

Education and emancipation in the thought and practice of scholars of Southern Italy (1861-1947)

Brunella Serpe

University of Calabria, IT

Abstract

Following Italian Unification in 1861, saw the birth of the “Southern Question”, which in fact encompassed a number of questions, first and foremost, that of education. Indeed, the pervasive ignorance, as decried by scholars of Southern Italy, represented a clear obstacle to the social and cultural emancipation of the Mezzogiorno, making it necessary to seek the enactment of suitable laws that would ensure the universal provision of schooling, especially in those areas where illiteracy was highest. Numerous ministerial enquiries, together with research carried out by intellectuals and philanthropists in many communities of the Mezzogiorno, gave rise to an intense debate on the real nature of the Southern Question, highlighting the centrality of the fight against illiteracy. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the state had also begun to address the issue of adult illiteracy, and numerous initiatives to tackle this problem were undertaken by philanthropic associations and individuals involved in education.

Fin dall’Unificazione d’Italia (1861) il generale stato di arretratezza del sistema economico-produttivo meridionale, faceva del Mezzogiorno un’area dove la povertà era più diffusa. Nel contesto postunitario la nascita della Questione meridionale celava diverse questioni: prima fra tutte, quella scolastico-culturale in quanto l’analfabetismo, come denunciato dagli studi della corrente del meridionalismo, costituiva un palese freno all’emancipazione sociale e culturale del Mezzogiorno ed era necessario puntare all’approvazione di interventi legislativi per favorire la diffusione della scuola e dell’alfabeto. Numerose Inchieste ministeriali e ricerche condotte da intellettuali e filantropi in molti comunità del Mezzogiorno davano vita a un intenso dibattito sulla natura della Questione meridionale già a partire dalla fine degli anni Settanta dell’Ottocento; esse mostravano la centralità della lotta all’analfabetismo che, a partire dal primo decennio del Novecento, si caratterizzerà per l’attenzione dello Stato impegnato a promuovere numerose campagne di alfabetizzazione degli adulti anche attraverso il coinvolgimento di associazioni filantropiche.

Keywords: illiteracy; Southern Italy; history of adult education; scholars of Southern Italy; emancipation

Brunella Serpe – *Education and emancipation in the thought and practice of scholars of Southern Italy (1861-1947)*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/14656>

Parole chiave: analfabetismo; Mezzogiorno d'Italia; storia dell'educazione degli adulti; meridionalisti; emancipazione

Brunella Serpe – *Education and emancipation in the thought and practice of scholars of Southern Italy (1861-1947)*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/14656>

1. Introduction

Following Italian Unification (1861), Royal Decree 3725 of 13 November 1859 on the *Organisation of Public Education in the Kingdom of Sardinia*, better known as the Casati Law, was gradually extended to the entire Italian peninsula, without taking account however of the profoundly uneven levels of schooling and education that characterised the territory of the new nation. The sharp differences between the various regions were the result of the public education policies pursued by the governments of the now defunct states that had been incorporated into the new kingdom. In some cases, these had been neglectful of schooling and the drive for literacy, partly a reflection of economic and social backwardness, especially in Central and Southern Italy, where illiteracy was almost universal. Indeed, no government had ever shown any serious interest in education here, and many districts had no schools at all. In the absence of publicly funded facilities, in some areas the local parish priest organised classes for those who did not attend the private schools, whose purpose was to educate the offspring of the bourgeoisie and the ruling classes and prepare them for university. The lack of even a rudimentary school network severely hampered the attempt to extend the Casati Law to all the areas of the Kingdom of Italy.

Census data show with great clarity the situation in the various parts of the Kingdom. In 1861 illiteracy was bad in the Central and Northern regions (affecting 74% of the school population), but was even worse in the South and Islands, where 90% of the population was illiterate. Closing this gap was extremely difficult, as the successive statistics attest. Figures from 1871, 1881 and 1901 show a gradual reduction of illiteracy in the Central and Northern regions (59%, 56%, 40%), which contrasts with the evident persistence of the problem in the South and the Islands (85%, 81%, 71%) (SVIMEZ, 1961^a).

