to be linked to the promotion of public schooling.

The introduction of education reforms caused trouble for the collaborative, gradualist line championed by Credaro, first with the Nasi Law (1903), affecting pension benefits and how appointments and promotions were made, and then the Orlando Law (1904), which raised the compulsory schooling age to 12 years and introduced an extra two years of elementary schooling. It failed, however, to raise teachers' wages, offering only a modest increase to rural teachers. Voicing the discontent of its teachers for the partial satisfaction of their claims, the UMN sided with the «extreme» left (*Estrema*), made up of Radicals, Republicans and Socialists to call for the vaster reform of education, centred on the transfer of competence for elementary schools to the central government.

The move came against a political backdrop shaped by alliances between progressive forces united by their anticlericalism and encouraged by the Freemason movement; these «blocs» were formed in response to the attenuation of the *Non Expedit* papal decree which until then had kept Catholics out of politics. The blocs sought to combat the emerging collaboration between Catholics and a large part of the government circle towards politically and socially conservative ends.⁶²

The UMN also adopted a line of resolute secularism, leading Catholic teachers to leave the union. They had originally joined to counterbalance left-wing positions, but also because they were convinced of the need for a decisive voice, whose strength lay in the unity of the profession. The Catholics were also generally opposed to the transfer of competence to the central government, in the belief that elementary schooling should remain a municipal responsibility. Thus they moved into a new organization of Christian inspiration formed in 1906, the Tommaseo, which had no intention, however, of forgoing the defence of teachers' interests or of adopting a soft stance towards the government —so much so that in one of its conventions there was even talk of strike action.⁶³

⁶² See the considerations of Giovanni Orsina on this scenario in *Anticlericalismo e democrazia. Storia del Partito radicale in Italia e a Roma, 1901–1914* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002).

⁶³ On Catholic teachers and the Tommaseo, see Carla Ghizzoni, *Cultura magistrale nella Lombardia del primo novecento. Il contributo di Maria Magnocavallo 1869–1956* (Brescia: La Scuola 2005), and «Maestre cattoliche e associazionismo magistrale a Milano in età giolittiana», in Bartoloni (ed.), *Per le strade*, 181–212.

Non-religious teachers were no less militant. At their convention in Venice in 1909, some two thousand teachers, including numerous women, voted in favour of an alliance with the General Confederation of Labour. Although moderates saw in this confirmation of a «subversive» turn, the alliance did not reflect any real growing left-wing sentiment among the union's members, but rather the hope that the workers' movement would support them in their claims, without, however, demanding much in return, in the common interest of raising the people.

It was not only the heightened pressure exerted by teachers that led to the approval of the most far-reaching education reforms of those years, contained in the Daneo–Credaro Law (1911), carrying the names of the two ministers who wrote it;⁶⁴ by then the public function of education, and the crucial role of the state in this field, had come to be accepted by legal scientists, politicians and the highest levels of the public administration.

Introducing a series of specific measures, from the expansion of state control to the creation of scholarship funds, the stated purpose of the law was to defeat illiteracy, a debilitating social evil that was still widespread in many regions, especially in the south, and which held back the modernization of the country. In a step towards appeasing teachers in their chief demand, the law assigned responsibility for schools in towns outside provincial capitals to the provincial education boards, whose members included principals and teachers elected by their colleagues as representatives.⁶⁵

But just as the UMN seemed to have completed its triumph, as was seen in elections for council representatives for elementary schooling on the Superior Board, established by the Daneo–Credaro Law,⁶⁶ internal divisions reappeared, tied to profound differences of interest and status. Urban teachers were disappointed at their exclusion from the extension of state control, despite their having been more active in the battle, while male rural teachers were upset over the transformation of many all-boys classes in the countryside into co-educational classes, which were thus given to women teach-

⁶⁴ On the action taken by the UMN during the complex passage of the law, see Barausse, *L'Unione Magistrale*, 329–370.

⁶⁵ De Fort, *La scuola elementare*, 269–291; Carmen Betti, *La prodiga mano dello Stato. Genesi e contenuto della Legge Daneo–Credaro (1911)* (Florence: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 1998).

⁶⁶ Marcello Dei, «Le elezioni magistrali dal 1909 al 1924: un approccio sociologico», *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 16 (4), (1985): 554–586.

ers—the undesired outcome of a key refrain in the propaganda used by the teachers' movement, namely the «teaching crisis», or drop in the number of men entering the profession, which male teachers had sought to exploit to obtain concessions from the government.⁶⁷

A contradiction latent since the origins of the UMN thus rose to the surface and erupted, pitting male teachers against their female counterparts. The UMN was not particularly sensitive to women's demands, especially their call for equal pay, which the union pursued in a low-key way, as it was incapable of mediating between conflicting interests; dominated by men, it was uncertain and mostly hostile towards measures that opened new doors for women in the profession. On their part, male teachers, fearing the overwhelming competition of women, argued that the greater presence of women in schools risked exposing education to the influence of the Church, while denouncing the tendency of women—too timid and submissive to authority—to hold back developments and blunt the incisiveness of the organization.

