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**Regional culture as a vehicle of nationalism in Italian textbooks. School policy and publishers' interests in the regional book for primary schools (1924-1927)**

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In 1923, a few months after the installation of the fascist government, the first big reform in education after the Casati law – passed in 1859 and enforced thereafter all over the newly united state – was put forward by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), philosopher of idealism and the first fascist Minister of Education.

Actually, Gentile's reform albeit conservative, was guided by strong pedagogical ideals and only later was deprived by fascism of its original meaning. The fascist party did not have, at that point, a proper pedagogic line, that is why Mussolini turned to Gentile, who would obtain the favour of Italian intellectuals, pedagogues and teachers; more, he saw idealistic philosophy as a good ally against democratic and socialist trends<sup>1</sup> though not subversive, in a phase of his accession to the power where he still had to deal with democratic institutions (the first fascist cabinet had to obtain the majority in Parliament<sup>2</sup>). The reform, made up of a great number of laws, decrees, regulations and memoranda, concerned both administrative and pedagogic aspects in each grade of education, from pre-school to university<sup>3</sup>. According to Gentile's conservative purpose, the new laws aimed at centralising school system on the basis of hierarchical principles; but the main objective was favouring classical education in spite of the introduction of technical education – a tangible expression of the social mobility that had characterized Italian school system and society during the "Liberal age"<sup>4</sup> – this also brought to a strong selection in university admittance, as it was stated that technical schools would only give access to a profession<sup>5</sup>.

Among the measures contained, a great interest towards schoolbooks emerged, as an answer to a problem that Gentile's forerunner had already tried to deal with. In fact, school manuals published in the previous years were felt by pedagogues and politicians as backward both in contents and in form, more, it was common opinion that too many books were on the market as a consequence of publishers' speculative aims<sup>6</sup>.

As far as primary school is concerned, Gentile's reform was quite successful and managed to change the approach to publishing Italian school books<sup>7</sup> especially through state revision of texts,

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<sup>1</sup> Tomasi 1972, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> See Turi 1995, p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> On the reform see, in particular, Charnitzky 1996, pp. 93-191.

<sup>4</sup> Genovesi 2005, p. 147. On Italian legislation in the field of education see Barausse 2009 and Ascenzi-Sani 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Turi 1995, pp. 327-328.

<sup>6</sup> See Galfré 2005, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> See Chiosso 2003, p. XIII, Chiosso 2004 and Galfré 2005, p. 58.

which favoured some publishers, generally new firms who kept abreast of technical progress, to the detriment of other smaller businesses. As Gentile was more concerned with a reform in the higher levels of education, the dispositions regarding primary schools were worked out and extended by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, a Sicilian pedagogue strongly connected to Minister Gentile<sup>8</sup>. It was Lombardo Radice who conceived and carried out a new method of state revision of textbooks by Ministerial boards, which worked from 1924 to 1928<sup>9</sup>, in addition he drew up the new lists of books “prescribed or admitted for each grade”<sup>10</sup>, in which the regional book for primary schools appeared for the first time.

This new kind of book, also called *Almanacco regionale* (regional almanac) was to bring regional culture into schools, families and public libraries, to create a national culture for young generations in a country that, notwithstanding the political unification in 1861, was still far from linguistic and cultural unity, especially among the lower social classes. In order to understand these statements, it is appropriate to dwell upon the Italian debate on regionalism, which dates back to the decades following the unification<sup>11</sup>. Provincial life was conceived as primary source of individual identity, on which national identification had to be built. This debate was taken up at a date post WWI: the nationalist patriots aimed at strengthening bonds between region and the homeland, in order to increase people’s concern for a united and powerful home country.

