

TEMA MONOGRÀFIC

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Maria Montessori's training in Rome:  
anthropological studies and aspirations  
for social reform

*La formació de Maria Montessori a Roma:  
estudis antropològics i aspiracions  
a la reforma social*

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RESUM

Maria Montessori es va llicenciar en medicina a la Universitat de Roma i posteriorment va participar en la investigació amb erudits romans d'antropologia mèdica, alguns dels quals eren els principals exponents del món científic i cultural italià. Giuseppe Sergi, en particular, va estar molt present en el debat públic nacional sobre alguns dels principals problemes de la societat italiana: les causes i les conseqüències de la pobresa i l'analfabetisme i la necessitat d'un sistema educatiu més eficaç.

Les idees de Sergi i altres científics (C. Bonfigli, S. De Sanctis, N. D'Alfonso) sobre aquests problemes van influir en Maria Montessori. La jove doctora va ser inspirada i animada pel mateix Sergi a dirigir les seves activitats i investigacions en el camp de la cura i l'educació infantil. L'antropologia mèdica va ser, per tant, un element

essencial en la formació de la jove Montessori i també en la gènesi de la seva pedagogia, així com del mètode. L'ensenyament a l'Institut femení del Magisteri de Roma va ser una oportunitat per desenvolupar una "antropologia pedagògica" rellevant per al seu creixement científic, fins al punt que la mateixa Maria Montessori la va superar i abandonar durant el procés de maduració del seu pensament.

PARAULES CLAU: Montessori, Antropologia Mèdica, Positivisme, Nens amb retard mental, Instituts d'Ensenyament.

## ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori graduated in medicine from the University of Rome and subsequently took part in the research activities of Roman medical anthropology scholars, some of whom were leading exponents in Italian science and culture. Giuseppe Sergi was a major figure in the national public debate regarding some of the main concerns in Italian society, focusing on the causes and consequences of poverty and illiteracy, and the need for a more effective education system.

The ideas of Sergi and other scholars (C. Bonfigli, S. De Sanctis, N. D'Alfonso) regarding these problems influenced Maria Montessori. Indeed, she was inspired and encouraged by Sergi himself to direct her activities and research to the field of childcare and education. Medical anthropology was therefore an essential element in the formation of the young Montessori, and the genesis of her pedagogy and method. Teaching at the Institute of Education for Women in Rome represented an opportunity to develop a relevant "pedagogical anthropology" for her scientific evolution, even though Maria Montessori herself would later leave it behind.

KEYWORDS: Montessori, Medical Anthropology, Positivism, children with learning disabilities, Teaching Institutes.

## RESUMEN

María Montessori se graduó en medicina por la Universidad de Roma y posteriormente participó en la investigación con eruditos romanos de antropología médica, algunos de los cuales fueron exponentes distinguidos del mundo científico y cultural italiano. Giuseppe Sergi, en particular, estuvo muy presente en el debate público nacional sobre algunos de los principales problemas de la sociedad italiana, las causas y

consecuencias de la pobreza y el analfabetismo y la necesidad de un sistema educativo más eficaz.

Las ideas de Sergi y otros investigadores (C. Bonfigli, S. De Sanctis, N. D'Alfonso) sobre estos problemas influyeron en María Montessori y, por otro lado, la joven doctora se inspiró y fue animada por el propio Sergi para dirigir sus actividades e investigación en el campo del cuidado infantil y la educación. La antropología médica fue, por tanto, un elemento esencial en la formación de la joven Montessori y también en la génesis de su pedagogía, así como del método. La enseñanza en el Instituto femenino del Magisterio de Roma fue una oportunidad para desarrollar una "antropología pedagógica" relevante para su crecimiento científico, aunque la misma María Montessori la superó y abandonó durante el proceso de la maduración de su pensamiento.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Montessori, Antropología médica, Positivismo, Niños con retraso mental, Institutos de enseñanza.

## I. THE ROMAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCHOOL

The life of Maria Montessori is now widely known thanks to multiple studies that have looked at its different stages: from her early youth studying medicine and initial research in medical anthropology, to her long mature period identified with her work in spreading her original teaching method around the world. The most important studies are also characterised by a certain disparity of views and judgements regarding Montessori's life and ideas, which emerge when contrasting her first biography—with its near "hagiographic" tone—by E. M. Standing,<sup>1</sup> with the highly and rigorously documented work by R. Kramer<sup>2</sup> (still, perhaps, the best) and recent critical studies by M. Schwegman<sup>3</sup> and H. Leenders.<sup>4</sup> Maria Montessori's formative years up to her first research and teaching activities remain aspects that still require in-depth analysis.

<sup>1</sup> STANDING, Edwin M. *Maria Montessori. Her Life and Work*. New York: Plume, 1984 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1957).

<sup>2</sup> KRAMER, Rita. *Maria Montessori. A Biography*. New York: Addison Wesley, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> SCHWEGMAN, Marjan. *Maria Montessori 1870-1952*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> LEENDERS, Helene, *Der Fall Montessori*. Bad Heilbrunn, Klinkhardt.