That assessment was not without its grounds, but it neglected to appreciate the growing awareness among women teachers of their rights, and not only in the classroom, as evidenced by the case of ten women teachers from the Marches region, who in 1906 petitioned and obtained a first-instance ruling ordering their inclusion on the electoral roll, as part of an international campaign for the vote for women.⁶⁸

At the same time, women teachers most committed to the union and involved in the emerging women's emancipation movement were marginalized, leading them to give rise to independent women teachers' groups in some cities; they were opposed by new groups that labelled themselves «male chauvinists», which called for boys' schools to be reserved to male teachers.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Nor did teachers view favourably the creation of an additional teacher training channel, the teacher gymnasium schools, open to pupils with a gymnasium diploma, fearing that it would encourage an excessive influx of teachers. As a matter of fact, in the years that followed the «teacher crisis» would become one of unemployment, but not only because of the new gymnasium schools.

⁶⁸ The ruling handed down by the Court of Ancona was quashed by the Court of Cassation: Marco Severini, *Dieci donne. Storia delle prime elettrici italiane* (Macerata: Liberilibri, 2012). The teachers worked in both urban and rural schools.

⁶⁹ On this matter see Barausse, *L'Unione Magistrale*, 396; De Fort, «I maestri di scuola», 208–211; Ghizoni, *Cultura*, 302–324, e «Maestre cattoliche».

EPILOGUE. FROM THE WAR TO FASCISM

On the eve of the First World War, cracks in the teaching «class» could be seen in conflicts between subgroups and even rival personalities, which had emerged in the context of electoral contests. Particularly bitter was the generational conflict, which would soon become a clash of values and culture, besides one of political outlooks. For some time education authorities had reported unrest among younger teachers, who were disaffected, quarrelsome and «ready to appeal, more or less opportunely, to the organizations of their class»⁷⁰ —such was the typical educated middle-class judgement, which, following the consolidated stereotype, attributed any display of independence and political activism to incomplete or superficial studies, which thus generated unsatisfied desires and political extremism.

As the political and social scenes became more polarized and radical tendencies and the union movement gained the ascendancy among left-wing forces, even teachers began to back positions in favour of a «rough and tough» union struggle for the intransigent defence of their own specific interests, regardless of the general interests of schools, without compromising with the government or bothering to win the support of public opinion.

The attack on the gradualist reformism that the UMN advocated was also a clear move away from the positivist cultural climate that inspired the union and which had shaped the education of the majority of teachers. Although restricted to the smaller, but dynamic circles of an avant-garde, the echoes of emerging cultural movements and their efforts to demolish positivism could be heard. Inspired by the neo-idealism of Giovanni Gentile and his circle and open to irrational and vitalistic trends, these groups were at the forefront of an effervescent programme of activities, involving the establishment of journals, pedagogical publications and initiative in the field, such as the creation of an Action Group for Public Schooling, which worked to revive education and raise teacher consciousness, something considered essential for any kind of schooling reform. It struggled, however, to engage teachers, in part because of the complete revolution in culture, mentality

⁷⁰ Commission of Inquiry on Public Education, Vol. I, *Relazione sui servizi della pubblica istruzione* (Rome: Tip. Forzani, 1910), 70.

and teaching practices called for by such idealism, and in part because of the obscure language which its supporters indulged in.⁷¹

With the rise of a socialist to the leadership of the UMN, Giuseppe Soglia, a member of the reformist faction, by then representing a minority of his party, who was backed by trade unionists, the confusion among teachers grew, as the majority held more moderate political views that saw little chance of achieving anything significant through a policy of direct confrontation and who, at the same time, felt intimidated by the menacing tones of the so-called teacher vanguards, which had threatened to expel school principals and inspectors and scoffed at the mythical «mission» that for many teachers was a pillar of their self-respect.⁷²

Differences of opinion were exacerbated by Italy's entry into war, when it became clear that the neutralist stance of the president (who was forced to resign because of it) was miles away from the view of the majority of teachers, who nevertheless had not been particularly pro-war, save for some isolated vanguard groups. With the exception of the small socialist grouping, which remained firm in its anti-militarism and would only collaborate in providing civilian aid, teachers generally responded with enthusiasm to calls from the government and the Italian intelligentsia to spread war propaganda among younger generations.⁷³ But then even during the Libyan War (1911-1912), albeit with a different tone and sensibility, the educational press promoted and helped spread numerous initiatives designed to celebrate Italy's colonial enterprise in schools.⁷⁴

