

A «sick culture»: essays and manuals on the formation of a racial consciousness in Fascist Italy. A case study (Brescia 1940-1944)

Una «cultura enferma»: ensayos y manuales sobre la formación de una conciencia racial en la Italia fascista. Un estudio de caso (Brescia 1940-1944)

Daria Lucia Gabusi

e-mail: daria.gabusi@libero.it

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Italia

Abstract: This article, through a 'case study' of essays and textbooks for primary school teachers published in Brescia, a town in Northern Italy, would provide a contribution to the reconstruction of a national history's page (not yet completely studied and known), in which all intellectuals – although restrained in what they could say under a dictatorial regime – had to choose if they would provide a cultural contribution to an ideology that all democracies born in Europe after the Second World War would strongly reject and condemn. By adopting a research method intended to combine the history of the education system with political, cultural and social history, the reading of these texts offers a glimpse of the multifaceted cultural environment within which racist legislation was born and implemented in Italy. These authors demonstrate, at different degrees and levels, how their writings helped to spread the racist ideology of the regime. This page of the history of Italian racism and anti-Semitism, resulting in the end in concentration and death camps and extermination, shows us how words and ideas can become, once disseminated and assimilated, facts justifying the killing of innocent people.

Keywords: racist legislation; racial education; cultural racism; anti-Jewish campaign; cultural anti-Semitism.

Resumen: Este artículo, a través de un 'estudio de caso' sobre ensayos y libros de texto para los maestros de escuelas primarias publicados en Brescia, una ciudad en el Norte de Italia, proporciona una contribución a la reconstrucción de una fase de una historia nacional (que todavía no se ha estudiado y no se conoce por completo), en la que todos los intelectuales – aunque condicionados por el régimen dictatorial – tuvieron que elegir si quieren proporcionar un aporte cultural a una ideología que todas las democracias nacidas en Europa después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial rechazaban y condenaban enérgicamente. Mediante la adopción de un método de investigación que combina la historia del sistema educativo con la historia política, cultural y social, la lectura de estos textos ofrece una visión del entorno cultural multifacético en el que la legislación racista nació y se implementó en Italia. Estos autores demuestran, en diferentes grados y niveles, cómo sus escritos ayudaron a difundir la ideología racista del régimen. Esta página de la historia del racismo italiano y el antisemitismo, lo que resulta en los campos de exterminio y de concentración, nos muestra cómo las palabras y las ideas pueden llegar a ser, una vez difundidas y asimiladas, hechos que justifican la matanza de personas inocentes.

Palabras clave: legislación racista; educación racial; racismo cultural; campaña antijudía; antisemitismo cultural.

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1. Introduction¹

Italian Fascism was characterized from the very beginning by an educational project aimed at moulding people's ethics that, over the years, has increasingly improved and better defined. At the center of this extensive and pervasive pattern – as shown by the large historical bibliography available (Tomasini, 1969; Bellucci and Ciliberto, 1978; Mazzatosta, 1978; Ostenc, 1980; Gentili, 1983; Charnitzky, 1994; Gaudio, 1995; De Fort, 1996; Ricuperati, 2001; Gibelli, 2005; Montino, 2007; Colin, 2010) – was the education system, the institutional framework within which Fascism could put deep and long-lasting roots. Youth organizations devoted to the militarization of young people (Addis, 1973; Betti, 1974; Bertone, 1975; Koon, 1985; Zapponi, 1982; La Rovere, 2003; La Rovere, 2013) – by working closely with the schools – helped to spread fascist ideals and to implement Mussolini's «national reeducation» project, aimed at breeding «new men» (Tognon, 2002, pp. 15-50; La Rovere, 2002, pp. 51-78). In fact, recent studies define Fascism as an «educator Totalitarianism» (De Giorgi, 2008, pp. 184-216).

Since the mid-'30s, this project intensified in preparation for and in connection with some regime-defining steps like waging the Ethiopian War, adopting racial laws, and fighting World War II. Then, the whole media system – consisting of newspapers, publishing houses, national radio, and the film industry – became a political-educational and propaganda tool of the regime, generating a true «media Totalitarianism» (this expression is found in: Gibelli, 2005, p. 248. See also: Cannistraro, 1975; De Grazia, 1981). From that moment on, the link between the National Fascist Party («The Great Pedagogue» Gentile, 2006, p. 143), the intellectual-cultural *milieu* (Tannenbaum, 1973; Mangoni, 1974; Isnenghi, 1979a; Isnenghi, 1979b; Turi, 1980), and publishing houses (Tranfaglia & Vittoria, 2000; Ragone, 1999; Turi, 1997), became more and more intense, producing a 'political monopoly' of knowledge for the formation of a new imperialist and racist identity.

Through the analysis of some books published in Brescia – a midsize town located in Northern Italy – between mid '30s and mid '40s, this article is a contribution to the reconstruction of the «historical morphology of educator-totalitarianism» (De Giorgi, 2001).

¹ A broader and more detailed discussion on the topic, with some in-depth case studies, is being published in *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche* (2015).

2. Educating the «cultural racism»: the case of Brescia

The racist ideology path in human history started a long time ago and faced – as we know – a turning point in the sixteenth century, after the conquest (about the concepts of superiority/inferiority, equality/inequality and identity/difference see Tzvetan Todorov's classical pages (1992) -first published in 1982-) of the American continent by Europeans. Thanks to the contribution of 'pseudoscience', philosophy, religion and politics, between the 18th and 19th centuries racism penetrated European societies (Mosse, 1978) so deeply as to contribute to – with the rise of Fascism and Nazism and the outbreak of World War II – the mass murder of millions of people, not only Jews² but anyone considered 'different' and 'inferior'.

