

TEMA MONOGRÀFIC

---

# Adult education and the struggle against illiteracy in the Italian Mezzogiorno in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

## *L'educació de l'adult i la lluita contra l'analfabetisme al Mezzogiorno Italià a la primera meitat del segle XX*

Brunella Serpe  
brunella.serpe@unical.it  
*University of Calabria (Italy)*

Data de recepció de l'original: setembre de 2019

Data d'acceptació: gener de 2020

### RESUM

Després de la unificació italiana (1861), l'analfabetisme va representar un problema greu que la pobresa econòmica i social, la insuficiència dels edificis escolars i l'escassetat de mestres adequadament qualificats van fer difícil de resoldre. Aquest article analitza les mesures adoptades contra l'analfabetisme al sud d'Itàlia a principis de segle xx. Aquestes mesures van ser aplicades activament per l'estat juntament amb una sèrie d'associacions filantròpiques, inclosa l'Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI). Amb l'anàlisi de les dades sobre l'analfabetisme i els documents continguts en els arxius de l'ANIMI, ha estat possible reconstruir la història de l'educació d'adults, el que va permetre a moltes persones alfabetitzar-se i alliberar-se de la ignorància, especialment quan l'ANIMI i altres associacions van reprendre les seves activitats després de 1945.

PARAULES CLAU: analfabetisme, associacions, Itàlia meridional, història de l'educació, història de l'educació d'adults.

## ABSTRACT

Following Italian unification (1861), illiteracy represented a serious problem which economic and social poverty, the inadequacy of school buildings and a shortage of suitably qualified teachers made difficult to resolve. This paper analyses the measures adopted against illiteracy in Southern Italy in the early twentieth century. These measures were actively pursued by the state together with a number of philanthropic associations including the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (National Association for the Interests of the Italian Mezzogiorno, ANIMI). By analysing data on illiteracy and documents held in the ANIMI archives, it has been possible to reconstruct the history of adult education, which enabled many individuals to become literate and free themselves from ignorance, especially when ANIMI and other associations resumed their activities after 1945.

**KEY WORDS:** illiteracy, associations, Southern Italy, history of education, history of adult education.

## RESUMEN

Después de la unificación italiana (1861), el analfabetismo representó un problema grave que tanto la pobreza económica y social como la insuficiencia de los edificios escolares y la escasez de maestros adecuadamente cualificados hicieron difícil de resolver. Este artículo analiza las medidas adoptadas contra el analfabetismo en el sur de Italia a principios del siglo xx. Estas medidas fueron aplicadas activamente por el Estado junto con una serie de asociaciones filantrópicas, incluida la Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI). Al analizar los datos sobre el analfabetismo y los documentos contenidos en los archivos de la ANIMI, ha sido posible reconstruir la historia de la educación de adultos, lo que permitió a muchas personas alfabetizarse y liberarse de la ignorancia, especialmente cuando la ANIMI y otras asociaciones reanudaron sus actividades después de 1945.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** analfabetismo, asociaciones, Italia meridional, historia de la educación, historia de la educación de adultos.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Following Italian Unification (1861), Royal Decree no. 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, albeit without taking into account 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, governments had been neglectful of schooling and the drive for literacy, partly reflecting the economic and social backwardness that prevailed, particularly in central and southern Italy, where illiteracy was almost universal and many districts had no schools at all. In some areas, in the absence of publicly funded schools, the local parish priest organised classes for those who could not afford to attend private schools, which existed for the purpose of educating the offspring of the bourgeoisie and the ruling classes and preparing them for university. The lack of even a rudimentary school network severely hampered the attempt to extend the Casati Law to all areas of the Kingdom of Italy.

Census data show with great clarity the situation in the various parts of the Kingdom. In 1861 there was substantial illiteracy in the Central and Northern regions (affecting 74% of the school population), but the situation 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 in 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%).

Marking the start of a new attempt to address the issue, investigations were conducted to establish the causes of illiteracy and laws were passed which reaffirmed the principle of compulsory attendance and transferred the management of elementary schools from municipalities to the state. However, all these measures proved to be insufficient, 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 those who had never been to school and lacked even the most basic level of education.

