

The perspectives of Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice and of the idealist intellectuals on Maria Montessori

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Abstract

The Italian historiographical tradition on the reception of Maria Montessori has highlighted the widespread misunderstanding that she faced in Italy, often accompanied by prejudicial devaluation, if not by actual personal attacks. Within this critical panorama, stronger resistance was exhibited by Catholics and Neo-Kantians than by Idealists, and in particular Gentile and Lombardo-Radice showed deep appreciation for Montessori, offering her remarks that were rather interesting from a pedagogical standpoint – and are still to be considered thoroughly if we wish to approach her method critically. Furthermore, Lombardo-Radice also brought into the Italian debate a series of international criticisms that had the same tone and content as those addressed to her by the intellectuals involved in the new school movement, as evidenced by an analysis of the articles that Ferrière published in the magazine *Pour l'Ère Nouvelle* during the 1920s. By doing so Lombardo-Radice confirmed his divergence from Gentile and his proximity to the progressive school movement.

La tradizione storiografica italiana sulla ricezione di Maria Montessori ha messo in evidenza la generale incomprendimento a cui andò incontro in Italia, accompagnata spesso da una svalutazione pregiudiziale, quando non da veri e propri attacchi personali. All'interno di questo panorama critico i cattolici e i neo-kantiani espressero più resistenze degli idealisti e in particolare Gentile e Lombardo-Radice apprezzarono convintamente la Montessori a cui mossero dei rilievi particolarmente interessanti dal punto di vista pedagogico, che ancora oggi sono da considerare seriamente in un approccio critico al metodo. Lombardo-Radice inoltre ha anche riportato nel dibattito italiano una serie di critiche internazionali che avevano i medesimi toni e contenuti di quelle che le indirizzavano gli intellettuali impegnati nel movimento delle scuole nuove, come evidenziato da una analisi dei testi che Ferrière fece pubblicare sulla rivista *Pour l'Ère Nouvelle* negli anni '20, confermando la sua divergenza rispetto a Gentile e la sua vicinanza all'attivismo.

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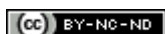
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Cives' studies (2001) on the reception of Maria Montessori have highlighted the general misunderstanding she encountered in Italy, often accompanied by a prejudicial devaluation, if not by real personal attacks. Within this critical panorama, however, some positions stand out for a greater capacity of dialogue and for the attribution of acknowledgments and judgments oriented towards the admission of a validity of the method, and in this sense we can state that among catholics and neo-kantians Montessori found more resistance than among the idealists, this certainly making a simplification that however does not distort her evaluation by most of the Italian intellectuals engaged in the field of education. Then observing the different positions present within the idealist cultural alignment we note that Montessori has been received with attention and equanimity, in particular by Gentile himself and by those teachers and men of culture who found their pedagogical reference in Gentile and in his actualism, such as Lombardo-Radice. The historiographical tradition, nonetheless, has usually highlighted the critical and polemical aspects of their opinions, even if citing the possibility of a desirable further analysis, given that, in the words of Cives, the topic deserved "to be resumed and deepened" (Cives, 1983, p. 153). Taking up the appeal that incites in this sense, we will try to define the characters of the diatribe triggered by Lombardo-Radice against Montessori in the mid-1920s, also reporting the opinions of other authors who lived within that *Vocian*, Croce's and Gentile's circle which constituted the centerpiece of the elaboration of pedagogical thought which was hegemonic at the time, and which has since established itself as a mythical point of reference in the history of our nation.

Therefore, if on the anti-idealistic, secular and liberal front – grouped around Credaro in his *Rivista Pedagogica* – we find many who expressed themselves in critical terms (above all Della Valle, Vidari, Zanzi, Resta), and if the Catholic side (with Casotti and Barbera for example) preferred to minimize the importance of the method (not always in favor of the Agazzi), the attentions of Prezzolini or Gentile instead tended to enhance the Montessori experience, framing it as a precious resource for the school system, as a vanguard of free, spontaneous and concentrated expression of the child at school, and as a valid experiment to be adopted and adapted, sorting out the elements that could be accepted and used in the broader horizon of the school reform that has been prepared for some time and which, even before being formalized as a law and ministerial policy was anticipated by schools and teachers who deviated from the traditional didactic paths. This essentially positive attitude of the idealist world fluctuated from the reductive extreme represented, actually in a somewhat incidental way, by Croce, up to the wide recognition of Gentile and Lombardo-Radice, but still maintained constant characteristics that testifies to their common ancestry; the main points were as follows: 1) validity of the classroom atmosphere (in which children are industrious, concentrated, spontaneous, active, acting in accordance with their own interests and their internal rhythms), 2) instrumental reduction of Montessori methodological claim, 3) criticism of the theoretical foundations (as philosophically poor and epistemologically confused), 4) rejection of the mystical and sectarian element that leads to the idea of an orthodox method (*Montessori mysteries*, Croce called them). The instrumental reduction of the method is very clear precisely in Croce, who assumes towards the method a utilitarian vision, extremely frank and pragmatic in nature, of real *sacred theft* (Augustine said that in the hypothesis that the Platonic philosophers have said true things and consonant with the Catholic faith, not only should they not be feared but they must be taken from them as if by abusive possessors and used freely