Marking the start of a new attempt to address the issue, inquiries were conducted to establish the causes of illiteracy and laws (Legge Coppino, 1877) were passed reaffirming the principle of compulsory attendance and transferring management of elementary schools from the municipalities to the state (Legge Daneo-Credaro, 1911). In practice, these measures had little impact, and thus the 1920s saw the creation of the *Opera contro l'analfabetismo* (Anti-Illiteracy Board), aimed primarily at adults. The Board conducted literacy campaigns designed to address the widespread ignorance among adults who lacked even the most rudimentary skills such as reading and writing. Indeed, the Daneo-Credaro, which transferred responsibility for schools from the municipalities to the state, had not been a success, as shown by the data on illiteracy that emerged from the census of 1921: while the percentage was significantly lower in the Centre-North (19%), it was still very high in the South and Islands (48%). For this reason, preparation began for major intervention in the field of adult education via a series of specific initiatives. However, despite reaching a high number of illiterate women and men, the adult literacy campaigns managed only to reduce rather than eliminate the problem of ignorance, which successive censuses continued to highlight.

In the period immediately following the Second World War, the law on mass education (Scuola Popolare) of 1947 and the founding in the same year of UNLA by teachers eager to fight adult illiteracy demonstrated just how widespread ignorance among the mass of the population still was. The new measures had partly been prompted by the United States' decision to restrict immigration, which had the effect of excluding illiterate

persons. This led to the worsening of deprivation precisely in those areas where the need to emigrate in search of work that would restore dignity and the prospect of emancipation to young people was most acute.

The success of these campaigns was partly due to the adoption of a model of education that was able to meet the needs of the context, as well as the age and interests of its target learners, who attended the rural, evening and Sunday schools in large numbers. This is borne out by the documents and teaching circulars that guided the work of the many teachers involved in these initiatives, which were designed specifically for adults. This documentation attests to the success of the literacy campaigns but not the end of illiteracy, as demonstrated once again by the census data of 1951. While illiterate persons accounted for 13% of the Italian population as a whole, there were large differences between the regions: Piemonte 3%, Lombardia 2%, Lazio 10%, Puglia-Campania-Sicily-Sardinia 22-24%, Basilicata 29%, Calabria 32%. In the 1961 census, despite an overall improvement, Calabria was still in last place, with 21% of its inhabitants illiterate (SVIMEZ, 1961^a).

A century after Italian Unification, illiteracy was still a problem, although by then it was gradually being resolved as it was associated with a particular age group. The cultural weakness of a South that had been so slow to achieve full literacy, at a time when the low qualitative level of education made it harder to break with the culture of dependence and state aid, was still a matter of concern. The state of permanent subordination, the absence of freedom and self-determination and the persistence of a culture of delegating decisions to others were all consequences of centuries of ignorance that have left large areas of the South with no opportunity for the dialogue that is needed in order to achieve more widespread participatory and emancipatory growth.

2. Illiteracy and the debate among scholars of the South

Opening a school in every village of the Kingdom had been a key objective for the ruling classes ever since unification in 1861. And yet, all the attempts, including the economic penalties for families who did not comply with compulsory school attendance, had not produced significant results. Illiteracy remained stubbornly high, especially among the Southern population. Particularly interesting in this regard are the observations the scholars who concerned themselves with Italy's Southern Question ("meridionalisti") and the measures required in order to tackle the state of deprivation that characterised practically the whole of the South of the Kingdom. *Le due Italie* (The two Italies) (Fortunato, 1912) of which Giustino Fortunato, himself from Basilicata, would later write about, highlighting the evident economic-social crisis of the Mezzogiorno, became the subject of analysis by "meridionalisti". For these intellectuals, the Southern Question was in fact a combination of questions that the birth of the new state had brought into sharp focus.