## 2. ILLITERACY IN ITALY

Opening a school in every district of the Kingdom had been a key objective for the ruling classes since unification in 1861. And yet, all attempts, which included 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. The analysis of 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 as to the causes of the problem. He argued that illiteracy and ignorance could never be eliminated without measures designed to resolve economic backwardness, itself a symptom of acute social problems which needed to be tackled without hesitation if illiteracy was to be effectively eliminated.<sup>1</sup>

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 that had emerged from the Inquiry conducted by the 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 through new laws that enabled intervention in support of the public school system. This was supposed to have a presence in every corner of the Kingdom, including through free nursery and elementary schools for young children, but also in the form of winter, evening and Sunday schools to attract and involve adult citizens.<sup>2</sup>

The document, however, failed to recognise the urgency of the situation. Indeed, it stated that compulsory schooling could not be imposed by law, but should rather be seen by 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 in their lives, insufficient to give them anything more than the most rudimentary education, which would need to be consolidated in subsequent years.

1 See the works of VILLARI, Pasquale on illiteracy. *La scuola e la questione sociale in Italia*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1872 (II ed.); id., «Di chi è la colpa? O sia, la pace e la guerra», *Politecnico*, Milano, settembre 1866; id., *Le Lettere meridionali ed altri scritti sulla questione sociale in Italia*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1878.

2 MINISTERO PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE. *Sulle condizioni della pubblica istruzione del Regno d'Italia. Relazione generale presentata al Ministro dal Consiglio superiore di Torino*. Milano: Stamperia Reale, 1865, p. 503.

With Michele Coppino as Minister of Education, the State was committed to tackling the depressing picture that was emerging from the censuses. The law of July 1877 reinforced the principle of compulsory elementary education and established a new Inquiry entrusted to Gerolamo Buonazia, which within a year published data on the real state of the school system across 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. 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 laws regarding attendance had little impact. The Buonazia Inquiry produced a documentary account that is extremely informative on the subject of 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 small number of 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.<sup>3</sup> More serious problems were seen in Central Italy where just under half of children attended 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».<sup>4</sup>

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 which were 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»

3 This was found by the Inquiry to be the case in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia, where a steadily growing number of school-age boys and especially girls were employed in industrial production, mainly in the textile sector. See MINISTERO PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE. *Sull'obbligo della istruzione elementare nel Regno d'Italia. Attuazione della legge 15 luglio 1877*. Roma: Tip. Eredi Botta, 1878, p. 14-16.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 33-35.

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».<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the Inquiry had been to reveal 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».<sup>6</sup>

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 and educational authorities were urged to make the entire community aware of the benefits of a school education. Measures to support teachers, who saw significant improvements in terms of both salaries and qualifications, were also designed to boost elementary education and its quantitative and qualitative development.

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 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, promoted its own markedly more democratic and inclusive programme with regard to the struggle for literacy, compulsory education and technical and vocational training. In this context of new ideas, old fears and legislation whose effect was to promote the construction of schools in wealthier areas, the censuses confirmed once more the sharp differences between regions.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 39-48.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.

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 reform of teachers' legal status enacted by the Minister Nasi in 1903 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) and the Orlando Law of July 1904 entitled *Provvedimenti per la scuola e per i maestri* (Measures for schools and teachers), together with the report by Camillo Corradini on *Istruzione primaria e popolare in Italia* (Primary and popular education in Italy) which followed the Inquiry launched in 1907,<sup>7</sup> showed the seriousness of the state of education in Italy, which could no longer tolerate such poorly organised schooling. Reforms were needed, supported by adequate funds, to enable 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), which was seen as the only way to fight illiteracy, reduce the stark differences between the various parts of the country and build a more solid school system even in its most backward areas.

Following the approval of the Daneo-Credaro Law, the census conducted in 1921<sup>8</sup> showed substantial improvement in all parts of the country, clearly due to the positive effects of the law.

### 3. THE OPERA CONTRO L'ANALFABETISMO

In the 1920s the transfer of elementary schools to state control made it possible to tackle the scourge of illiteracy more decisively 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

7 CORRADINI, Camillo. *Relazione presentata a S. E. il Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione dal Direttore Generale per la istruzione primaria e popolare dott. Camillo Corradini*. Roma: Tip. Operaia Romana Cooperativa, 1910.

8 Data from the Census of 1921 show illiteracy at 19% in the Central and Northern regions and 48% in the South and Islands.

high number of illiterate adults through 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.

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, attendance records and the results attained. However, with decree 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».<sup>9</sup> The four earlier Boards were joined by a further six, each of which was charged with eradicating illiteracy in a precise regional context. Thus one of the most interesting and productive pages in the history of public education and the struggle against illiteracy in Italy came to be written.