as the Jews stole from the Egyptians the gold they were entitled to when leaving the country). In fact, he accepts the method as a useful resource in the training of teachers such that they may draw some useful expedient or suggestion from it, but not as a general method to be introduced in schools (Croce, 1949); such that Montessori is penalized and reduced to a mere didactic contribution in the history of the school, with its cultural claims and outcomes consequently resized together with the statement that the results of those attending Montessori schools are equal to the average ones of normal-method schools.

The opposite extreme is embodied by Lombardo-Radice, who had a clear understanding of the Montessori phenomenon, and promoted it, asking for an intelligent, democratic and therefore open and flexible use of it, so that it was weighted above all with respect to the expectations and skills of the teachers (and to the economic capacity of the State), allowing everyone to create a new school system, serene (*scuola serena*) in its terms, in which the method evolved out of an orthodox form that was inapplicable except with enormous efforts (in economic and organizational terms) to a pedagogical tool useful to strengthen educators' skills. Certainly also in him, as in Gentile, Croce and Prezzolini, the attitude of instrumental relationship with the method always remained, but this attitude was not cause for contradictions and misunderstandings (Pesci, 2019, p. 138); rather it was the matrix of an odd relationship, in which the classicist and philosophical cultural origins, their academic prestige, their leading role in the pedagogical debate, their militancy in favor of a educational ideal and of a public school reform, and finally their direct managerial involvement resulting from the political position in the Ministry of Education, led the idealists to a position of predominance and convinced superiority towards Montessori, which was perceived as marginal and extraneous to their *coenaculum* because of her cultural origins and her role in the public debate (which was never acted by Montessori, and on this inability to contribute to the debates around his method, we mention here only the story of her magazines, all short-lived and deprived of the involvement of high personalities of the pedagogical world, something for which even Ferrière reproached her for it, as we will better see). This superiority however, far from being contemptuous and inattentive, on the contrary results in a call, a co-optation of her work in the progressive field of the new education, specifically in Lombardo-Radice who was able to enhance the activist soul of the method within the figure of Boschetti-Alberti, for example (Lombardo-Radice, 1925).

Between the extremes of Croce and Lombardo-Radice, as we will better see later, we find Prezzolini and Gentile, with different pedagogical characteristics and different cultural *status*, even though it must not be forgotten that Prezzolini was one of the most lively, active and influential intellectuals in the early twentieth century founder with Papini of *La Voce* – which had an incomparable significance in the Italian intellectual debate of the time. In Prezzolini (1919) we find a serious criticism of Maria Montessori in a volume collecting his writings where he describes himself as an extravagant and paradoxical educator, an “educator in my own way”, as he defined himself in the dedication entitled to Lombardo-Radice who made him discover his pedagogical vein. Precisely the dedication «to Lombardo-Radice and the editorial position make it a paradigmatic example of militant (pedagogical) idealism», argues Gaudio (2016, p. 454). Prezzolini's analysis, albeit with his glowing and ironic style that contributes heavily to giving a prosaic and down-to-earth image of Montessori, is fully in line with the direction that Gentile and Lombardo-Radice will later trace in a more academic way. First of all, he clears the

field from the alleged scientific nature of the method and resolutely denies that Montessori had any philosophical structure to support her practices, and nevertheless admits that even without these foundations her experiments have their roots in that solid reality of well done things, things which work; in short, she is an *empiricist*, who is content with trivial definitions and would not know how to do otherwise, but she knows how to do it, as is the case with freedom in children which is achieved in an excellent way, favoring the development of an inner discipline, self-control and character formation, abolishing the “school of stillness and silence”, thanks to exercises and activities made with appropriate and smart materials. Therefore, on the one hand, Prezzolini states that the method is an activator of energies, capable of stimulating new approaches, humbler and more laborious, in the teachers, who learn to respect the spontaneity and timing of the child, resulting even perfectly idealistic, as in the case of learning of reading and writing which, according to him, is an undeniable didactic success that leads children to compose naturally and without oppression (this being a theme very important to Lombardo-Radice); on the other hand, however, it denies its epistemic status of method, reducing it to a set of good practices that can be usefully learned and used by any teacher. Precisely the idea that some pedantic applicators can manipulate its cultural heritage, which resonates with the spirit of the idealist pedagogical revolution, turning it into a fetishistically morbid scholasticism due to its alleged scientificity, frightens Prezzolini who knows well that every method has encountered the same fate, first attracting the best, who, once they have taken what they have found valid, give way to the idiots and lazy people who look for what they would not be able to do in any case. Ultimately Montessori is appreciated, even praised, her expedients established as valid, her practices as liberating and leading to active discipline, while teachers are invited to experiment with her techniques, to use her materials, whose use may be unfounded theoretically, but bears fruit, even if one must not rely too much on these instead of the necessary abstraction that the child must gradually develop.