The analysis by Pasquale Villari, contained in his paper *La scuola e la questione sociale* (School and the social question), published in 1872, left no room for doubt concerning the causes of the problem. He argued that illiteracy and ignorance could never be eliminated without measures designed to resolve economic backwardness. The "colossal ignorance" of the "illiterate multitudes" (Villari 1866) that populated the backward Mezzogiorno, semi-feudal and subject to the most stifling institutional inertia, was itself a symptom of acute social problems which – Villari argued – needed to be tackled without hesitation if illiteracy was to be effectively abolished (Villari 1866, 1872, 1878). He was not alone in expressing such views. The study by Leopoldo Franchetti, *Condizioni economiche e amministrative delle province napoletane* (Economic and

administrative conditions of the Neapolitan provinces), published in 1873, seconded Villari's analysis and decried the persistence of a feudal Mezzogiorno characterised by the existence of a great mass of people oppressed by a small and corrupt minority. Franchetti subsequently returned to these reflections and expanded on them following another journey of discovery that took him to Sicily, this time together with Sidney Sonnino and Enea Cavalieri, the results of which were published in 1876 as *Politica e mafia in Sicilia* (Politics and Mafia in Sicily). Compared to the other parts of the Mezzogiorno, Sicily represented an even more complex situation due to the presence of the Mafia, which the authors considered to be not just a criminal organisation but a form of power that permeated the social fabric, an anti-state and a sort of local government. The Mafia imposed its own pathways of development, and indeed had its own culture, economy and politics. Its clientelism was both deep-rooted and blatant, demonstrating the dangerous weakness of the rule of law.

The insightful analysis conducted by the authors of the study thus highlighted another side of the Southern Question, namely that of crime. This aspect required decisive action by the state if it was serious about tackling the ills and shortcomings of the Mezzogiorno, which were taken up again and denounced in other studies published in the early years of the 20th century. The issue of education in general and mass education in particular was also forcefully debated in the Italian Parliament. Extending the age range of compulsory schooling and investing in school buildings were crucial to the fight against illiteracy, which was a worrying sign of underdevelopment. This was pointed out by parliamentary deputies in meetings of the Higher Council for Education, where reference was made to the strategies implemented in other European countries to combat illiteracy. This was also the approach taken by Francesco Saverio Nitti who, in a parliamentary session in 1907, drew the attention of the ruling classes to the problem of primary education, at that time still the responsibility of the municipalities, which were failing however to fulfil the task assigned to them, especially in the most depressed areas.

Of particular interest are the reflections of Pasquale Rossi, a Calabrian intellectual who rejected the notion of the inferiority of the "Southern race" and developed an approach to social education that would transform the common people into active, conscious and mature political subjects. The emergence of the masses on the European socio-political and cultural scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries prompted Rossi, a sociologist, to develop a positive conception of the masses that was diametrically opposed to that of Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo and Giuseppe Sergi, who were convinced of the criminal and inferior nature of the Southern population. In contrast, Rossi believed that the whole of Southern society could be improved by means of political education, schooling and culture. In his painstaking deliberations, he did not fail to denounce the living conditions of those who had been excluded from history and kept in a state of absolute wretchedness. He saw these people as having been deprived of the cultural resources that were indispensable, especially in that archaic social context, in order to avoid becoming marginalised and excluded from the collective dimension of modern life. The "mass culture" he proposed served to address the weak civic consciousness typical of the Southern population, which had already been clearly denounced by Villari, whose remedy had been a comprehensive programme of "civilisation", attempted with little success in the aftermath of 1861. As Dina Bertoni Jovine points out, this necessarily entailed «awakening minds, forming consciences, enlightening thought» by expanding education and literacy. However, it also required measures to compensate for «the terrible poverty

[because] schooling alone could not erase injustice and oppression or make taxation and prolonged conscription any more bearable» (Bertoni Jovine 1975, p. 15).