The xenophobic and racist (Raspanti, 1994; Cavaglion, 2000; Burgio & Casali, 1996; Collotti, 1999; Maiocchi, 1999; Gentile, 2013) project of Italian Fascism was drawn up by Mussolini and the Fascist leadership during and after the campaign in Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Empire³. From 1935-36 the stranger began to be considered an element of corruption of true and authentic Italians and to be portrayed as a possible cause of a dilution and eventual collapse of the national community. The conceptual basis of racist legislation in Italy then took shape in the virulent debate that accompanied the Italo-Ethiopian war: according to a specific project of nationalization, «the essential problem is the description of the «other» as alien to the country, anyway as a subject around which to create a «cordon sanitaire» and then to «fence», but not to suppress» (Bidussa, 1994, p. 58). Thus in 1938 – in a context prepared over time – racist legislation in fascist Italy⁴ was presented to Parliament, approved, promulgated and enforced. Starting from this year, the Jews were first denied their rights (1938-1943), and then persecuted (1943-45).

The relationship between intellectuals and Italian racist propaganda – creating a sort of 'cultural racism' – and the contribution that they gave to the anti-Jewish campaign have long been removed from the collective memory⁵ and

² The most comprehensive account of how Germany annihilated the Jewish community of Europe is Raul Hilberg's classic work, first published in 1961 (revised and expanded edition 2003).

³ On January the 4th 1937 «the minister for the colonies had presented to his colleagues a draft bill (then approved and issued as a Law Decree in April) which forbade in the colonies and in Italy the «marital nature relations» between an «Italian citizen» and a «subject» of Italian East Africa» (Sarfatti, 2002, p. 5). See also: Bottoni, 2008; De Napoli, 2011.

⁴ In recent years many studies have come out on the enactment of such laws and the different levels of reception in various sectors of Italian society (from the political to the scientific world, through the education professionals and, more generally, the cultural world). See at least (also for the bibliographic update): Collotti, 2006; Sarfatti, 2007; Germinario, 2009.

⁵ The causes of such a removal are – as we know – manifold, in which intertwine psychological mechanisms and much simpler reasons, related to opportunism and survival. See: Huyssen, 1995; Cramer,

only recently addressed by historical research⁶. In fact, all intellectuals – although limited in what they could say under a dictatorial regime – had to choose if (and with what degree of adhesion) they would provide a cultural contribution⁷ to a non-democratic ideology. In this sense, the article will throw some light on a national history's page which is far from being completely studied and known.

The fascistization of curricula in primary schools at the end of the 1920s was the first and most obvious manifestation of the «State educator». It started with the introduction of «the single textbook» and it continued in the following years with a whole set of regulations by the Minister of Education, Giuseppe Bottai. This effort, by injecting fascist ideals and principles into the education system, had the objective to create the «new man». Luciano Pazzaglia, a school and education historian, wrote about it:

The prospect of a new model of man proposed by fascism experienced different stages, corresponding to well-defined periods [...]. During the first phase, the «new man» was identified with Mussolini himself; in the years '26-'29, this term came to denote a way of life; over the consensus years the «new man» became fascist mass-man, interpreter of a new civilization; during the last phase of the fascist regime, the «new man» clearly took some racial characteristics (bio-pedagogy) and acted as a support to the ideal of the new world order that Fascism should have realized (Pazzaglia, 2003).

During the Ethiopian enterprise, intellectuals and teachers were mobilized for the war propaganda campaign. As a single goal to be achieved, the whole nation – and schools in particular – had to nurture an imperial consciousness through autarkic and racial education. Also when racial laws were introduced, the education system was enrolled in the 'cultural battle' and placed at the forefront in spreading racist ideology. Minister Bottai urged even the circulation of the magazine *La Difesa della Razza* (The Defence of Race) in primary schools (see Cassata, 2008).

The body of laws enacted at the end of the thirties was largely prepared, accompanied and implemented not only by regime propaganda, but also by a more-or-less free and spontaneous mobilization of intellectuals, institutions, educators and schools. As David Bidussa emphasizes, Fascist racism «appeals to scientists and intellectuals so as to contribute to this effort, sets in motion legal means to affirm racial categories, structures institutions in line with these categories» (Bidussa, 1994, p. 69). In fact, Italy not only enacted racial legislation, but «it established a cultural and political practice of racism, and produced political

1996; Ricoeur, 2004.

⁶ See essays collected in Flores, 2010.

⁷ The forms and degrees of complicity with racist ideology were several, as Raul Hilberg has taught us (Hilberg, 1992).

and cultural anti-Semitism» (Bidussa, 1994, p. 9). Furthermore, «persecution is the result of a multi-layer twist and involves a transformation not only in individual and collective behaviour but also in the apparatus, and the cultural, mythological, and political *machine* which is set in motion» (Bidussa, 1994, p. 17). Therefore, those measures encountered much support – albeit at different levels and in a different degrees – among the Italian intellectuals (Galfré, 2005), while very rare were cases⁸ of firm condemnation and overt rejection.

Notwithstanding its strong Liberal-Catholic tradition – which had been stifled by fascist violence since the '20s – and the absence of a real Jewish community⁹. Brescia was not isolated from this political and intellectual influence. The town is even today marked by a relative high concentration of publishers¹⁰, with a Catholic publishing house – La Scuola¹¹ – specializing in textbooks and pedagogical publications with national circulation. In those years, also Brescia saw the publication of essays and manuals aimed at spreading 'cultural racism'.