The result is an image of Montessori as a pedagogist who is attentive to childhood freedom, and offers good psychological advice, able to assist with apt means and materials the child's innate ability to discipline himself through the work of discovery and expression, but as with all idealists, also according to Prezzolini Montessori is to be used as a resource by teachers, masters, who will have to take what is good in her proposal without getting involved in the fetishism of the method, which is instead dismantled in its claims of rigor, as lacking coherent theoretical premises, thus resizing it to a series of good, even excellent ideas from which to take only those didactic tools which are useful to them; in short, he warns against its consideration as a method and rather invites an opportunistic behavior, a didactical instrumentality, in which the discovery, materials, expedients, ideas must be separated from the monolithic methodological vision which the megalomania of Montessori and its imitators has relegated it in. Prezzolini does not buy it, which will then be his motto (*non la bevo*, in Italian) towards political commitment, towards people taking side with impetus, fanaticism, madness, against the idea that the renewal of society needs the struggle, and he prefers to anticipate that serene analysis here, that caution of the spirit and those rules of intellectual honesty that push the man of idealistic culture to think of his role in terms of an action that seeks to clarify ideas, to bring out values, to save, above the struggles, an ideal heritage, so that it shall return and bear fruit in future times (Prezzolini, 1922).

Gentile, as is well known, was instead the most typical example of the intellectual who merges the commitment of thought with that of politics, and on the other hand the premises of his philosophy could not push him to anything other than a perfect coincidence between thought and action, and in our case between pedagogical theory and the guide of pedagogical reflection and schooling (Spadafora, 1997; Hervé Cavallera, 2019). Given Gentile's enormous production, we will limit ourselves to taking into consideration the only text he wrote (albeit with the contribution of others, at least to look to the signatures of the document) on the Montessori method (Valitutti, 1968), a text written for the Ministry of Education, guided by Croce, who had to decide on the confirmation of some funding for two Roman elementary schools for which the administration had previously given support to the Montessori experimentation. This text has already been analyzed by Cives (1998, pp. 350-357) in a brief review on the judgment of the idealists (that means Spirito and Lombardo-Radice) towards Montessori, attributing to them a stance of greater availability than the neo-Kantians, though still citing their hardness and basic misunderstanding – with the exception of Gentile himself. Cives' considerations are generally to be accepted, but it will be useful to review a pedagogical question of the Gentile report that he, on the basis of Valitutti (who however analyzed the results of the report in an even more partisan way), does not elaborate, perhaps because of excessive respect for Montessori, defending her with the use of an alleged prejudice and incompatibility that idealists like others would reserve for her due to their tendency to rationalize ideologically and the fear of her excessive faith in the child's freedom together with the stigmatization of an oppressive adult. Insisting on the lack of enthusiastic reception of Montessori because «they could not really penetrate her method, nor participate in it and fully perceive its rich energetic dimension» (Cives, 1998, p. 357) was actually a way of not addressing the pedagogical issues raised to her on the merits, and partially with regards to the criticisms on the cultural dimension of the curriculum that Gentile addressed to her in his report. It is also necessary here to highlight the nature of a true masterpiece of analysis that is this report which mixes deep understanding and critical proposals for the improvement and application of the method in the broader Italian public school context, and not to think of it as *a compromise, an encouraging and benevolent judgment* (Cives, 1998, p. 353). We have also to take into consideration that Montessori never entered the arena of debate justifying herself on the same dialectical level nor tried new experiments suggested by critics.

The report opens with the data taken from the context of the visit to the Roman schools and with a description of the atmosphere of diligent children's activity that denotes an intuitive and analytical understanding of the Montessori class in which the outward traits of the traditional class disappear. The Montessori classroom is in fact composed by children who are in the classroom as in a gathering of peers in their own home spending hours applying themselves to what they like best among the various ingenious instrumental inventions that are at their free disposal, or writing, doing accounts, reading and drawing (*sic*). He then goes on to affirm that the limited attendance of children compared to an average school, and on the contrary the almost doubled adult- children ratio due to the addition of assistants and a music teacher, generally favored attention to the environment and the solicitude and care addressed to each individual pupil by the teachers (*individualization*). The most relevant notes, however, concern cultural learning, especially linguistic one. While in first grade children usually write quickly but with poor knowledge of the spelling rules, since third grade, thanks to the teachers' efforts, they

improve and show a writing competence comparable to their peers of state schools. What seems to be left aside is the role played by the adult following the child in the process of broadening his own understanding of the world, through readings, conversation and lessons, which are an irreplaceable stimulus to expand the cultural space available to the child and avoid to be relegated to the continuous brooding of his poor own experiences. Thus, Gentile points out here a real issue that still exists today in the second cycle of primary school, that in Montessori terms corresponds to the *dilating need of culture* in shaping the child's character, which Montessori advocated two decades later, although without developing its didactic and practical consequences (Montessori, 1993/1949). Assuming that the atmosphere due to the prevalence of individual work and the suppression of collective experiences is more focused and *serene* (a term borrowed from Lombardo-Radice), it is undeniable, says Gentile, that it will also result less dramatic and real, thus the issue of the appropriateness of a curricular programmatic design that brings the child out of a situation that limits the field of experience and skills, which in traditional school is mainly carried out by resorting to programs, books, teacher's lessons.