As regards education, Lombardo Radice was firmly convinced that common people’s culture – in Lombardo Radice’s thought the ideas of pupil and common people were strongly bound – finds its sources in local tradition and folklore, that is why regional culture has to be introduced into schools as a step towards the idea of a homeland. If some of these statements could appear naive, it is necessary to mention that Lombardo Radice had the merit of believing in the possibility for people from lower social classes to become active members of society through their cultural redemption<sup>12</sup>. More suggestions in this direction came from Giovanni Crocioni (1870-1954), pedagogue and folklorist<sup>13</sup> who maintained that, far before Gentile’s reform, some teachers had felt a need to teach regional culture at school, and they even compiled regional books by themselves; likewise some publishers had arranged small collections of booklets or anthologies to be used by teachers both for their formation and in the classes<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Giuseppe Lombardo Radice (1879-1938) actually changed his mind on Gentile’s work after having seen, only a year later, the developments in his education reform, that is why he resigned from his office of Primary Education Director in 1924. Further on Giuseppe Lombardo Radice see Picco 1954.

<sup>9</sup> See Ascenzi-Sani 2005.

<sup>10</sup> *Libri di testo prescritti o consentiti per le singole classi*, in «Gazzetta ufficiale», 24 ottobre 1923, n. 250, cited in Catarsi 1990, pp. 341-342.

<sup>11</sup> See Cavazza 2002, pp. 285-309 and Cavazza 2003, pp. 17-77.

<sup>12</sup> On Lombardo Radice’s pedagogical thought see Lombardo Radice 1925, 1931, 1936.

<sup>13</sup> On Crocioni see Ambrosoli 1972; Anceschi 1977, Cavazza 2003, pp. 44-54.

<sup>14</sup> We can mention the regional reading textbooks set up in 1906 by Sandron (see Lombardo Radice 1936, p. 414 and Crocioni 1914, p. 103); a collection of anthologies for secondary schools directed by Crocioni himself from 1914, that

The new syllabuses stated that regional culture had to be studied during history and geography lessons, especially from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> elementary class, by adopting different almanacs for each region, and gave directions to publishers on how the new books had to look and which contents they had to include. They were essentially of three kinds:

- Material: books had to be handy and resistant as a regional almanac had to be used for three years; in addition it was supposed that they would have been read outside of school as well.
- Formal: they had to be almanacs, i.e. books had to contain a calendar with indication about fairs and fêtes in the region, together with the main national holidays. It is interesting to remark the will of relating this new book with an editorial genre, the almanac, that had been closely linked to popular culture for centuries<sup>15</sup>.
- Of content: they had to include tales from the popular tradition, vernacular texts and lyrics, traditional sayings, regional folklore together with national history, tales from the unification, information about the royal family and portraits of national heroes.

It is clear that the instructions about content were not particularly accurate, however, over a brief period a great number of regional almanac collections were produced by different publishers as a new investment, furthermore, the booklets would have been purchased by school- and popular libraries too. As a further advantage, the possibility of keeping the same structure and form for the whole series of regional books made it possible for publishers to arrange complete collections quickly and with low expenses. That is why a big number of publishers asked their staff and contributors to prepare regional culture books as soon as possible, in order to present them to the revision board in 1924<sup>16</sup> and to have them ready for teachers' choice within the start of 1924-1925 school-year. Enrico Bemporad in Florence and Arnoldo Mondadori in Milan were the first publishers to produce almanacs for almost all regions<sup>17</sup> and they advertised their new collections in teachers' journals during the last months of the previous school-year<sup>18</sup>, but also some smaller publishing houses managed to bring out small regional books series, generally related to the local area in which they worked, which were to be enlarged in the following years.

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actually ended after the first volume (see Crocioni 1914, pp. 110-111 and Cavazza 2003, p. 46) and the collection of booklets "Le perle d'Italia" intended by Vallardi for those who were preparing their permanent teaching exam, see «L'Unione magistrale», 3, n. 9 (1923).

<sup>15</sup> On *ancien regime* almanacs see Braida 1997, pp. 193-215, Braida 1998, pp.139-144 e Solari 1989.