9 Article 7 of the *Disposizioni generali e transitorie riguardanti la gestione delle scuole non classificate* (General and transitory norms regulating the management of the unclassified schools) also gave a complete list of the Boards and their regions of reference: the *Società Umanitaria* for Veneto and Venezia Giulia; the *Opera nazionale per l'Italia Redenta* for Venezia Tridentina; the *Gruppo di azione per le scuole del popolo* for Lombardia; the *Gruppo di azione per le scuole rurali* for Piemonte; the *Comitato ligure per l'educazione del popolo* for Liguria; the *Ente nazionale di Cultura* for Toscana and Emilia; the *Scuole per i contadini dell'Agro romano e delle Paludi Pontine* for Lazio, Abruzzi, Umbria and Marche; the *Consorzio nazionale emigrazione e lavoro* for Campania and Molise; the *Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* for Calabria, Basilicata, Sicilia and Sardegna; the *Ente pugliese di cultura* for Puglia.



#### 4. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ILLITERACY AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE INTERESTS OF THE ITALIAN MEZZOGIORNO (1921-1928)

The *Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* (National Association for the Interests of the Italian Mezzogiorno, ANIMI)<sup>10</sup> 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 in the two largest islands, Sardinia and Sicily. These regions were the object of a great many studies and investigations by ANIMI's founders, among whom were Umberto Zanotti Bianco, Giuseppe Isnardi, Leopoldo Franchetti, Giustino Fortunato, Gaetano Salvemini and many other illustrious scholars of the Italian southern question.

The most salient developments in the work of the Association are detailed in documents that record its intense efforts in an unforgiving and impervious region, where many adults had barely been to school at all, since the distance they had to travel to their schools was worsened by the lack of good roads. Almost all of the students «[...] had to arrive by roads in very poor condition, crossing ravines and rivers without bridges of any kind», wrote the Regional Director for Basilicata. «In the long winters of our region [...] with the heavy rain and frequent snow making the country roads impassable and the fords dangerous even for adults, it was not possible for children aged 6 to 12 years to attend these schools».<sup>11</sup>

The Regional Director for Calabria also recorded the complaints of the population. The schools were a long way from the villages and «[...] they took it away from us; they say that those who live near the village, which is beyond the river, have priority. But can our children travel that far every morning and

10 On the history of the Association, see especially SERPE, Brunella. *L'azione educativa dell'ANIMI e la metodologia didattica di Maria Montessori*, CAMBI, Franco; TREBISACCE, Giuseppe (Eds.). *I 150 anni dell'Italia unita. Per un bilancio pedagogico*. Pisa: ETS, 2012, p. 245-260; id., *La Calabria e l'opera dell'ANIMI. Per una storia dell'istruzione in Calabria*. Cosenza: Jonia, 2004.

11 *Basilicata*, Report by the Regional Director Domiziano Viola in ISNARDI, Giuseppe. *Le nostre scuole. L'Opera contro l'analfabetismo in Basilicata, Calabria, Sardegna e Sicilia (1923-24)*. Roma: Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia, 1926, cit., p. 12.

return every evening? And the river? Who can pass it in the winter? It's not fair [...]».<sup>12</sup>

The Regional Director of Eastern Sicily pointed out that movement from one district to another was difficult; it involved crossing «ravines which frankly inspire fear [...] there is no road fit for vehicular traffic, but only a small and poorly maintained track running beside – and sometimes along – the bed of the stream, which then rises steeply towards the village».<sup>13</sup>

These difficulties were compounded by the state of the school buildings, which often had no chairs, desks or blackboards. In many cases the teachers were poorly educated themselves and were often housed in poor-quality lodgings a long way from the school. Working in such a backward context was not easy; each teacher was «alone» and had to do their job «[...] within the narrow confines of the educational and social policies dictated by the state in its instructions to the schools».<sup>14</sup>

These accounts express the spirit of the law against illiteracy, whose objective was to provide an education service suited to the context, age and interests of the people the measures were aimed at. The rural schools for adults were not –and never could have been– conceived as normal schools. Rather, they were specially adapted in terms of their organisation, content and teaching methods. They were not standardised, but differentiated and continuously monitored in order to ensure their effectiveness and respect for the educational needs of illiterate adults. The teachers played a fundamental role, their actions guided by the teaching circulars issued by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, which tackled cultural questions and sought to explain the reasoning underlying the new pedagogical approach that had inspired the Gentile Reform of 1923. Radice's communications also addressed the specific problems and needs of a teaching body which was often young and under-qualified, but eager to engage with the specific characteristics of the task before them: «The advantage of working with those newly minted teachers we had in our schools [...] was that they had free minds and were thus able to