The traditional way, mentioned above, drastically influence the spontaneous juvenile nature, and in this light, other tools might be considered to give cultural structure to the method without leaving aside the characteristic freedom and the individual interest which concerns it, as the teachers seems to consider when they adapt it on a daily basis.

Gentile knows that, during the first years of elementary school, children must essentially acquire technical skills (the 3 Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic) and for this purpose, the combination of Montessori materials and the methodological organization of free choice under the quiet and indirect guidance of the teacher is more than necessary. However, when the cultural work and the discovery of thought and spirit starts, then it is necessary to consider the problematic nature of the method. It is true that the individual work and the drive to action given by materials together with a teacher able to suggest rather than inform, generate a more industrious and brisk child, , who has greater awareness of his own strength, but this comes into opposition with the needs of the cultural curriculum. Children must come into contact with the human world, and if you do not want to do this by turning to traditional methods, it is necessary to design an alternative.

However, the cosmic educational proposal of Montessori (Montessori, 1970/1948) has not filled this gap, mainly because there is no answer to the issues pointed out by Gentile. Moreover, it seems clear that Gentile has no interest in sophistic discourse: he does not argue the cultural formation of Montessori nor compare his ideas to hers or mention any other educational experience as bearers of innovative solution and he does not criticize the methodological status of her theory, although he could easily do because the method in the Gentilian perspective is a norm applied to facts, while the true theory is the ascertainment of a fact in its general, constant, necessary, characteristics (Gentile, 1921, p. 17), it is therefore the real children who make the adult establish awareness of the educational act, both theoretical and practical and never the other way around. He is the only idealist who does not question the low or personal Montessori's register, fact that clearly shows his sincere interest and his will to make a constructive contribution. He also recognizes the educational value of Montessori schools, offering to send teachers to experience what natural forces the child releases in contact with an adult

who carries out a suggestive rather than informative action, in a serene environment that embodies the principles of self-education pedagogy, that elsewhere it is only claimed.

Accepting some criticisms would have meant accepting the warning of the idealists: never harbor illusions about the possibility of reducing the complexity and arcane nature of education, which is the revelation and perpetuation of the human spirit through generations and allow to create that harmony of soul between educator and educated. This harmony Lombardo-Radice calls interconnection of souls in which the teacher adapts himself to the spiritual state of the children, living it as his own and developing it together with them, to bring them to higher positions in regions that he has already «reached in the formation of his own culture; and in which he must return, winning them back with them» (Lombardo-Radice, 1913, p. 13). Montessori could not understand the role of the teacher who pushes the child on a path of continuous overcoming of his own state towards superordinate forms of thought, historically, socially and culturally oriented in a programmatic proposal, as idealism wanted.

The parable of Lombardo-Radice, instead, takes him from the promotion of the method (starting from the Montessori kindergarten which he sponsored and to which he contributed after the Messina earthquake of 1908) to his detachment to promote only the activist Montessori to the refusal in favor of its evolution in an anti-dogmatic sense, represented by the serene schools born from its inspiration, such as the Swiss ones of Boschetti-Alberti and Bontempi (Sahlfeld & Vanini, 2018) and the ones inspired by Agazzi method.

Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice was the pivotal figure of the plots and animating force of the idealist leadership over the school, the trade associations, the teaching staff, the publishers and the universities, and his eclectic and open personality, together with his great culture and unquestionable organizational skills, he was able to constitute the cornerstone of a cultural action that led him to be one of the main references for the teaching class in the role of organizer and promoter of culture (Cives, 1984, p. 177). This path then was also extended beyond the results of his elementary reform and his association with Gentile, and overcame the temporal limits of his own life, as pointed out by his posthumous success (Chiosso, 2014).

Lombardo-Radice was the pedagogue who, more than others, was able to manage continuous and significant international relations (academic as the informal ones) which put him at the crossroads of an activist network that always considered him as one of the most important promoters of a new school system (Todaro, 2019). Moreover, this role led him to take a position on all school experiments, including the Montessori one that he always dialectically put in relation with the spirit of his time, with the culture of new schools, with philosophy, with the history of pedagogy, but also with educational techniques. In this light, Lombardo-Radice was, among all the idealists, the true evaluator of the kinship with Montessori, not only from the pedagogical perspective, also on a high theoretical level (even if, in this case, Gentile prevails), but also at a more practical level, putting it in relation with the didactic implications arising from the movement of the new schools, and which Gentile could not consider instead, bringing it back into the context of a useful analysis to critically include it in the Italian way to activism, and to make its pedagogical characteristics understandable to a mixed public made up of both specialists and urban and rural teachers, always posing, with a desire for comparison and exchange, the problem of discussion of practices.