Therefore, by observing a local case through a sample survey we can not only reconstruct a specific reality, but also we can make a sound verification of national phenomena. However, Brescia and its province are only partially a local case: in fact – from the fall of 1943 on – they found themselves at the center of the Italian Social Republic. Besides of course the re-location of the government to Salò, on the Garda Lake shore nearby, the concentration¹² of national institutions, ministries, and Italian and German troops turned Brescia – in some way – into the 'capital' of the new state.

Among the titles published by a dozen publishers from Brescia over a period of time following the racist laws and during the deportation and extermination of Jews, I will focus on four books: (i) *I Principi affermati ed attuati dal Fascismo nel campo dell'educazione* [*Principles as Stated and Implemented by Fascism in Education*]; (ii) *Rinascenza didattica* [*Teaching Renaissance*]; (iii) *Luci di civiltà. Antologia di Diritto e di Cultura Fascista ad uso dei giovani* [*Civilization Lights: Anthology of Fascist Law and Culture for the Youth*]; (iv) *La razza è storia. Saggio introduttivo sugli aspetti filosofico-scientifici politico-religiosi morali e sociali del fascismo*. Riv-

⁸ The most emblematic and widely known case is that of Angelo Fortunato Formigini, a publisher of Hebrew origin, who expressed his strong condemnation of anti-Semitism fascist by committing suicide, jumping from the tower of the cathedral of Modena.

⁹ In Brescia, the Jewish presence was very small (195 individuals out of 750,000 inhabitants). See: Chiarini, 2007.

¹⁰ We have to mention at least the following publishing houses in Brescia: Codignola, Gatti, Geroldi, La Scuola, Luzzago, Pavoni, Queriniana, Vannini, Vescovile.

¹¹ An important summary of the position of La Scuola publishing house during Fascism is in Pazzaglia, 2004. See also: Pazzaglia, 2005, pp. 100-130.

¹² See the list and location of offices of the ministries and other state institution in Borghi, 2001, pp. 194-203.

oluzione di razza [*Race is History: an Introductory Essay on Fascist Philosophical, Scientific, Political, Religious, Ethical and Social Aspects. Race Revolution*].

The first two papers were published by «La Scuola»: a textbook on fascist education principles and a textbook training for public competition for would-be primary school teachers. The other two volumes were published by «Giulio Vannini»: a political-ideological essay and an anthology of «fascist culture» for the youth. While forming a racial consciousness and an imperial identity emerged as the main concern in those textbooks published by «La Scuola», spreading racist ideology and anti-Semitism as a ‘cultural’ priority was the focus of «Vannini’s» essays. In both cases, the inspiration of fascist biological¹³ racism was clearly present, although with different *nuances*. The next sections of the article will look, in turn, at these four books.

3. The contribution of schools to the «defense of the race»

The need to infuse Italian candidates in competitions with an autarkic, racist and imperial consciousness, (as well as the most appropriate teaching methods to transmit it to primary school students) was the focus of *I Principi affermati ed attuati dal Fascismo nel campo dell’educazione* (Agosti, 1935)¹⁴, written by Marco Agosti¹⁵, an influential pedagogue.

In *I Principi*, Marco Agosti argued that schools could offer a significant contribution to the defense and strengthening of the race at cultural and intellectual levels. The essay section devoted to the «defense of race at schools» (Agosti, 1942, p. 199) tried and outline the characteristics of «racial pedagogy», based on three aspects: moral, intellectual, and physical defense of the race.

Regarding the *moral defense of the race*, Agosti wrote: «Schools are the palladium of the moral characteristics of the lineage that carry the seal of a thousand-year experience raised in the light of the Catholic tradition» (Agosti, 1942, p. 221). These features were the «gentleness of spirit», the «feeling for everything that speaks to the heart and the imagination», a «native nobility», a «sense of balance and harmony», and «religious needs that blend harmoniously with the Catholic primacy of Rome» – all values that «the collective will of the State de-

¹³ The anti-Jewish legislation «called their victims not as «Jews», i.e. people with certain religious, cultural or identity characterizations, but rather as «belonging to the Jewish race», i.e. bearers of hereditary material characters that can not be eliminated» (Sarfatti, 2002, p. 7).

¹⁴ The quotations of this paper are taken from the expanded reprint of the fifth edition, 1942.

¹⁵ For a profile of the prominent educator and collaborator of La Scuola publishing house see Scurati, C. (2004). Marco Agosti. In Pazzaglia, L. (Ed.), *Catalogo storico* (pp. 113-116); De Giorgi, F. (2011). *Autorità fascista e libertà cristiana. Due lettere di Giovanni Modugno a Marco Agosti e Vittorino Chizzolini* (1936). In Caimi, L. (Ed.) *Autorità e libertà. Tra coscienza personale, vita civile e processi educativi. Studi in onore di Luciano Pazzaglia* (pp. 101-111). Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

fends on political frontiers, but which by their nature can be effectively defended only in trenches at schools, where firmly you have to win the ideal battle that our race-made-Nation and then unitary State and, finally, Empire, fights for the triumph of *Christian* civilization in the world» (Agosti, 1942, p. 221).

Each school subject had a key role to play for the *intellectual defense of the race* and the creation of a racial consciousness, but in particular history, geography and literature came to the fore. In contributing to the *physical defense of the race*, education could help «protect the health of the race to prevent aging and death» also by teaching gymnastics, but not only:

- It is to see, now, what role do schools play in this *physical defense* of the race, i.e.:
- a) in the demographic struggle;
 - b) in eugenics, in physical education, and in improving people's well-being;
 - c) in imperial policy;
 - d) in the promotion of hygienic and sporting life;
 - e) in the fight against miscegenation (Agosti, 1942, pp. 208-209)¹⁶.