The complex and interrelated problems that lay behind illiteracy in the Italian Mezzogiorno thus included organised crime, the incompetence of local administrators, economic and social aspects and the poor health and sanitary conditions in which many Southern communities lived. Two more enquiries published in 1910 revealed to the country the real conditions of a significant part of the South, Calabria, which had been devastated by the earthquake of 1908, with cities on both sides of the Strait, Reggio Calabria and Messina, suffering severe damage. These were the *Inchiesta sulla scuola popolare in provincia di Reggio Calabria* (Enquiry into public education in the province of Reggio Calabria), conducted by Gaetano Salvemini, Giovanni Cena, Sibilla Aleramo and Giuseppina Le Maire, and *L'Aspromonte occidentale* (Western Aspromonte) by Giovanni Malvezzi and Umberto Zanotti Bianco. Both investigations stressed the centrality of schools and education as indispensable tools for the growth and renewal of Calabria and the Mezzogiorno, and called for strong state intervention to tackle economic underdevelopment, the lack of schools and the precarious living conditions of the inhabitants. They also decried the lack of clinics and medical facilities, which made it difficult to combat diseases caused by poor diet, poor hygiene, promiscuity family life and unsanitary surroundings.

Zanotti Bianco returned to this long list of difficulties in other fact-finding trips in which he described the state of the schools and of childhood in Calabria and Basilicata. The first, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria* (The martyrdom of schools in Calabria), published in 1925, revealed the appalling state of the schools and the difficult conditions in which the teachers were obliged to work. In contrast, the second, *Inchiesta sulle condizioni dell'infanzia in Italia* (Inquiry into the condition of children in Italy) promoted by the Unione Italiana di Assistenza all'Infanzia (Italian Union for Childhood Assistance), published in 1926, revealed the conditions in which children were condemned to live: a dreadful state of affairs, dominated and determined by «a dominating power, Poverty» (Zanotti Bianco 1926, p. 5) which obscured the need for proper schooling. A normal childhood was effectively impossible, thanks to the exploitation of underage labour which impaired the children's physical and mental development. According to the diary of a Roman teacher who worked for ANIMI in Calabria, many children were feral and violent, but when taken in and protected by schools, they rapidly became well-behaved and eager to learn (Serpe 2017, pp. 97-107).

The teacher's account recalls the position of Gaetano Salvemini. He had no doubt that the neglect of the Southern municipalities (which were starved of financial resources), the absence of proper schools and the “burning” need for education, highlighted by the difficulties experienced by the emigrants as they sought to integrate and find work in other countries, were all questions that required urgent attention. In the above-mentioned enquiry into public schools in the province of Reggio Calabria, Salvemini had already described the state of the facilities then being used as schools: buildings so decrepit and unappealing that people wished they had been destroyed in the earthquake (Salvemini 1955, p. 269).

The outbreak of the First World War and, above all, the advent of Fascism did not allow for the advancement of the debate on the Southern Question, which in the interwar period was reduced to an issue of purely historiographical interest. It was only after the Second World War that the political, cultural and ideological debate over the Mezzogiorno resumed, this time covered widely in a number of journals, such as “Nord-Sud”,

“Cronache meridionali” and “Il Mondo”, in which the various exponents of “meridionalismo” set out their ideas.

In his summary of the debate over the Southern Question since 1945, the historian Gaetano Cingari highlighted the difficulty of sustaining interest in the themes of the Mezzogiorno, which seemed to suffer permanently from backwardness. Cingari spoke of a «leopard spot» (Cingari 1992, p. 18) Mezzogiorno, of many and different Mezzogiornos, in which development was frequently a result of changes imposed from outside, for example the economic policies pursued by the central government and the culture of consumerism, rather than arising from the capacity for self-determination of Southern civil society. This state of subjugation had gradually resulted in a sort of cultural dependence, since even the debate on the Mezzogiorno itself no longer featured in national newspapers, which cited the views of minor Southern intellectuals but not the true product «of the internal culture of the Mezzogiorno» (ivi, p.19).