Therefore, Lombardo-Radice tried to include Montessori in a broader framework of pedagogical and cultural reference in which the elements she could contribute for to everyone's school stand out, which is a crucial step for her true understanding, because they are functionalized, and generalize her ideas, bringing their own values to the experiences and needs of others, avoiding the risk that otherwise it will remain as an exceptional event, which is born perfect like Minerva from the head of her father, and is destined to appear perpetually dressed in the artificial character of a timeless method. While the other idealists have just appreciated the spirit, the freedom, and the spontaneous nature of her experiment, also outlining the fetishism of the method but avoiding any specific analysis, Lombardo-Radice shows a sincere desire of explaining Montessori's educational message more extensively to enrich the school environment, devoid of any personalism.

However, it will be clear that this explanation will imply reducing the constituent elements of the method to historical categories of the educational problem, and in the long run will lead it to break with orthodox Montessorism.

In this light, it will be analyzed the Lombardo-Radice's point of view on Montessori's work from the 1910s onwards, as he was the pedagogue who tried to deepen her method and work (Mazzetti, 1958), and also from the recognition that they have in common the defense of the freedom of the child. Even if the freedom of the Lombardo-Radice is the creative, inner, fantastic freedom of the child who has his culture, his way of seeing the world, of telling stories, his naive morality, and so he puts the spontaneous compositions, drawings and tales of the children (like those of Muzzano) in the first place, while Montessori discovers a real system to guarantee the child the freedom of movement, choice and work in a classroom. The discovery of the child in Lombardo-Radice is linked to the difference between the child, as he is seen by the adult, and the real child (outside the school), but the emphasis is always placed on classic creative skills (the writing of Swiss children, the calculation in mind of his own children, the drawing) and especially on the compositional skills, with those tales so true and alive of the rooster of Jelmorini, of the cats of the children that describe the mustache, the bright eyes, the hunts for the mice present in his book *Athena fanciulla* (Lombardo-Radice, 1925), which unveils childish art treasures, inviting us to watch out for the school of rhetoric that disguises itself as a diary school, an active school, which mimics involving children and instead avoids free composition and spontaneity to re-propose old rigidities imposed by the adult in the form of fresh novelties that are only a way to re-propose the arid, unthinking, notional, repetitive methods. Instead, he asks for a commitment to a school that is based on knowledge of childhood, on the respect of the child and on the dialogue between the living environment and the school, and in this sense the greatest freedom that he has recognized in the school for children is to speak one's own dialect, express oneself through it, analyze it and translate it into Italian (Morandi, 2019). However, if freedom and the spontaneous child, who educates himself, are the horizon of both, the theoretical premises, the cultural background, the knowledge, the relationship with the teaching class, lead them to a difficult sharing in defining the school and teaching activities. It is within this diversity that Lombardo-Radice matures a willingness to guide teachers in the maze of the Montessori method to allow them to find a way to discover the map of his useful resources.

The first of these resources is play, which is a way of showing childhood interest in the world, the first degree of creative work in which interest and effort are homogenized, a real preparation for life and the central activity of childhood (Lombardo-Radice, 1926a). There are two Montessori, he says (Lombardo-Radice, 1926b), on the one hand is the one who, accepting the tradition of Rousseau, Froebel and Tolstoy, announced with new force the principle of self-education of the child precisely starting from the enhancement of play, this Montessori has declared war on pedagogism and rhetoric, on the artificially created interest, on the insincerity of the old discipline, on the enmity of the abstract school with life. On the other hand, however, there is the Montessori who has covered this fertile fundamental idea of the form of positivism and the adoration of false experimentalism and we must be wary of this, because the infantile spontaneity that Montessori so appreciates and that leads the child to the development of his talents, does not need rigid means, scientifically prepared, because it is not the means that generates child development, it is rather the infantile personality, his creativity, the child who gradually proceeds from naturalness to objectivity of the spirit, not by means of mechanical tools, but employing a continuous work of discovery of reality and its systematization and rational understanding. The decision to put only structured materials on the pedestal transforms the child's freedom of investigation into conditional freedom, and risks making us lose sight of the central role of the child in its development, believing that it is the material that carries out the learning, confusing the case with the cause, the trigger with the explosion. The natural formula with which learning is achieved is therefore play, which lingers in the imagination, which uses language and drawing, song and hand (Hessen, 1954). The genius of Montessori stands in the creation of an environment that is like a children's home, in which everything is proportionate to them, and in respect of their free choice of occupation, not exclusively in the type of materials, rather in the organization of the children's play, showing herself as a true follower of Froebel, so that it is not amusement but occupation, not automatic and dispersive but intelligent and constructive, and therefore why not use paper, clay, colors, sticks, constructions, which offer infinite possibilities to the incipient personality, and are variable and docile to infantile initiative? (Lombardo-Radice, 1926b). The question is still open today. Considering the game and its function during the childhood, therefore, Lombardo-Radice invites us to stop at general principles, without giving ready recipes, without setting up a sequence of particular precepts, without pre-establishing methods of use, succession of acts, etc. and suggest us to leave the door open to all those games that allow learning, «so that the contribution made by Montessori to the new school can take place and make the most of it», says Lombardo-Radice (1926c, p. 50). Also in this case, as in Gentile's case, the criticism is brought to a pedagogical level, not polemical, and Montessori's understanding of the role of the act of playing does not exactly come out unscathed from an in-depth analysis (Lupi, 2016, *in press*). Also from here comes the criticism of the elimination of drawing and artistic works, such as Ravizza toys, which were so functional in the first *Casa dei Bambini* and which have been obliterated without giving reasons, abandoning everything that has no direct relationship with its didactic material (Lombardo-Radice, 1926c, pp. 40-41), such as his predilection for Agazzi's poor and unpatented materials.