<sup>16</sup> The deadline was 23<sup>rd</sup> september 1924, date on which it had been difficult for Ministry and publishers to agree, as it can be read on the «Giornale della libreria», journal of the publishers' association. See 37, n. 20-21 (1924), p. 418 and *ivi*, n. 22, p. 438.

<sup>17</sup> They were actually two of the biggest textbooks publishers at that point, further see Galfré 2005, pp. 58-72.

<sup>18</sup> «I diritti della scuola» 25, n. 35 (1923-1924), p. VIII and *ivi*, n. 38-39, p. II.

It is possible to notice some general features that characterise regional almanacs published in Italy between 1924-1927, some of them were clearly adopted in order to respond to the Ministry's directions cited above<sup>19</sup>:

- Form: they were characterized by a small format, paperback binding with a hard cover, in order to make the book resistant (it had to last three school-years); pictures and photographs (mostly black and white) made the information clearer. Moreover, each almanac was accompanied by a booklet (renewed and distributed once a year) containing the calendar, as expected by the Ministry;
- The price varied between 6 and 9 lira, depending on the publisher and the size of the book;
- The titles were generally limited to the name of the region, sometimes bound with the inscriptions "regional almanac" or "regional schoolbook for primary schools";
- The authors were usually teachers or pedagogues who often compiled more than one regional almanac for their publisher.

The choices that the publishers carried out seem to have been appreciated by the Ministry: the revision board that worked in 1924 delivered a positive judgement on the collections, especially on the material features of the editions<sup>20</sup>. Crocioni's opinion was rather different and more critical: he did not appreciate the excessive mixture of different topics<sup>21</sup> and registers, still due for a substantial part to publishing and teaching demands.

As far as Mondadori is concerned, we may affirm that the books released by this successful publishing house located in Milan (operating in the field of textbook since 1912) met the Ministry's favour, as a result of the efforts that, in his usual farsighted way, the publisher directed in adjusting his production to the new syllabuses, choice that earned him the supremacy in school books production from the twenties on<sup>22</sup>.

How did Mondadori's almanacs look and how did they respond to the Ministry's directions?

The collection, called "Collezione Mondadori almanacchi regionali", was issued in a very short time: 11 books published in 1924 and 7, for the remaining Italian regions, in 1925.

From the material point of view the books showed uniform features, as already mentioned: small format (approximately 13x20cm) and resistant binding: the size varied between 160 and 300 pages, the colour covers were usually followed by rudimentary maps that opened the books, the

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<sup>19</sup> The analysis has been drawn on a sample of regional almanacs conserved in the Italian libraries.

<sup>20</sup> See Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione – Direzione generale dell'Istruzione elementare, *Relazioni sui libri di testo per le scuole elementari ed elenco dei libri approvati e dei libri respinti. IX. Relazione finale della Commissione ed elenco dei libri esaminati nelle sessioni di agosto e settembre 1924*, riportato in Ascenzi – Sani 2005, p. 378.

<sup>21</sup> See Crocioni 1930, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> For Arnaldo Mondadori's biography see Decleva 1993.

texts were often illustrated with photographs and images. Each book was accompanied by an appendix containing the calendar, which was held in a paper pocket stuck to the cover, however it has been impossible to understand whether it was sold or just distributed to the pupils.

Although the publisher did not impose a fixed outline to follow, it is possible to identify a certain regularity in the books' structure: the majority of Mondadori's almanacs follow the calendar, each section refers to a month and its features i.e. holidays, fairs, activities in the country, sayings etc. As far as the contents were concerned, it can be affirmed again that no definite instruction came from the publisher, nonetheless it is evident that the authors adopted the same strategies, hence different almanacs usually touch on the same topics, which can be summed up as follows:

### 1. Elements of history

This issue took up a rather big part of each volume, so that we could ask whether almanacs interfered with history manuals; the regional perspective, however is always present. The historical narration concerns chiefly the regional events that brought to Italian unification, while we shouldn't be surprised by the fact that recent history is almost absent; the totalitarian turn in Italian politics was still to come and regional almanacs echo Risorgimento themes instead of fascist models. The narration of the lives of eminent Italians refers to a practice in use in post-unification history books as well<sup>23</sup>.