Thus the progressive, humanitarian ideology that teachers had championed, at least among their more self-conscious vanguards, which their harshest critics accused of steering youths towards «a pale ideal of man

⁷¹ Giorgio Chiosso, *L'educazione nazionale da Giolitti al primo dopoguerra* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1983); Ester De Fort, *La cultura dei maestri*, in *Cultura e società negli anni del fascismo*, (Milan: Cordini, 1987), 221-226; Maria Maddalena Rossi, *Il Gruppo d'azione per le scuole del popolo di Milano 1919-1941* (Brescia: La Scuola 2004).

⁷² Barausse, *L'Unione Magistrale*, 397-428.

⁷³ Andrea Fava, «Mobilitazione patriottica, assistenza all'infanzia, educazione nazionale nella scuola elementare dell'Italia in guerra (1915-1918)», in *Un paese in guerra. La Mobilitazione civile in Italia (1914-1918)*, eds. Daniele Menozzi et al., Unicopli, Milan, 2010; Simonetta Soldani, «Al servizio della patria. Le maestre nella Grande Guerra», *ibid*, 183-211; Ghizzoni, *Cultura magistrale*, 334-344.

⁷⁴ De Fort, «I maestri elementari», 562.

without a homeland», fearful and cowardly,⁷⁵ declined and faded away in the fervour of nationalism —a phenomenon witnessed not only in Italy.

In instilling national sentiment and the cult of patriotic memory, teachers found a new meaning and pride in their mission, in the name of a patriotism rooted in the Risorgimento, with which even Catholic teachers identified, thus healing old wounds and showing that the construction of a teacher identity did not in itself exclude its integration in the processes of nationhood that were underway.⁷⁶

The general climate of conflict that emerged in the post-war years would ultimately take its toll on the UMN. The socialists broke away, with the more intransigent factions prevailing, to form the Teachers' Trade Union (*Sindacato Magistrale*) in 1919, which advocated direct class conflict, while socialists, right-wing liberals, idealists and Catholics all attacked the democratic positions of the UMN, taken over by the ferment of nationalist and anti-worker sentiment.

The political equilibrium had shifted radically. Boosted by the popularity of the Italian Popular Party (PPI), the Tommaseo association grew in membership, despite the mistrust provoked by some points of PPI policy, especially the defence of private schools. It especially succeeded in penetrating groups whose interests had been under-represented by the UMN, such as women teachers and substitute teachers.

Only in 1919 did teachers manage to unite momentarily, participating in mass in a strike called jointly by the three teachers' unions against the erosion of their pay by inflation. Faced with the pinch of economic pressures, teachers ultimately came to identify themselves with other workers and adopt their methods of protest.

It was an important turning point in the history of the profession, marking an end to the view of teachers as part missionary, part public functionary, content with the satisfaction afforded by their noble tasks and required to show devotion to the government. That sense of unity, however, was short-lived. The action stirred indignant reactions, especially from Gentile and his associates, convinced as they were that the state should not bow to the

⁷⁵ Giovanni Prezzolini, *Paradossi educativi* (Rome: La Voce, 1919), 37.

⁷⁶ Traniello, *Nazione*, 85.

threats of trade unions, whose demands they saw to be expressions of corporatist and special interests. Teachers could only manage to improve their pay and employment conditions by being worthy of such improvements.

The Fascist rise to power enabled Gentile to put his ideas into practice. His education reforms completely changed teacher training, raising normal schools, which had become teacher colleges (*istituti magistrali*), on par with other secondary schools. They lost their vocational character to become a more selective school of culture, thanks to the inclusion of Latin and philosophy in the curriculum. According to Gentile, who was critical of method and so-called scientific pedagogy, only culture had the power to strengthen the spirit and steer teaching work, turning teachers into «midwives to consciousness», guiding the process of personality formation in pupils.⁷⁷

Denied representation on the boards of the education administration and closely monitored by school principles, it was the duty of teachers to learn and obey, and to conform to the new political situation. Gentile was aware that the majority of teachers embraced neither idealism⁷⁸ or Fascism, which they initially saw as a subversive movement, loathsome to their spirit of order, although attitudes began to change after Mussolini's rise to power, in the hope that he would put an end to the troubles and brutality of the paramilitary squads (*squadristi*).