According to Agosti «in the demographic battle schools play an essential role: they must educate young people to the concept and feeling of the Christian family» (Agosti, 1942, p. 209), but they could also become an important instrument in the fight against miscegenation (Barrera, 2008, pp. 393-414; Sòrgoni, 2008, pp. 415-427), a particularly pressing issue according to Fascist propaganda: «It is up to schools to train the ethnic consciousness of the difference between the Italian race and other races of the empire, generating the pride of our civil superiority» (Agosti, 1942, p. 209). However, intermarriage was not totally excluded by the author:

We know that *very different* races, by mixing, degrade (scourge of miscegenation). But it seems that, under certain conditions, the meeting and the merger of two races that are *not very different* brought some benefits (for example, the Indo-Europeans or Aryans would mix with the Mediterraneans to form the Italian race) (Agosti, 1942, p. 207).

Agosti finally tried to distance himself from Nazi eugenics:

Theories of *racial hygiene* were raised of which racial eugenics is the first most important. But properly biological eugenics *would ultimately treat the human species as an animal species*, justifying some extremely dangerous and reprehensible in practice logical speculations, such as, for example, the legitimacy of sterilization and euthanasia. Even efforts of pediatrics and prophylaxis of childhood aimed at reducing infant mortality, according to the terribly inhumane logic of pure racist eugenics, would not be encouraged because infant mortality *aims to eliminate the weak*. And now there is a

¹⁶ Italics in the original that will appear on all citations of: Agosti, 1942.

growing understanding even among the most fervent supporters of hygiene of the race that *the biology of the human species is a different matter and that the voluntary action of man in his favor must be kept within certain limits; crossing those lines it would impact first and foremost against religious and ethical-legal principles and then against those factors that differentiate human biology from that of the animal species* (Agosti, 1942, p. 221).

4. *Rinascenza didattica*: essays and exercises for the racist formation of teachers

Marco Agosti also edited *Rinascenza didattica* (Agosti, 1940³), within which, contributions and reflections expressed by Agosti himself, by Aldo Agazzi¹⁷ and by Giuseppe Fanciulli (Montino, 2009) are of particular interest, also because all three authors kept on writing extensively even after the end of WWII, well into the republican era. Their impact on democratic Italy's education system was far from being marginal, and Agazzi was also a government consultant for education reforms in the 1960s.

The imperatives proclaimed by Mussolini and Bottai regarding the need to «take the education system to the Empire level» and to «form a racial consciousness» were welcome – with diligence perhaps exceeding expectations of the same fascist hierarchy – by pedagogists and intellectuals particularly influential in the Italian publishing industry: they even contributed to amplifying the pervasiveness of the fascist educational project.

Rinascenza didattica is a 650-page training book for future teachers, full of essays and exercises addressing several different topics. I will focus here on just three of them, because they reflect three facets of a peculiar form of racism probably mitigated by the common Catholic background: conciliation between Christianity and racism, the role of taught subjects and the idea of the motherland in the formation of a racial consciousness, and the relationship between the concept of rurality and that of «purity of blood».

First, it was difficult to answer the question on the evident incompatibility¹⁸ of racist ideology with Gospel principles. Marco Agosti, in his essay entitled *Imperium*, tried to solve the puzzle in one of the reading proposals to candidates for the written test in teachers' public competitions (Agosti, 1940, p. 71). After stating that «Christianity [...] proclaimed the equality of individuals» and that «no nation can cristianly advocate the right to rule over another people to exploit it for its own purposes», he argued that «every people has the right to their freedom and independence: the myth of the people who have the right

¹⁷ On the Catholic pedagogist see: AA.VV. 2001; Scurati, 2005.

¹⁸ For a summary of such a complex issue see: Moro, 2008, pp. 15-44. See also De Cesaris, 2010; De Cesaris, 2011, pp. 151-162; Ventresca, 2012, pp. 285-302; Coppa, 2012, pp. 345-358; Kornberg, 2012, pp. 359-378.

to dominate simply because they are the strongest is debunked» (Agosti, 1940, p. 71). After these claims, how did they justify the domination and oppression exercised by the government and by the Italian army on christian people of Ethiopia? The Catholic educator first drew a hierarchical principle (the very foundation of every racist ideology) to which he added the «divine» role assigned by Providence to Italy:

A superior person only has a right: to educate those who are inferior to him. A nation of more advanced civilization has only a right towards people of inferior civilization: to rise them. [...] Providence has allowed Italy to be the empire of a people from an inferior civilization. [...] Catholic Italy with the forces of its ancient civilization aims at creating a moral and economic unit in the dilated sphere of its political Empire, collaborating with Church authorities¹⁹ to defend the Christian civilization wherever it is and to spread it where it has not arrived yet or it has been deformed (Agosti, 1940, pp. 71-73).

A similar attempt was made by proposing a tutorial that defined human solidarity «as moral fact, and as a moral fact raised in the light of the Gospel, it is the implementation of the commandment: Love thy neighbor as yourself, meaning for our countrymen and fellow citizens without excluding of course the rest of humanity» (Agosti, 1940, pp. 71-73). Therefore:

An alien from this point of view of the policy, in fact, is *less neighbor* – practically and commonly, as he lives depending on another country and because his political will is incapsulated in another belief system, i.e. another State (Agosti, 1940, pp. 71-73)²⁰.

Contradictory statements and weak arguments exposed, with all evidence, the difficulty of holding together in a single ideological racist system clearly irreconcilable terms: imperialism and Christianity.