The second resource is *Casa dei Bambini* (the Montessorian name for kindergarten or infant school). This might seem counter-intuitive because, by resigning from the *pro methodo Montessori* committee, Lombardo-Radice

affirms that he will continue to defend *Casa dei Bambini* and the method also against Montessori's dogmatism, meaning that her school are serene places, examples of new schools that have been able to create an atmosphere in which the requests and ideas of environments weld the family dimension with the Froebelian activity, the exercise of practical life with aesthetic education, manual work with respect for the times and interests of the child. These motifs were also present in Alice Franchetti and her husband, in Latter, in Agazzi, and Montessori with her *Casa dei Bambini* was able to systematize them in a significant form, which inspired many educators. Still in this light, it is possible to continue to build the homes of children as Montessori did at the beginning, without stiffeners that make a more scholastic, less familiar atmosphere prevail, less open to simple and unstructured exercises which also marked the beginning of the Montessori experience under the aegis of the Franchetti (Lombardo-Radice, 1926c, p. 40). «The conclusion is short: despite the persistent contrast of the Montessori pedagogical conception with the idealistic pedagogy, we have been, are, and will be, for the *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's Home). With this we honor what is brilliant in Montessori educational practice» (Lombardo-Radice, 1926c: 50), which means that the first Montessori (the one of the birth of the *Casa dei Bambini*) is for Lombardo-Radice more linked to the spirit of the new schools and lends itself more to being interpreted in an adaptive, creative sense, leaving freedom of action to those who want to emulate it, being inspired by it, because it is an intelligent kindergarten structure that puts children in the position to choose, be active, self-educated, by living a real condition of interest and spontaneity. It is true, however, that these resources, the organization of the forces and playful interests of the child and the new, articulated, organic and functional proposal of the *Casa dei Bambini*, are promoted within a wide national and international network with a short series of interventions the reasons of which also result from the international profile assumed by Lombardo-Radice since the 1910s, that marks a sort of turnaround of the traditional Italian historiography that believes that Montessori was more appreciated abroad while the idealists more linked to national, academic, local motivations. In this light, it will be useful to analyze the relationship that Lombardo-Radice had with Ferrière and the group that referred to his magazine *Pour l'Ère Nouvelle* on Montessori issues, which were also investigated there and presented in a European-wide debate. Lombardo-Radice, who was entrusted by Ferrière to echo the contributions proposed in *Pour l'Ère Nouvelle* in Italy with his magazine *L'Educazione Nazionale*, appears as an intellectual able to contribute to the European debate with an original position on Montessori but also to report the concerns and impulses towards the method that were of figures such as Cousinet, Ferrière, Decroly, Bovet, Boschetti-Alberti, Valli and Philippi Van Reesema, who, between 1922 and 1927, were concerned with presenting the pros and cons of the method, with a basic attitude that is comparable to that of the idealists, attribution of genius for the solution of childhood freedom understood as the choice of occupation and play in an environment rich in material stimuli, recognition of the value of the *Casa dei Bambini* as a true active nursery school, warning against the orthodoxy of Montessori and its certain idiosyncrasies (about free drawing and art education in general). So, what does Lombardo-Radice read on *Pour l'Ère Nouvelle* about the method? The Ticino teachers first of all (Valli, 1922; Briod, 1924; Boschetti-Alberti, 1926) who are not only presented by Lombardo-Radice to the Italian public but present themselves in person to the activist public as experimenters of the method, also able to start from Montessori environment and its organization of children's energies and interests,