Cingari was writing at a time when the expansion of mass schooling from the 1960s to the 80s had finally reduced illiteracy to negligible levels. However, then – as now – it was legitimate to question the extent to which this statistically objective achievement had coincided with *qualitative* improvement among the new generations.

3. Government measures against illiteracy

The first document on the state of public education in the new Kingdom of Italy dates back to 1865 and shows strong awareness of the link between underdevelopment, poverty and illiteracy. It also contains the data emerging from the Inquiry conducted by the Consiglio Superiore della PI (Higher Council of Public Education) just one year earlier, which had revealed a nation with a high number of illiterate citizens. The document affirmed the intention of the Italian government to reduce illiteracy by means of new laws that enabled intervention in support of the public school system, which was supposed to have a presence in every corner of the Kingdom, including free nursery and elementary schools for young children, but also winter, evening and Sunday schools to attract and involve adult citizens (Ministero Pubblica Istruzione 1865, p. 503). The document failed to recognise the urgency of the situation however. Indeed, it stated that compulsory schooling could not be imposed by law, but should rather be seen by the families as a moral obligation and an opportunity to improve their children’s condition. In addition, it was clearly felt that for many children of the lower classes, school would represent a very short period of their lives, insufficient to give them anything more than the most rudimentary education, which would need to be consolidated in subsequent years.

With the appointment of Michele Coppino as Minister of Education, the state’s commitment to tackling the depressing picture emerging from the censuses appeared to strengthen. The law of July 1877 reinforced the principle of compulsory elementary education and a new Inquiry was entrusted to Gerolamo Buonazia, within a year publishing data on the real state of the school system of the Kingdom. The Inquiry produced a damning verdict on a system that had been unable to improve in all parts of the country despite the adaptations and reformulations of the Casati Law. Specifically, school provision was poor in many provinces of the Central and Southern regions and the Islands and it was here especially that the appeals and the laws regarding attendance had little impact. The Buonazia Inquiry produced a documentary account that is extremely informative

regarding the structural condition of the school system, highlighting the irregular distribution of schools relative to the population and the uneven teacher-pupil ratios. Above all it showed how the paucity of material and human resources progressively worsened from the North of the Kingdom towards the Centre, the South and the Islands. Specifically, the North was seen to be an area of consolidated literacy, with a very few geographically specific weak spots that were not due to real deficiencies in the school system but rather to the exploitation of child labour, which made attendance difficult and restricted enrolment (Ministero Pubblica Istruzione 1878, pp. 14-16). More serious problems were seen in Central Italy where just under half of children were in school, although it was believed that this could realistically be raised to 70%: «The road is long» said the Inquiry's report, «but the growing attendance in the schools that are being opened makes us confident of reaching our goal sooner than might be expected» (ivi, pp.33-35).

The Southern provinces showed a serious lack of progress in all of the indicators considered and described by the Inquiry. In all areas, school provision was affected by the dire economic and social conditions, responsible for sharp differences between provinces and even between municipalities, both small and large. Support for outlying administrations, which were often unable to enforce compulsory attendance, was therefore recommended as the best way to affirm and spread the “value and discipline” of schools and education more generally: «It is thus necessary to conduct inspections with the specific aim of recognising the local difficulties that prevent, in such a large number of municipalities [above all in Puglia and Calabria], including some of the most important, the implementation of compulsory schooling» (ivi, pp. 39-48).

The purpose of the Inquiry had been to identify the causes of illiteracy, and Buonazia's conclusions stressed the close relationship between schooling, poverty and moral regeneration: «The greater the success of schooling in terms of building up the moral strength of the people, the easier it will be to remedy the shocking poverty that afflicts the unhappy toiling classes» (ivi, pp.53-54).

The Minister Coppino was by then in a position to implement a series of financial measures in support of municipal administrations, thereby enabling them to tackle the poor state of school buildings using subsidised loans. There was a renewed emphasis on compulsory education, this time backed up by a system of penalties for families that did not comply, and the municipal authorities were urged to make the entire community aware of the benefits of a school education. Also designed to boost elementary education and its quantitative and qualitative development were the measures to support the teachers, who saw significant improvements in terms of both salaries and qualifications.