Second, there was the issue to educate to imperial and racial consciousness (Agazzi, 1940, p. 239) across the board. Aldo Agazzi, like Marco Agosti, was keen to ensure that schools would reach this learning objective. In his essay in *Rinascenza didattica* (with the title *The teaching of geography as a factor of national consciousness*) Agazzi underlined the role of history and geography: «the need of an empire is inherent and inborn in the lives of great peoples [...]. The imperial mission is a kind of investiture received on entering history. Our race [...] had and intimately preserves this momentum and this kind of empire» (Agazzi, 1940, p. 239)²¹. Educators and teachers could therefore play a key role in achiev-

¹⁹ In the original text, «Church authorities» appear as «apostolato gerarchico» (hierarchical apostolate).

²⁰ Italics are mine.

²¹ The pedagogist supported his arguments with recurrent quotations from the Mussolini's speech in Tripoli on April 15, 1926 on the wonderful qualities of the «Italian race»: «a singular miracle in human

ing the imperial project: «At schools, then, the first «demonstration» about our history – to be made clear to pupils, increasingly from year to year [...] – concerns the elements and the awareness of the uninterrupted imperial tradition of our race» (Agazzi, 1940, p. 253).

Giuseppe Fanciulli, a writer and scholar of children's literature and various educational topics, in his essay *La patria e l'infanzia* (Fanciulli, 1940, pp. 61-70) (*Motherland and Childhood*) presented the motherland as an «element of racial heritage». Every effort of educators «must aim for the formation of young people's national consciousness» (Fanciulli, 1940, p. 61) raising within the children's soul the love for the homeland, defined as a «hereditary element of the race», whose vitality was preserved only by avoiding cross contamination with other peoples:

The Motherland, as a psychological reality, is, first of all, heritage. [...] As from father to son certain bodily elements are transmitted [...], so it is for certain activities of the soul. There is also in each new individual a core which can not be recognized as a simple parental inheritance, because it comes from much deeper; [...] [it is] heritage of the race. [...] Those people who come from fusions of different races in many generations can be completely disinherited (Fanciulli, 1940, pp. 62-63).

With arguments which sound a bit fanciful, he finally tried to prove the existence of an alleged «Racial memory»:

For several years, some thousands of young Italians from many foreign countries come here to spend their holidays [...]; among these, many know little about the Motherland and do not speak a word of Italian. Well, in a few weeks, these young people can speak and write the language correctly: that would be impossible, if they were to learn a foreign language, and not, as it is in reality, to «remember» what the hereditary soul has not forgotten. Now what is this «hereditary datum»? It is a feeling, or at least the active disposition toward a feeling. It is the revelation of a reality, of a presence, not through cognitive but affective paths – visions and love attachments.

The homeland was considered «a closed and deep heritage of the race» (Fanciulli, 1940, p. 65), as shown by the example of children having «grown up in foreign or anarchist environments [and yet] moved by a wave of a national flag or by the echo of a song of the Motherland» (Fanciulli, 1940, p. 66). The teaching suggestion for the educator was therefore to refer to «that «hereditary datum» linked to the already existing reality, and to strive to gradually translate it into explicit and well-defined values, to the maximum extent» (Fanciulli, 1940, p. 67).

history» (Agazzi, 1940, p. 251). Agazzi went on: «through the conclusions drawn from history, we will put light on the peculiar dignity of the Italian race: first of all in relations with the Empire, as «the racial problem [...] is related to the conquest of the Empire; because history teaches us that empires are won by arms, but are held with the prestige. And for the prestige we need a clear and severe racial conscience establishing not only the differences, but the absolute superiority», quoting Mussolini's famous speech in Trieste on September 18, 1938 (Agazzi, 1940, p. 252).

Finally, also the theme of rurality²², which is central in fascist ideology, was functional to the invention of a «racist culture» in Italian schools: peasants were presented as the true warehouse-keepers of the purest characters of the race, as their attachment to the land, combined with the isolation of the territory, had protected their blood from mixing with that of other nations. In carrying out these exercises for future teachers, a conception of a ‘spiritualist’ race – justified by a common history, literature, and language – was attached to a ‘physical’ and ‘genetic’ race, to an ‘organic’ and ‘material’ conception based on the combination of «land and blood». For example, the exercise *Faithfulness of the earth is a Latin virtue that has helped in every epoch the purity of the Italian blood* followed this scheme:

–Show that the faithfulness to the earth is really a Latin feature;

–Show that the faithfulness to the earth element is in favor of blood purity:

it can be said that [...] the attachment to the land, stability and unity [...] of farmers on their own [...] estates, is a safe element protective of their own blood, as the defense of their field is at the same time that of the race. Rural people do not celebrate mixed marriages: it is a general factual statement, and a consequence of their way of life. [...]

–Prove that in every age the attachment to the land has helped to keep the Italian race pure (Agosti, 1940, p. 468).

After reviewing the barbarian invasions, the text goes on:

you can answer that – despite invasions – these were in number and importance as to not substantially alter the purity of our race. [...] And less than anywhere else they altered the race where the Italic people were rural. [...] The barbarians stayed mostly in towns and large cities, and formed a ruling aristocracy: the countryside, high valleys, and mountain villages far away – in short, rural Italy – remained immune from barbaric contact, pure in his blood. And it was here, as prolific populations remained attached to their land that, through all eras of history, the blood remained untouched, despite the various dominations on our soil. [...] *Land and rurality were the conservative force, virtue, and purity of the people which was destined to rise again* (Agosti, 1940, pp. 469-471)²³.

In order to support the argument, Mussolini’s words, inevitable and monumental, were quoted:

²² David Bidussa writes: «The corporatist image of the peasant world in fascist culture corresponded to two cultural guidelines. The first [...] exalted the rural society as a feeling of ownership, family worship, a sense of tradition, respect for hierarchies, attachment to the homeland. The second [...] insisted on the quality of the lineage, and identified in that human world, at the same time, the foundation of the imperial civilizing mission and of the Italian nation and the physiognomy of Italy as a ‘proletarian nation’» (Bidussa, 1994, pp. 54-55).