using its materials and expedients, but also introducing other elements that have not upset the system of the new schools on the part of children and their initiative, and always focus on that active discipline which is typical of the method and which derives from the possibility of choosing and concentrating on one's own exercise individually or in small groups. In the October 1924 issue instead were published two articles, one by Decroly (1924) and one by Briod (1924), both of which report applications of Montessori principles to the schools of their territory, Amsterdam and The Hague in the case of Decroly and the Ticino in the other. Decroly admires the Montessori spirit and sincerely appreciates the work observed during his visits to the Dutch schools, and he also highly esteems the solution, which suited his method in full, of enabling children to choose their own activity. He also asks himself, however, what to do when the interests of children go in more varied directions than those indicated by the orthodox use of the material that some schools, in that case, choose an experimental path of reasonable eclecticism that tries to respond to the needs of the infantile mentality without giving up on the idea of a school with the child at the centre, leading to better results than the schools of orthodox montessorism had (*orthodoxe*). Briod also presents the Ticino schools as Montessori did, who have been able to use the method and adapt it to the local situation aware of its idea of children free to act in intensely conducted, serious, reflective activities, which make them feel good and at the same time allow them to learn in the respect for their own times, and then points out, for example, that Boschetti-Alberti grants freedom of choice and work in a prudent way (*très prudemment*) and first to those who are able to manage it, lead the others gradually towards self-education (Briod, 1924, p. 67). Moreover, variances are introduced in Montessori's methodological framework in order to reshape the traditional school also preserving a structure able to guarantee stability both in terms of organization and educational curricula. The Montessorian methodological framework, as mentioned above, seems to be implemented but closely received and applied, especially in the application of spontaneous activity. Montessori was also praised by Cousinet for her idea of a free environment for the children to know them more deeply, giving them free access to the materials but also pointing out the need of the figure of the teacher as a facilitator, and allowing both individual and group work, idea which is also shared by Lombardo-Radice in an unsigned note, but which bears his tone, in *L'Educazione Nazionale* in the issue in which he presents his most famous criticisms of Montessori, in 1926). Ferrière himself (1926, pp. 151-152), reporting on a trip to Italy he did to learn about the best experiences of the new school in the *Bel Paese*, also refers about the meeting he had with Maria Montessori, complaining that she does not participate in congresses, where evidently she could explain herself and present her method to an audience of specialists and teachers stimulating a debate, preferring to organize her own congresses and training courses, avoiding contacts and mingling with other scholars. He then asks her if she is against to free drawing and free play (also themes of the Lombardo-Radice criticism, as we know), and the Montessori answer is quite unsettling: they are fine, but at home, not at school. Thus, the conclusion seems the acceptance of the method, with the firm hope that when Montessori will scientifically investigate the infantile manifestations that she has not yet understood, the strength and effectiveness of her material will be enriched by other finds.

Moreover, it is interesting the paper entitled *Les Précurseur de Madame Montessori*, published for the first time in a Dutch magazine and two years later republished by Ferrière (Philippi Van Reesema, 1926a, 1926b, 1926c),

which illustrates in a great deal of detail, denoting a meticulous study, the thought, methods and materials of Itard, Seguin, Bourneville, and Ebergiste De Deyne of the *Frères de la Charité* in Ghent, all the authors that Montessori has carefully studied to develop her own materials and some didactic techniques of her methodⁱ. Montessori is considered, as always in the cultural territory we are exploring and of which Lombardo-Radice seems to be a typical established exponent, a standard-bearer of freedom and self-education, of the child's spontaneity, of his intelligence employed in activities useful for the development of preparatory faculties for higher intellectual functions. She is clearly a pedagogue with a medical-scientific background (the famous phrase scientific pedagogy here acquires the linguistic meaning it originally had also in Montessori, as opposed to that of pedagogy without adjectives, that is, philosophical pedagogy) and she is responsible for ferrying the idea of exercise of the sensory and sensorimotor faculties from the world of the education of the abnormal to the experience of the new schools, and for this reason she is a meritorious of childhood and humanity. However, a contradiction appears in her classes, and concerns spontaneous action and the disclosure of interests in infantile nature, because Montessori asks to her teachers to direct the child towards an activity that is a training of faculties and organic functions with the help of a special material, just like in its predecessors, but the normal child in contact with the materials also shows other tendencies, different from the exclusive willingness to practice with special materials. And so, the play, the playful exploration, the free drawing, the intelligent creative attitude in front of new situations and problems, the imagination, are denied, devalued (*Montessori l'estime de moindre valeur*) and she, famous for speaking of spontaneity, freedom and observation of the child ignores some of the most spontaneous expressions. In short, there are acquisitions that do not pass through the use of a structured material (*qu'on ne pourra jamais acquérir par un entraînement spécialisé et un matériel spécial*).