The Coppino reforms were instituted by the new government led by the Sinistra (Left), which was decidedly more democratic in outlook than its predecessor, but the results did not live up to expectations. When the Sinistra later fell from power, the new government was unsympathetic to the cause of mass education, which it considered to be a potential vehicle for social subversion. This return to a more conservative approach was reflected in school programmes, text books and recommended reading for children, which extolled the values of forbearance, patience and social humility. These ideas were hotly contested in that period by the nascent Socialist movement, which, regarding the struggle for literacy, compulsory education and technical and vocational training, promoted its own programme, markedly more democratic and inclusive. In this context of new ideas, old fears and legislation whose effect was to promote the construction of schools in the richer areas, the censuses once more confirmed the sharp differences between regions.

Thus the 20th century began with the old problems still unresolved, prompting a new series of measures in support of primary education, vocational schools, and better training for teachers, who needed to be removed from the vexatious influence of the municipal administrations.

The year 1903 saw the enactment of a reform by the Minister Nasi regarding *Nomine, licenziamenti e stipendi dei direttori didattici e degli insegnanti delle scuole elementari comunali* (Appointment, dismissal and remuneration of teachers and head teachers in municipal elementary schools), which established the teachers' legal status on a new foundation. This was followed by the Orlando law of July 1904 entitled *Provvedimenti per la scuola e per i maestri* (Measures for schools and teachers), and a few years later by the report by Camillo Corradini on *Istruzione primaria e popolare in Italia* (Primary and popular education in Italy), the culmination of an inquiry launched in 1907 (Corradini 1910). These laws and initiatives showed the gravity of the state of education in Italy, which could no longer tolerate such poorly organised schooling. Reforms were needed, supported by adequate funds, enabling broad-based and intensive action in both quantitative and qualitative terms throughout the national territory.

The Corradini Inquiry proved to be decisive for the approval of the Daneo-Credaro Law (1911), seen as the only way to fight illiteracy, reduce the sharp differences between the various parts of the country and build a more solid school system even in its most backward areas. The Census that followed the approval of the law, conducted in 1921 (19% Centre-North, 48% South-Islands), showed substantial improvement in all parts of the country, clearly due to the positive effects of the new legislation.

In the 1920s, the transfer of elementary schools to state control made it possible to tackle the scourge of illiteracy with large-scale measures. The creation by the Minister of Education Mario Orso Corbino of the *Opera contro l'analfabetismo* (Anti-illiteracy Board) in 1921 was accompanied by literacy campaigns aimed at reducing the uncomfortably high number of illiterate adults by means of more effective measures that were specially tailored to their needs, in some cases with the support of cultural organisations and private associations.

The *Opera* adopted the recommendations of the previous Ministers of Education, Alfredo Baccelli and Benedetto Croce, who had already stressed the importance of mass education, and entrusted the task of eradicating illiteracy to a number of *Enti Delegati* (Special Boards), headed by intellectuals and philanthropists such as Giovanni Cena, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, Alessandro Marcucci and Umberto Zanotti Bianco, key figures in the history of Italian education (Volpicelli 1962, pp. 54-58).

The Boards included the *Ente Scuole per i contadini dell'agro romano e delle paludi pontine* (School Board for Farmers in the Area of Rome and the Pontine Marshes), the *Società Umanitaria* (Humanitarian Society), the *Consorzio nazionale dell'emigrazione e lavoro* (National Consortium for Emigration and Labour), and the *Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* (National Association for the Interests of the Italian Mezzogiorno). In their first two years, these boards achieved a great deal in terms of the numbers of schools opened and students enrolled in them and the assiduousness of attendance. However, by means of Decree Law 2410 of 1923, the Minister Giovanni Gentile shut down the *Opera*, replacing it with the *Comitato contro l'analfabetismo* (Anti-illiteracy Committee). A growing number of boards and cultural institutions were now called on to manage the increasingly numerous schools, which were provisional in nature and described as "unclassified". The four earlier Boards were joined by a further six, each of which was charged with eradicating

illiteracy in a precise regional context. Thus was written one of the most interesting and productive pages in the history of public education and the struggle against illiteracy in Italy.