²³ Italics are in the text.

Fascist rural and anti-urbanistic policy is linked to this reality, and it was established by the Chief who engraved his peasant origins on his homeplace in rural Predappio, who has continued everywhere to brag above all to be rural, and evermore proclaiming more strongly the interdependence between loyalty to the fields, national greatness, and domination of the race:

1. «Solid and stable nations are those that stay attached to the land, those that have the highest number of small land-holders».
2. «The aim is this: within a few decades, all rural Italians must have a large and healthy home, where peasant generations can live and last for centuries, *as safe and unchangeable basis of the race*».
3. Land and immutability of race are one: «The land and race are inseparable and through the land the history of the race takes place and race dominates and develops and makes the earth fertile» (Agosti, 1940, p. 472).

If, on one hand, it is true that Catholic «La Scuola» tended «to accept more and more explicitly the cultural and political positions of Fascism» (Pazzaglia, 2004, p. 51), on the other hand, it is also true that, despite the explicit fascist ties of its many authors, its publications never reached the violent and aggressive tones that – as we shall see – can instead be detected in the volumes published by Vannini, to which now we turn.

5. *Luci di civiltà*: educating young people to anti-Semitic racism

If the theme of anti-Semitism was almost entirely absent in the textbooks of «La Scuola», the essay by Luigi Bottini *Luci di civiltà*, edited in Brescia by the publisher «Giulio Vannini» in 1940, did not spare racist and anti-Semitic aggressive tones and content. The subtitle of the volume was «basic elements of law, corporatism, and welfare (compulsory, optional, and various social insurances), which were to be used in preparation for Agonali in the G.I.L. [Gioventù Italiana del Littorio] culture and in preparation for the Balilla team leader and First Aid exams. Institutions and social arrangements, elements of various contemporary political history, and various subjects of National Fascist Culture».

In the chapter *The «human reclamation» of fascism*, the author talked about the «Scientific Background», of racism, claiming that there are «different human races» (Bottini, 1940, p. 336) and that «the present population of Italy is of Aryan origin and its culture is Aryan. Jews are not Aryans». (Bottini, 1940, p. 336) This incorporated Mussolini's reference to the originality of the «Italian race» (Bottini, 1940, p. 336) and the very recurrent theme of the end of the Roman Empire as a result of mixing with other peoples (Bottini, 1940, p. 336):

The intervention of foreign elements had dissociated the character, i.e. the soul, bringing it to decay. In order now not to fall again into the same error that caused

the collapse of Rome, it is good and necessary for the Italian people to build a racial consciousness (Bottini, 1940, pp. 337-338).

Thus, according to Bottini, forming an Italian racial consciousness meant avoiding decay and returning to a presumed purity of the origins. It was easy then for the author to move from 'historical' nature of racism to its biological-spiritual features, ending up in a kind of 'ideological soup' that floated on the obsessive themes of blood and purity:

Italian spirit will spread throughout the world, and without pretense of oppression, it will dominate souls and it again will shape the world according to our civilization in our image and likeness. But in order for the Italian nation to express herself spiritually, with purity, and then with universal value, and in this way to spread spiritually in the world, it is necessary that our people will not be adulterated and spoiled by interference of elements of different race among us, within our blood (Bottini, 1940, p. 338).

Bottini then gave his definition of racism:

With the word *racism* we mean the set of all those social measures, private and governmental, that are implemented by our people to defend the blood, the intellectual and the spiritual and moral firmness, and the interests of our race, against other races (Bottini, 1940, p. 338).

The sub-section on «racist measures» summed up the meaning of racist laws, placing them in the context of a broader nationalist project inspired primarily by xenophobia, even more than by anti-Semitism. First of all, the foreigner was feared for his anti-national nature (of course the Abyssinian²⁴ was the more direct stereotype): after racial laws, Jews too were persecuted at the beginning as foreigners, and then, even being Italian, as belonging anyway to a kind of 'stateless internationalism':

These measures were realized:

1) – By preventing foreigners who had gradually entered Italy, who later became Italian (fake Italian), from gradually taking possession of riches, positions of authority, and the government of our country;

2) – By preventing foreign residents in Italy from making oaths in secret to those of their race living abroad, to the detriment of our race and our Fatherland, as well as for many years Italian Jewish communities indissolubly linked to other Jewish communities over the Alps have continued continue to do, whose program abroad is the most violent anti-fascism, especially from the Abyssinian War onwards;

²⁴ Bottini states: «In fact if a million Italians marry a million Abyssinian women, then we would have millions of children with Abyssinian blood in the veins, with half Abyssinians physical intellectual and moral character. All these millions of new children of Italians, semi-Abyssinians, would lower the level of civilization and power of our people». (Bottini, 1940, p. 339).

3) – By preventing, through marriages with foreigners, our race from gradually losing its specific characteristics of blood, of intellect, of feeling, of strength and character (Bottini, 1940, p. 339).

Persecuted for centuries, writes Bottini, the Jews «are trained in slyness» and in Italy, «always enjoyed respect and equal civil and political rights with the Italians, and actually they were considered Italians themselves» (Bottini, 1940, p. 343). However, they «did not want to merge with the Italian and while remaining citizens of the State, continued to consider themselves separate from us, to consider themselves foreigners in Italy» (Bottini, 1940, p. 343). At that point it was easy to present racist laws as a «self-defense» of the fascist state against the «Jewish conspiracy» hatched by the «plutocrats» (Bottini, 1940, p. 347). This is chilling in retrospect – evoking the real fate of millions of people in death camps –, as the words chosen by Bottini would have foreshadowed the future death and persecution of Italians, if the alleged project of Jewish domination had materialized:

If there is any sentimental melancholy against us that claims that our racist and anti-Jewish struggle will lead innocent people to an overwhelming ruin, we shout in retort that it is still better that we are victorious in order to prevent the anti-fascist Jews from dragging Italy and our innocent women, children and elders into overwhelming ruin (Bottini, 1940, p. 347).