12 *Calabria*, Report by the Regional Director Giuseppe ISNARDI in Isnardi, Giuseppe. *Le nostre scuole...*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

13 *Sicilia Orientale*, Report by the Regional Director Vitale Chialant in ISNARDI, Giuseppe. *Le nostre scuole...*, *op. cit.*, p. 81-82.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

appreciate the value of the content of the new programmes and to put it into practice with the right degree of enthusiasm».<sup>15</sup>

However, the recruitment of the teachers for the day, evening and weekend schools –and the relationship with them– sometimes gave cause for concern. Specifically, it was necessary to find the right teacher for each school, who was able to attract the greatest number of students, instil in them affection for the institution and regain the families' trust. It was also necessary however to «[...] enable the teachers to live near the school or not too far away from it, lest bad weather and poor roads affect the regularity of their presence».<sup>16</sup>

The schools of Basilicata were also affected by the absence or irregular presence of teachers. Here too, families had little confidence in either schools or teachers, who were seen as lacking enthusiasm and commitment to their jobs.<sup>17</sup> The appointment of teachers, who represented the necessary link with the families and inhabitants of the district, was thus extremely important. In many cases however, the teachers were demoralised by the difficulties of living in remote and inhospitable areas and working in squalid, cold and bare classrooms that were not conducive to the task of educating and in many cases even prevented it.

In the 1960s, Luigi Volpicelli spoke of the sacrifice of teachers and pupils forced to attend schools such as those in Calabria<sup>18</sup>. Backed up by images, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria* (The martyrdom of school in Calabria) by Umberto Zanotti Bianco denounced the inadequacy of school buildings, a problem that could only be resolved by state intervention. The work urged the state to stop «hiding behind the labyrinthine legal system»,<sup>19</sup> which prevented the poorest municipalities from benefiting from the educational reforms.

The reports of subsequent years continued to show the positive results of the measures against illiteracy. Analysing the Association's educational and managerial activities under its mandate to eradicate illiteracy from October 1921 to September 1928, Giuseppe Isnardi states that aside from the statistics and the results, the struggle against ignorance was «one of the most important initiatives –and perhaps the most fortunate– of the Italian school system,

15 *Basilicata*, Report..., *op.cit.*, p. 18.

16 *Calabria*, Report ..., *op.cit.*, p. 30.

17 *Basilicata*, Report ..., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

18 VOLPICELLI, Luigi. *Dopo l'analfabetismo...* *op.cit.* p. 54-58.

19 ZANOTTI BIANCO, Umberto. *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1925, p. 9-15.

one which truly showed its potential strengths, which only needed to be prompted, revealed and lovingly guided».<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, Fascism, which by then had degenerated into a dictatorship, sought to influence and interfere with every move of the Association and, its staff, their work and the life of the schools themselves. «The situation had become unsustainable» according to Isnardi «even in our isolated provincial context, not so much with the school authorities (who, it must be said, were always understanding and benevolent with us, even in moments of grave difficulty) as with the civil powers and “local politics”. [...] On 1 October 1928, the mandate for the four regions in which the Association had operated passed to the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*. [...] I remember my last visits [...] to some schools that I had become particularly fond of. [...] through tears I looked, for one last time, at the places that for almost eight years I had so joyfully frequented, where everybody worked together so confidently. No, not all of that labour could be said to be lost!».<sup>21</sup>

After seven years of intense efforts, the Association's work was ended due to incompatibility with the new political order. The entire school system and indeed the whole of Italian society were by then fully in the grip of Fascist totalitarianism and irreversibly politicised. Abandoning the work they had started in order to avoid being overwhelmed, and following the situation from afar having handed over the reins to trusted staff, was for the members of the Association the lesser evil and the most intelligent way to protect what they had started.

The correspondence and meetings of the members of the Association allow us to reconstruct the moment when they relinquished their mandate, which had been mooted since 1925. In the face of the gradual reduction in their freedom act, their determination to not give in to regime pressure meant that there was no room for compromise.

20 ISNARDI, Giuseppe. «L'attività educativa scolastica dell'Associazione», in *L'Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi Nazionali del Mezzogiorno d'Italia nei suoi primi cinquant'anni di vita*. Roma: Collezione Meridionale Editrice, 1960, p. 214. On the numbers of schools, students enrolled, students taking and passing exams in the regions where ANIMI worked (1921-1928), see the «Appendice alla Parte III» of *L'Associazione Nazionale...*, *op. cit.*, p. 272-274.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 250-251.