It is clear that Lombardo-Radice did not conduct his critique in 1926 alone, nor did he unreasonably exacerbate his positions in 1930 when he finally came to support Agazzi sisters definitively, but rather participates, albeit with a certain *vis*, absent in the little excited tones of the international forum of the Ferrière's review, to a cultural and pedagogical milieu that clearly understood the limits of the Montessori method within the coordinates of the active school. The idealism of Lombardo-Radice therefore certainly counted in the criticism of Montessori, and like Gentile he advanced pedagogical questions that have their roots in the distance between actualist philosophy and method, but were also expressions of a cultural feeling of the world of the International League of New Education, of its most prominent exponents and of the specialists who dealt with the program of expansion of active schools. This expansive process had a stable trend, the need to exchange ideas, experiences, put them to the test and draw conclusions to make improve schools' response in promoting active learning, as stated in the manifesto of the *Biennale Internationale de l'Éducation Nouvelle* as a first statement, the new school is a laboratory and Montessori, with a scientific training background and with the lens always focused on observation and materials with educational power, escaped the challenge represented by participation in a movement in which it was not enough to declaim principles and implement them (which everyone acknowledged that Montessori was able to do excellently) but also to discuss them and let others experiment freely, without foreclosures, however understandably motivated by the natural will to preserve her work. In short, it is not Lombardo-Radice who is closed towards the Montessori experience, but rather we are witnessing a clash between

intellectuals who work in a movement for schools and the Montessori that they recognized as a god, but a fascinating one that risks blinding his faithful, if you do not focus her in the right position in a pantheon that was still very large and in which even the deities were questioned.

A final aspect of Lombardo-Radice's critique concerns precisely the *vis* we mentioned above, what Cives (1983, p. 153) called «*malignity*», and which certainly derives from personal reasons, in fact in the famous 1926 article on the revisions introduced by Montessori in his book he devotes the most vehement part against her not to pedagogical questions but to the lack of gratitude towards her first benefactors and inspirers, the Franchetti barons, who were, Alice and her husband, very attached to Lombardo-Radice by feelings of affection: they shared ideals and consonance of educational methods, and it is normal that the elimination of the dedication to Alice Hallgarten Franchetti as references to her experiences at La Montesca and to the practical life and gardening activities of Lucy Latter (1906), whose work had been presented to her by Franchetti in Città di Castello. Lombardo-Radice cannot bear that Montessori eliminates any reference of gratitude to two people who were so important in the lives of both, and whose educational activities at Montesca Lombardo-Radice presents in his *Athena fanciulla*, and we must remember in fact that the Franchetti organized the first method training course, they worked to spread the knowledge of Montessori and her work in English-speaking countries and Franchetti procured her the international patent for the sale of her teaching materials (Gutek & Gutek, 2016, p. 86). Even the exclusion of references to the Humanitarian Society of Milan and to Ravizza's toys, which had been valid support for the diffusion of the method with the production of materials and furnishings in the early years when it was not easy to obtain them or have them made by artisans, affects Lombardo-Radice. And it also strikes us politically because the Humanitarian Society in 1924 had been transformed into a Fascist institution, Augusto Osimo (great patron of Montessori) falsely accused of bad and lavish management, their relief support to the working classes, widely left politicized, suppressed, and when Riccardo Bauer, who after will be among the founders of *Giustizia e Libertà*, defended the work of the removed junta on Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione Liberale* there was a purge of him and all socialist employees of the Humanitarian Society. Montessori sends a clear signal, she prefers to remove a reference that could put her in a bad light with the fascist government, and this mimetic concern is not the only one she had during the revisions of her text (Trabalzini, 2003). In such a circumstance we should not forget that Tina Tomasi (1976, p. 153) invites us to consider critically her alleged anti-fascist intransigence, which is propagated in some sectarian contexts, recalling the public affirmations in favour of fascism during the period of collaboration in which Mussolini had decided to aim at a Montessori institution to enjoy the reflection of its fame, while Montessori exploited the relationship to start new initiatives such as that of the *Scuola Regia di Metodo (Royal School for Montessori Method)*. Only the failure of these initiatives and the growing climate of intolerance on the part of ministerial and governmental circles, and not her moral or political opposition, led her to leave the country, a judgment shared also by Kramer (1988) and Pesci (2019). Lombardo-Radice had a different personality, he could not accept ungratefulness, in fact, he was a great promoter of the experiences of others, never taking someone else's credits, valuing the teachers and teachers of the small villages, the countryside, the dispossessed, as he did up to last in his *Pedagogia di apostoli e di operai*. He was also a true moral example during fascism, always defending his ideas, taking responsibility, and exposing

himself personally against the regime, to the point of paying off with the closure of his *L'Educazione Nazionale*, the review where he had criticized Montessori.

Notes

¹ Here, for the purpose of this paper, it will be not analyzed how wisely Montessori was able to steal the best materials or ideas from each of them, even if this struck Lombardo-Radice very much who also wrote to the *Frères de la Charité* in Ghent for information on the date of invention of materials to understand if Montessori in 1907-1908 during one of her visits had actually copied them from Ebergiste De Deyne (Gilsoul, 2016, p. 12), but the conclusion pointed out by the article.

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