The final slogan – intended, unfortunately, to find new room and credit in the Italian political debate many decades later – was: «In our house, he, who has our blood in his veins, must command» (Bottini, 1940, p. 348).

6. *La razza è storia*: a synthesis of Fascist anti-Semitism

Even more virulent were the arguments put forward in support of fascist racism from Giovanni Pestalozza in his *La razza è storia*. The author (Secretary of «Ispettorato Generale per la Razza» (Sarfatti, 2008, p. 114) / «General Inspectorate for the Race», established by Mussolini in 1944 to intensify the racist and anti-Jewish campaign) exposed – with an exalted, emphatic and vehement prose – the most recurring themes of racist ideology, ‘enriched’ by those typically found in ‘classical’ anti-Jewish propaganda. He defined four areas of investigation of race doctrine. The first concerned «the fundamental postulates» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 61) of race. The second delved into «spiritual values and the superiority of the Aryan in the hierarchy of races». The third «addressed other components within Aryanism, to include the Aryan-Nordic upper core and its Europoid components, such as Aryan-Roman and Aryan-Germanic» (Pestalozza, 1944, pp. 61-62). The fourth addressed «*Judaism*, outlining its history and identifying

it as the *dark enemy* of every constructive energy and source of perversion and decadence. This was the primary defensive and political factor and origin of the orientation of Fascist racism» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 62).

After stating that «racism is firstly selection» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 69), Pestalozza then dealt in detail – with constant references to the articles of a leading Italian theorist on race (Julius Evola), which had appeared in magazines and newspapers (Allotti, 2012) – with the biological basis of racial theories. Selection conforms to two levels of racism – at the level of «demographics, eugenics, self-preservation, and purity, selection can be viewed as being «external»; at the second level, selection can be defined as internal, acting on spiritual values» (Pestalozza, 1944, pp. 69-70). He then went on wondering when selection takes place. It does so when «the demographic battle proclaims and promotes eugenics that restore body structures; when it announces the fight against the Jew and oust its murky plots; when you prevent different races from interacting within the community in order to avoid hereditary incongruity that comes with intermarriage» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 70).

Faithful to the most popular and well-known anti-Jewish stereotypes, Pestalozza claimed that in order «to penetrate and understand the Jewish problem, one must use uncommon doctrine and sensitivity, since the danger lies in the snaky power of its subtle denials»:

However, the biology and genetics are the most reliable instruments for launching the final blow and reach its healthy oyster; external defensive selection, among other things, has the task of *breaking down the beast*; the internal reconstructive selection [...] has the task to eliminate the rubble (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 73).

Pestalozza also claimed that the originality of Italian racism, inherent in the fascist revolution (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 117), was strengthened with the birth of the Empire²⁵ and acquired new force in relation to the adoption of the Geneva sanctions. Therefore, it was not a 'by-product' of German racism²⁶. Michele Sarfatti wrote in this regard that

in the thirties, almost all of Europe experienced the rise, in different ways, of anti-Judaism and its legitimacy. The persecutory legislation introduced by Nazis in

²⁵ Even Aldo Agazzi, in tutorial *La difesa della razza è imperativo della coscienza imperiale*, said: «for Italians the racial problem became clear with Fascism. a) the Duce hinted at it there since 1919, and then on various occasions. However, this statement from 1921 is the most remarkable: «Fascism is concerned with the problem of race»... «with the race we will make history». [...] b) 1936: «The land and race are inseparable and the earth produces the history of race and race develops, dominates, and fertilizes the earth» (Agazzi, 1940, p. 456).

²⁶ On the contrary, «irrespective of the imposing complex theoretical science that justifies it, the Germanic Racism practically implemented legislation of which the main points appear derived from our secure tradition, and not certainly with the most intransigent aspects» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 116).

Germany starting in 1933 was on one hand a product of and a testament to this process, while on the other hand, it became a strong stimulus to its further development, because it showed Europeans that it was technically, politically and morally possible to legislate against its fellow Jewish citizens. Having said that, it should be highlighted that no documents or evidence whatsoever have been discovered suggesting direct or indirect intervention in the thirties on the part from Berlin to influence other states to adopt similar laws. *Inter alia*, it should be noted that some of the Italian anti-Jewish measures were, at the time when they were enacted (1938), more persecutory than those in Germany. For example, the definitive expulsion of Jewish students from state schools was decided in Rome on September 2, 1938, yet in Berlin it was decided only two and a half months later. This Italian ability of achieving records [...] is the most striking aspect of its genuine autonomy in processing and execution» (Sarfatti, 2002, pp. 9-10).

In an attempt to explain the way that racism should have followed in order to «force adherence to the italic type from the past», Pestalozza listed seven objectives:

1. The knowledge and affirmation of the race;
2. The defense of the race from polluted blood;
3. The defense of the race from disease and diseased inheritance;
4. The defense of the race from all attacks by foreigners and especially from Judaism;
5. The demographic expansion of the race;
6. The improvement of the race in its eugenic and moral aspect;
7. The qualitative enhancement and autarky of the race through the selective emancipation of the Aryo-Roman upper core (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 89).