## 5. THE ADVENT OF FASCISM AND THE INTERRUPTION OF AN EXPERIENCE

The order of the day entitled *Comunicazioni urgenti e deliberazioni circa la delega dell'Opera contro l'Analfabetismo* (Urgent communications and deliberations regarding the mandate of the Anti-illiteracy Board), adopted by the meeting of the Association on 9 August 1925, represents the first recorded complaint about the interference of the Fascist government and its powerful surveillance apparatus, in defence of the autonomy of the Board's mandate. In this order of the day<sup>22</sup> and a further note,<sup>23</sup> the Association rejected the possibility of it relinquishing its apolitical character. It also stressed the importance of defending its own and its teachers' independence and freedom of action in the struggle against illiteracy, declaring that the work of educators could not be subject to interference and impositions.

The uncompromising stance of the members of the Association also explains the regime's attempts to undermine its work through repeated attacks on the schools managed by ANIMI. However, the reports of the ministerial inspectors speak of well-organised schools, showing the baselessness of the criticisms advanced by certain local elements with their own political agenda.<sup>24</sup>

The mandate was formally relinquished in March 1928 in response to a ministerial circular announcing the reorganisation in line with Fascist values of the unclassified rural schools, which were now required to set up local branches of the *Balilla* and *Giovani Italiane* Fascist youth groups. All the Boards had to make «earnest and unconditional efforts to ensure the full implementation of the directives issued in this regard by His Excellency the Minister, in obedience to the precise will of the Duce».<sup>25</sup>

The Association then informed the Minister and the Directors General of its decision to terminate the mandate, to the disbelief and sorrow of all the teachers.<sup>26</sup> The Ministry reacted by transferring the mandate to other Boards, including the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* for Calabria and Sicily, the *Ente di Cultura e di educazione della Sardegna* for Sardinia and the *Ente Pugliese di cultura* for Basilicata, as detailed in the circular received by ANIMI.<sup>27</sup> The

22 See the order of the day, reproduced in full in *L'Associazione Nazionale...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52-53.

23 Note of 9 August 1925, ANIMI Archive, Roma.

24 ZANOTTI BIANCO, Umberto. *op. cit.*, p. 55-58.

25 An excerpt of the ministerial circular is given in ZANOTTI BIANCO, Umberto. *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

27 Circular issued by the Ministry of Education, *Ufficio Speciale per le Scuole Sclassificate e la Vigilanza*

news of the transfer of the rural schools to the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) was highlighted in the Bulletin published by the ONB, which reassured the teachers of its great appreciation for their spirit of sacrifice, abnegation and the loyalty they had always shown.<sup>28</sup>

Another article set out the new goals of the rural schools, which contrasted sharply with those of the measures instituted in 1921. The priority now was not to familiarise the young with the alphabet, but to educate them to «consider the broad horizon of the nation's needs [...], to feel the heartbeat of the ideals of Fascism, to desire the greatness of the nation, to yearn for glory, to have the soul of a warrior [...]. These will be schools of individual differentiation, of subordination, of Fascist discipline, of social education, but they will also be schools of labour. And the pupils [...] will love the life of the fields, which until recently they abandoned for the life of the city purely out of a need for human contact, because they felt the pulse of the nation in the city. By bringing the nation back to the countryside, these schools will stem the exodus of peasant farmers and will obtain the longed-for ruralisation of the country».<sup>29</sup>

The article's conclusion was dedicated to the teachers, who were urged to support the new direction, to see the greatness of the project, to adopt a heroic pedagogy, to prize the most humble and most profound elements of society, on which national life would be constructed. «Their school contrasts with the city school in terms of the age and number of the pupils, equipment and method. Their school, with three classes combined, often lacking in resources, will be the gymnasium of industrious necessity and of the brotherhood that soothes all poverty».<sup>30</sup>

These words explain why ANIMI could not be part of such a project, whose aims were total control, manipulation, conformity and regimentation, demonstrating once again its profound sense of freedom and indispensable independence.

*sugli Enti Culturali Delegati* on 3 July 1928 (Year VI of the Fascist era).

28 RICCI, Renato. «Agli Insegnanti delle Scuole Rurali dell'Opera Nazionale Balilla!», *Bollettino Quindicinale Dell'Opera Nazionale Balilla*, anno II, 15 ottobre 1928 (Year VI of the Fascist era), p. 4.

29 «Le 1200 Scuole Rurali assunte dall'Opera Nazionale Balilla», *Bollettino...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 6.