### 2. Regional geography

As predictable, the region's description is one of the main issues dealt with; besides the physical features of the area, the interest is conveyed on economic and productive aspects, especially agriculture (the main productive activity at that time); another way of describing the pupils' region in an enjoyable way was turning to travel narrations. In this kind of paragraphs the authors give directions on how to repeat the same trip that they describe, as an incentive for the pupils to learn by travelling in their local area.

### 3. Regional folklore

Regional culture had to have a significant role in the almanacs in order to let the pupils approach to folklore, popular literature and dialect, that is why books contain legends, popular lyrics, sayings (both in Italian and in vernacular) etc.; the almanacs relating to more rural regions also contain detailed descriptions of traditions, usages and customs. Although regional culture was the main theme of the new books, a reference to Italy as a united and powerful country is always present, according to Lombardo Radice's ideals. As an example, let us cite the prose, in the Tuscan vernacular, where Renato Fucini incites the reader to go beyond regionalism and to love

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<sup>23</sup> See Ascenzi 2004, p. 55.

one's homeland, but to still be proud of one's regional origin<sup>24</sup>. Likewise significant, the preface to the almanac *La Sardegna* recommends: "Above all, remember that you are Italian, because Sardinia is part of our mother Italy in the same way as you are part of your family"<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4. Elements of cleanliness and medicine

Ministry's directions also prescribed to put in the texts elements of cleanliness and anatomy, prescription that was respected on the whole by Mondadori's almanacs. In most cases we read advice that nowadays would sound superfluous or even excessive, but had to be spread among the lower social classes at that time. Let's see *La Venezia Tridentina*:

Have complete baths as often as you can. Keep your head clean, and rinse your mouth with salted water especially in the morning and in the evening. Change your underclothes frequently. Clean your house and preserve food from dust and flies, that spread dangerous disease.<sup>26</sup>

The authors of the almanac for Sardinia found it more effective to use examples, as in the case of the child expelled from school because he was dirty: as he learns to wash himself he is happy because "everybody loves him"<sup>27</sup>. Lastly the problems of addiction to tobacco and alcoholism appear as real plagues and are condemned by the authors.

#### 5. Civilisation

It was aim to give the readers useful advice for their everyday life, hence almanacs contain prescriptions on the works to do in fields and sheds, sometimes looking like proper handbooks. By examining this kind of paragraphs it appears that regional almanacs were seen by pedagogues as an opportunity to spread advice and suggestions to grown-ups as well, since they generally were illiterate and ignorant, by the means of their children, as Lombardo Radice wished:

[The regional almanac] will not only be a book for children: it will enter every home, it will be read by parents as well. The almanac is the book that makes school and life, children and adults, region and nation nearer.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, these remarks can be extended to the paragraphs concerning cleanliness and anatomy as well.

In some almanacs we find passages relating to the *Cattedra ambulante di agricoltura* [Itinerant Chair for agriculture], a widespread institution in rural areas, which aimed at educating peasants in order to improve profits from agriculture: the authors suggested that pupils recommend their parents to attend courses at the "Chair"; moreover all almanacs report mail rates, two booklets

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<sup>24</sup> R. Tanfucio [Renato Fucini], *La fratellanza dell'italiani*, cited in Lucattini-Talocchini, 1924, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Pirodda 1925, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Bernardi, 1924, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Pirodda, 1925, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione – Direzione generale dell'Istruzione elementare, *Relazioni sui libri di testo per le scuole elementari ed elenco dei libri approvati e dei libri respinti. IX. Relazione finale della Commissione ed elenco dei libri esaminati nelle sessioni di agosto e settembre 1924*, riportato in Ascenzi – Sani 2005, p. 377.