The «defense of the race» in these passages was very closely connected to the «Jewish problem», to the birth of which in all ages and in all disciplines those called the «qualified athletes of perversion»²⁷ had contributed. Judaism – for Pestalozza – represented a mortal danger because it acted «as an occult power and enemy in the heart of the national community», thus becoming more dangerous and more difficult to eliminate compared to the similar threat posed by natives in the African colonies:

The half-caste, with reference to the intervention of Jewish blood in the divine riverbed of the Aryan-Roman trunk is the most fearsome and it surpasses unparalleledly [...] the severity of any promiscuity of blood in the colony where [...] the intervention of a strict legislation is easy (Pestalozza, 1944, pp. 92-93).

To differentiate between «pure» and «impure people» and to fully pursue the draft of the «reconstruction» of the race, Pestalozza introduced «the opportunity

²⁷ The long list ranged from Lombroso, Freud, Spinoza, Einstein, Lenin to Leon Blum, Thomas Mann, Svevo, Moravia, and Steinbeck (see: Pestalozza, 1944, p. 90).

of the attestation of blood purity, which establishes a strict ancestral investigation and which is the first practical examination in order to oppose all forms of spiritual and bodily deviation, provided it is extended consistently and with religious severity to the whole nation. Only by certifying the blood purity there is a valid assurance for the evolution of an accomplished selective process to restore the Aryan values» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 114).

We cannot forget that racist measures distinguished the Italian population precisely on the basis of *percentage of blood*: an administrative ruling of 1938 established «classifying as being of the ‘Jewish race’ anyone who had ‘75 percent Jewish blood’, or ‘more than 50 percent Jewish blood’» (Sarfatti, 2002, p. 20).

Backed by the oft-quoted Mussolini’s (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 119) speech on October 26, 1935, Pestalozza cemented the link between racism and ruralism, which we have already encountered in the essays published by «La Scuola».

The appendix to the volume – entitled *Appeal to race to exist* –, in summarizing the theories expressed in the book, puts forward even more violent and aggressive arguments in support of the battle for the «purification» and «resurrection» of race. The author of the essay then theorized the necessity of *Lebensraum*, the need to maintain the purity of blood, the definition of «new men» and the subsequent selection process for the establishment of a race made up of «new and pure men». Pestalozza said: «we intend to rise through drastic methods of selection, we intend to purify the ranks [...]; and it is our belief that by this tormented martyrdom *the new man of new Italy* will arise» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 166)²⁸.

Soon afterwards, he returned to «bond of blood»²⁹, supposedly linking together members of the same race. «Pure men» («namely those whose fate was preserved from the contagion of foreign blood and spirit» (Pestalozza, 1944, pp. 169-171) therefore coincided with the «new men» who had to respond to meet specific requirements:

He had never belonged [...] to a Masonic lodge [...]; Be unequivocally of Aryan-European race with much documentary evidence, free from all ties of blood and interest with the local and foreign Jewish caste; Being of absolute moral integrity, of intransigent and fanatical faith, and with ruthless decision skills [...]; Siding [...] inextricably with the Germans, wisely convinced of the univocal purpose of the fight; Be intimately proud to celebrate life by the oath of dedication to the masters of the new Europe (Pestalozza, 1944, pp. 172-173).

²⁸ Italics in the original.

²⁹ Pestalozza kept insisting ‘biological’ racism, speaking of «law of blood» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 175), «Living blood relationship» of Italian (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 178), and «Chrism of blood» (Pestalozza, 1944, p. 179).

6. (Mis)Education and Consensus

Laws and decrees adopted in Fascist Italy from 1937 onwards, culminating in anti-Jewish legislation by Autumn 1938 were accompanied and supported in their implementation by a large and articulated cultural project. This project was not only promoted by the fascist hierarchy (primarily by Benito Mussolini and Giuseppe Bottai) and welcome by PNF [National Fascist Party] militants with varying degrees of support, but also it was based on the alignment of individual intellectuals who had thus far helped to spread the infectious seeds of racist ideology.

The legislative and cultural preparation during the years 1938-1944 was the premise of the death camps and the «deportation Phase» was made possible by the «discrimination Phase», when cultural propaganda – which we have tried to reflect on – played a significant part. As we have seen, the «militarization of the lexicon» is used almost obsessively in a succession of «demographic battles», «struggles against miscegenation», «trenches at schools», and measures on «defense of the race» leading to the Shoah. The story of Italian racism and anti-Semitism, resulting in concentration and death camps and extermination (although not all forms of racism and anti-Semitism led and lead to extermination), demonstrates how words and ideas can become, once disseminated and assimilated, facts justifying the killing of innocent people.

As tentative conclusion – although temporary and limited (a larger survey would certainly produce a result with an entirely different significance when compared with contemporary publications of publishers from other cities) –, it can be said that reading these texts helps us to throw some lights on the multifaceted cultural framework which became the breeding ground for racist legislation in Italy. A critical look at these authors shows, at different degrees and levels, how their writings spread their racist ideology. This in some ways helps us, at least in part, to understand how it was possible that even though many Jews were saved on several occasions by friendly relationships, there was not – in Michele Sarfatti's own words – a «real non-application of the law» (Sarfatti, 2002, p. 41).

As we have seen, both publications of explicitly education nature (*I principi affermati ed attuati dal Fascismo nel campo dell'educazione* and *Rinascenza didattica*) and ideological/propagandist materials (*Luci di civiltà* and *La razza è storia*) were pursuing an educational mission. Thus, they were adding their contribution not only to the conscience formation of 'the new man' much in line with Mussolini's directives, but also they served the purpose to enlarge the bases of collective consensus to the Fascist regime and its legislation.

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