The *Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* (ANIMI) (Serpe 2004) had been entrusted with the task of eradicating illiteracy among adults, which it worked on from 1921 until 1928, when it suspended operations in order free itself from the interference and control of the Fascist regime. Indeed, it saw the principles set out in its statute (which required it to be apolitical and free of any party affiliation) as being incompatible with the new authoritarianism of the Italian state. The Association did most of its work in Basilicata and Calabria, and on the two largest islands, Sardinia and Sicily. These regions had been the object of a great many studies and investigations by ANIMI's founders and other illustrious exponents of the Italian Southern question.

3. Conclusion

In the period following the Second World War, illiteracy continued to characterise many areas of the Mezzogiorno. The foundation in 1947 of the *Unione Nazionale per la Lotta contro l'Analfabetismo* (UNLA), headed by Francesco Saverio Nitti, resulted in the creation of numerous *Comitati comunali per la lotta all'analfabetismo* (Municipal Committees for the Struggle against Illiteracy) and *Centri di Cultura Popolare* (Centres of Popular Culture), as part of a renewed effort to tackle the problem of illiteracy in accordance with an innovative approach based on the active and conscious involvement of adults.

In addition to UNLA, other organisations such as the *Movimento di Cooperazione Civica* (Movement for Civic Cooperation, MCC) got involved, reprising the work of ANIMI and the *Società Umanitaria*, which after the fall of Fascism returned to the fray with a series of initiatives to help adults, including literacy programmes and vocational training.

But the Mezzogiorno had also been a testing ground for many intellectuals, Italian and foreign, who had made a strong impression on the country and drawn attention to the precarious living conditions of many communities of the South, especially those situated in inland areas. Figures such as Carlo Levi, Giuseppe Isnardi, Ernesto De Martino, Rocco Scotellaro, Danilo Dolci and Edward Banfield produced a wealth of studies and commentary that sought to raise awareness in those regions of both their state of dependency and their right to their own social subjectivity, enabling them to guard against the risk of alienation inherent in all forms of top-down intervention. For those scholars, change could only come from the communities themselves: self-education was the fundamental precondition for understanding, intervening and safeguarding those communities' distinctive cultural characteristics.

Once again it was poverty that made those communities the object of study, the absence of social structures and forms of participation having left the way open for individualism and sectionalism, a theme that forms a sort of common thread in the thought of scholars of the Mezzogiorno over the course of more than a century.