even include regulations about agricultural contracts, which probably were not part of the interests of primary school pupils. Finally, some almanacs contain paragraphs about emigration where, besides exposing data on the social phenomenon, the author's desire of giving advice to potential emigrant is clear. Illiteracy is described as the prime cause of the Italians' problems, the personal advantage of being able to write and read is widely praised: if one shows that he is cultivated he will not be abused or cheated; furthermore, the authors dwell upon juvenile work, that implies the violation of compulsory education laws as well as causing damage to children's physical development, lastly, they condemn prejudices and superstitions, spells and curses.

By reading the almanacs, we get the impression that the authors (and naturally the legislator as well) aimed at promoting a social redemption project for Italian rural classes, by giving them advice that helped them abandon crude and superstitious behaviour and understand the values of culture and progress; regional almanacs were regarded as a useful means to achieve this project of social and cultural regeneration in the newly united country.

After exposing the peculiar contents of these new text books a big question remains unsolved: it is impossible to give a description of the effective circulation that regional books had: the publisher's archive<sup>29</sup> does not provide any information in this sense and we do not have any official papers on this topic either. All we know is that the regional almanacs experience was to end very soon: in 1926 the last Mondadori's almanac was published, while in 1927 all publishers ceased their collections. But why did the turmoil that we have noticed in each publishing house calm down so quickly? The changes that occurred at the Ministry (Lombardo Radice and soon after Giovanni Gentile resigned in 1924), the totalitarian turn of the Government and the consequent fascist interferences in education, brought to a point where regional culture predictably became dangerous for the nationalistic plans by the fascist regime. The regional almanacs had been projected and thought up in order to respond to the demands of a pedagogical trend, strictly bound to the philosophy of idealism, that was not relevant anymore. As a consequence, the concern for regional culture had declined before the introduction of State book in 1929, as showed by the fact that publishers soon abandoned, the, by that time barren, market of regional textbooks. Nevertheless the experience of regional almanacs consist in an interesting attempt by idealistic pedagogics to introduce regional folklore in schoolbooks as a means of filling up the lack of cultural identity that, sixty years after the unification, still involved a substantial part of the Italian people.

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<sup>29</sup> Preserved in Milan by Fondazione Alberto e Arnoldo Mondadori.

### List of the titles issued

<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>
Giuseppe Bartolini	<i>Le Marche</i>	1924
G. Palazzi, G. Greco	<i>L'Umbria</i>	1924
Vittorio Ranieri	<i>Gli Abruzzi</i>	1924
Lelio Giannantonio	<i>La Basilicata</i>	1924
Cesira Fiori	<i>Il Lazio</i>	1924
Oronzina Quercia Tanzarella	<i>La Puglia</i>	1924
Gaetano Bernardi	<i>La Venezia Tridentina</i>	1924
L. Lucattini, G. Talocchini	<i>La Toscana</i>	1924
Mario Pasqualis	<i>La Venezia Giulia</i>	1924
Libero Talocchini	<i>La Liguria</i>	1924
Armando Bellodi, Remo Magri	<i>L'Emilia</i>	1924
Berengario Amorosa	<i>Il Molise</i>	1924
Alcandro Tongiorgi	<i>La Lombardia</i>	1925
Bianca Lena Pistamiglio	<i>Il Piemonte</i>	1925
Olga Musacchio	<i>La Campania</i>	1925
G. Masali, G. Zambonin	<i>Il Veneto</i>	1925
Michele Sorrentino Albertini e A. Messina Lazzara	<i>La Sicilia</i>	1925
Oronzina Quercia Tanzarella	<i>La Calabria</i>	1925
Sebastiano e Rosalia Pirodda	<i>La Sardegna</i>	1925
Berengario Amorosa	<i>L'Abruzzo</i>	1926



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