Even in 1924, when the last elections for the profession were held, the old union organizations still won 60% of the votes of the teaching body, which appreciated their tenacious, corporatist defence of teachers' rights.⁷⁹ Their claim to being non-political or the more or less lukewarm acceptance of Fascism would not prevent their end,⁸⁰ against a backdrop of threats and violence against opponents of the regime, while the professional press

⁷⁷ On the design and implementation of the neo-idealist pedagogical programme, see Jürgen Charnitzky, *Fascismo e scuola* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1996); De Fort, *La scuola elementare*; Michel Ostenc, *La scuola italiana durante il fascismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1980).

⁷⁸ In the lead-up to his reforms, educational publications were still dominated by positivist works: Ida Zambaldi, *Storia della scuola elementare in Italia: ordinamenti, pedagogia, didattica* (Rome: LAS, 1975), 531.

⁷⁹ Dei, «Le elezioni».

⁸⁰ The UMN and Teachers' Trade Union were abolished by law, while the Tommaseo focused exclusively on the spiritual education of teachers, something that would not save its members from persecution, leading it to disband in 1930.

was brought steadily under its control.⁸¹ Thus the Fascist trade union, the Schools Corporation (*Corporazione della Scuola*), which in 1926 would become the National Association of Fascist Teachers, was left unopposed, losing its representative objectives to become a grading and welfare body. For Mussolini, it was intolerable that teachers, like all public servants, should be anything but «atoms» subordinated to their superiors, and at the service of the regime.

Thus an important stage in the development of the profession came to fruition with the emergence and establishment of a strong, numerous teaching body united in the struggle to win rights and a status commensurate with their social role. Although their aspirations were never entirely satisfied, especially with regard to obtaining a legal status and pay conditions on par with those enjoyed by public servants, teachers did manage to earn greater social respect than in the past thanks to a more clear-cut course of study and higher teaching standards. Liberal governments showed greater confidence in teachers, certain that their support would not waver when tough decisions needed to be taken. During the war the majority of teachers did indeed play a vital role in keeping up the home front, but they were quick to demand the favour be returned once the war was over, when unions stepped up their battle for rights. Nonetheless, the inability of the union movement to overcome latent divisions within the teaching body, divisions of a political, special interest, gender and generational nature, and its drift towards more corporative stances would ultimately lead to rupture.

Teachers also had to deal with the harsh reaction to their claims of Fascism and the change in horizons brought about by education reforms introduced by Giovanni Gentile in the name of the neo-Hegelian philosophy that had become culturally dominant in Italy. The reforms shook up the profession, undermining many established customs, especially in relation to how the profession was traditionally practised, and faith in the experimental method itself, based on the principles of positivist pedagogy acquired through normal schools and the teaching advice imparted by educational journals. The cultural and social estimation that the reforms promised and in part delivered, by raising the educational qualifications required to enter the profession, was offset by the assimilation of teachers within the rank

⁸¹ G. Chiosso, «La stampa scolastica e l'avvento del Fascismo», *History of Education & Children's Literature*, III (1), (2008): 257–282.

and file of the regime, which used them to spread and instil Fascist ideology, suffocating their independence and any spirit of initiative and clamping down on the professional press. Even their commitment to secularism was undermined, as teachers were forced to teach Catholic religion under Gentile's reforms.

Fascism also limited the career opportunities open to women teachers, imposing on them the stereotype of the moral austerity of the teacher-mother and putting an end to the emancipationist fervour that had gained momentum among some women in the union movement. ■

Note on the contributor:

ESTER DE FORT is full professor of Contemporary History at the University of Turin, and President of the Master Degree Course in Historical Studies. She studied the educational policies in the Kingdom of Sardinia and in Italy during the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. Her work has also focused on history of the Italian Risorgimento and on exile after the European Revolutions of 1848-1849. Her publications include *Scuola e analfabetismo nell'Italia del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); *La scuola elementare dall'unità alla caduta del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996); «L'instruction secondaire sous la Royauté sarde de la Restauration à l'Unité», in *Une école à la mesure des Alpes. Contribution à une histoire de l'enseignement secondaire* (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble: Grenoble, 2009); «La scuola e il progetto della formazione degli italiani», *Le Carte e la Storia*, 2 (2011): 45-59; «Une fraternité difficile. Exil et associationnisme dans le royaume de Sardaigne après 1848», in *Exil et fraternité en Europe au XIXe siècle*, eds. C. Brice and S. Aprile (Bordeaux: Ed. Biere, 2013). She is member of the Center for the history of Italian Universities; member of the Center for the history of the University of Turin; full member of "Deputazione Subalpina di Storia Patria"; member of the Executive Council of the Institute for the History of the Italian Risorgimento (Committee of Turin); member of the Scientific Board of *Risorgimento*; member of the Editorial Board of *Rivista di Storia dell'Università di Torino*.