References

- Barausse, A., & D'Alessio M. (Eds.) (2018). *Processi di scolarizzazione e paesaggio rurale in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*. Pensa MultiMedia.
- Bertoni Jovine, D. (1975). *La scuola italiana dal 1870 ai giorni nostri*. Editori Riuniti.
- Cassano, F. (2021). *Il pensiero meridiano*. Laterza.
- Cingari, G. (1992). Il dibattito meridionalistico nell'ultimo quarantennio. In G. Genovesi & G. Trebisacce (Eds.). *Mezzogiorno Scuola Educazione dal 1945 ad oggi* (pp. 11-24). Jonia.
- Cipolla, C. M. (1969). *Literacy and Development in the West*. Penguin Books.
- Colaci, A. M. & Serpe, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Mezzogiorno Scuola Educazione. Persistenze e innovazioni (1900- 1960)*. Pensa MultiMedia.
- Compagna, F. (1965). *La questione meridionale. Il problema delle due Italie*. Edindustria Editoriale.
- Corradini, C. (1910). *Relazione presentata a S.E. il Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione dal Direttore Generale per la istruzione primaria e popolare dott. Camillo Corradini*. Tip. Operaia Romana Cooperativa.
- De Rosa, G. & Cestaro, A. (Eds.). (1970). *La questione meridionale. Antologia di scritti e documenti*. Ferraro.
- Fortunato, G. (1912). *Le due Italie. La questione meridionale*. Libreria della Voce.
- Isnardi, G. (1965). *Frontiera calabrese*. Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.
- Meda, J. (2018). "Invisible Schools". The public image of rural schools in Southern Italy in photographic inquiries and photo-reportages (1925-55). In Comas Rubí F. & del Mar del Pozo Andrés M. (Eds.). *Fotografía, propaganda y educación. Historia y Memoria de la Educación*. 8, 347-396.
- Meda, J. (2020). The "Agony of the School" in Southern Italy in the Images of Italian Photojournalists, 1940s–1950s. In Priem K., Hendel G. & Naggar C. (Eds.). They did not stop at Eboli UNESCO and the Campaign against Illiteracy in a Reportage by David "Chim" Seymour and Carlo Levi (1950). *Appearances – Studies in Visual Research*, 1, 198-220.
- Ministero Pubblica Istruzione (1865). *Sulle condizioni della pubblica istruzione del Regno d'Italia. Relazione generale presentata al Ministro dal Consiglio superiore di Torino*. Stamperia Reale.
- Ministero Pubblica Istruzione (1878). *Sull'obbligo della istruzione elementare nel Regno d'Italia. Attuazione della legge 15 luglio 1877*. Tip. Eredi Botta.
- Salvemini, G. (1955). La scuola popolare in provincia di Reggio Calabria. In Salvemini G., *Scritti sulla questione meridionale (1896-1955)*. Einaudi.
- Serpe, B. (2004). *La Calabria e l'opera dell'ANIMI. Per una storia dell'istruzione in Calabria*. Jonia.
- Serpe, B. (2007). L'ANIMI: una storia per immagini. *Nuovo Bollettino CIRSE*. 1-2, 33-42.
- Serpe, B. (2017). Appunti di una maestra durante la Grande Guerra: il diario di Lina Sarri (1916-1918). In Serpe B. (Ed.). *Scuola Infanzia e Grande Guerra* (pp. 97-107). EDUCatt.

- Stizzo, F. (2012). Discrasie e opportunità di un intervento filantropico a favore dell'infanzia nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia nei primi anni del Novecento. *Nuovo Bollettino CIRSE*. 2, 151-158.
- SVIMEZ (1961a), *Cento anni di statistiche sulle regioni d'Italia*. SVIMEZ.
- SVIMEZ (1961b), *Un secolo di statistiche italiane. Nord e Sud 1861-1961*. SVIMEZ.
- Trebisacce, N. (2004). *Scuola e Mezzogiorno prima e dopo l'Unità*. Jonia.
- Villari, P. (1878). *Le Lettere meridionali ed altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia*. Le Monnier.
- Villari, P. (1872). *La scuola e la questione sociale in Italia*. Le Monnier.
- Villari, P. (1866). *Di chi è la colpa? O sia, la pace e la guerra*. Politecnico.
- Villari, R. (Ed.). (1961). *Il Sud nella storia d'Italia. Antologia della questione meridionale*. Laterza.
- Vincent, D. (2000). *The Rise of Mass Literacy. Reading and writing in modern Europe*. Polity.
- Volpicelli, L. (1962). *Dopo l'analfabetismo*. Vito Bianco.
- Zanotti Bianco, U. (1964). *Meridione e meridionalisti*. Collezione Meridionale Editrice.
- Zanotti Bianco, U. (1926). *La Basilicata. Inchiesta sulle condizioni dell'infanzia in Italia promossa dalla Unione Italiana di Assistenza all'Infanzia*. Collezione Meridionale Editrice.

Brunella Serpe is Associate Professor in History of Pedagogy at the Università della Calabria, IT.

Contact: brunella.serpe@unical.it