One of the purposes of this essay is to look at Maria Montessori's lecturers from her university studies and early research activities, with a view to comprehending the extent of the pedagogical interest in the work of these scholars. Maria Montessori was greatly influenced by some of them, such as Giuseppe Sergi, given their interest in educational problems in the context of a new sensitivity towards the social question at the time. This interest is anything but negligible in the work of scholars such as Sergi, who devoted a large part of his work to periodically but systematically studying education and schooling issues in post-unification Italy.

During her years of medical training, Maria Montessori was mainly interested in medical anthropology research, under the guidance of scholars who nurtured these fields at the University of Rome. Anthropology was a main science within the positivist culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with some leading Italian exponents: Cesare Lombroso was perhaps the best-known, even outside researcher circles, with his works being translated into many languages and reprinted several times;<sup>5</sup> however, in addition to Lombroso (whose own investigations had the merit of requiring a more nuanced consideration of mental distress and social phenomena, especially crime and delinquency) other scholars in Italy gained wide international recognition. Albeit less widely known than his contemporary Lombroso, the name of Giuseppe Sergi stands out as no less deserving of a more careful historical consideration, since he could easily be deemed the leading light of anthropological research at the University of Rome.

Certainly, the vast field of anthropological research conducted in Italy and Europe between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries pertains to the history of medicine and psychology, rather than education and pedagogy. Nevertheless, the work of Sergi and other leading exponents of Roman anthropology (e.g. Bonfigli, Montesano, De Sanctis and Maria Montessori herself, who maintained deep ties with this group of scholars after her graduation and during her first independent research) is of primary importance in the specific field of education and pedagogy. Indeed, one of the prevailing focal points in their scientific research, namely the so-called "degeneration of the race" in both physical and psychological approaches, led to a series of consequences in the field and on how education was conceived.

<sup>5</sup> LOMBROSO, Cesare. *Luomo delinquente*. Milan: Hoepli, 1876; *Genio e follia*. Milan: G. Chiusi, 1864; *Le più recenti scoperte della psichiatria ed antropologia criminale*. Turin: Bocca, 1897.

In particular, and unlike their contemporaries, Roman anthropologists had clearly indicated and underlined the importance of what they termed the “social factors of madness” since the 1880s, recognising that remedies could emerge more from prevention rather than clinical treatment.

In light of this, and shaped and strengthened by their scientific work and the political choices of some (e.g. Sergi had an affinity with radicalism and even socialism, although he did not belong to any party; Bonfigli, who was a member of parliament, gave speeches in favour of social reforms, etc.), education clearly caught the attention of anthropologists, who made pronouncements on the topic several times, in addition to maintaining contact and relationships with like-minded pedagogues.

This group of scholars perceived education as the instrument of “cultural” transmission within advanced societies. In their view, “culture” meant a vast set of values, traditions and practices that embraced not only literature, science, art and the specific purpose of schooling, but also an entire set of characteristics that make up individual and collective “character” (indeed, a supposed typical, specific character of peoples is a major element in anthropology from the era). The notion of character also included mental “sanity”, the absence of pathological elements, and personality and behavioural disorders, in line with a psychiatric approach that did not yet sufficiently distinguish the field of psychopathology from the various forms of social distress and divergence.<sup>6</sup>

Even from a naturalistic standpoint, what prominently emerged from this concept of man and education was a balanced and realistic vision of the relationship between hereditary and environmental factors at play in individuals’ psychological development (apart from the substantially unscientific extrapolations of a sociological and ethnological character). Unlike their contemporaries, the Roman anthropologists emphasised the value of environmental factors in the development of mental pathologies and “degenerations”, with a view of man that could perhaps legitimately be compared to a type of *sui generis* functionalism.

In this sense, they recognised the need to focus attention on education and schooling as factors of social growth, at an historical moment where Italy was undergoing development leading to profound transformations in society and noticeable inequalities (between industrial cities and the countryside, between northern and southern Italy, etc.). Sergi became ever more aware of

<sup>6</sup> SERGI, Giuseppe. *Per l'educazione del carattere*. Milan: Dumolard, 1893.

the breadth of the social question and the entailing risks of its persistence for the peaceful coexistence between social classes.<sup>7</sup>

Despite certain contradictions linked to the high-ranking origins of these scholars, their work led them to recommend social reform measures in the name of justice and progress, and to avoid the spread of class conflict. During the Giolittian era in particular, they played a notable role in directing at least a section of public opinion towards change, with schools being deemed crucial for the progress of the entire nation, as well as for the construction of a better society.

These topics are especially present in the work of Giuseppe Sergi, who was more active than other anthropologists working in Rome over the long span of his scientific career (from around 1870 to the start of the 1930s) in the debate surrounding the most important social issues of the time. Sergi repeatedly proposed views that were clearly open to new demands from, for example, the feminist movement and, in the 1910s, from the pacifist movement, which he fully embraced and led to him reconsidering certain fundamental ideas in his writings.

## 2. ROMAN ANTHROPOLOGY: FROM GIUSEPPE SERGI AND CLDOMIRO BONFIGLI TO SANTE DE SANCTIS

According to Sergi, the conclusions reached by experimental science justified a strong demand for social justice in several directions<sup>8</sup>: it was fundamentally necessary to improve the living conditions of the lower classes, both regarding material aspects (wages, working hours, child and female labour) and cultural elements (sustaining a widespread and merit-based access to schools across all levels, the propagation of culture through adult schools and libraries, etc.). He recognised the need to acknowledge the social function of women, and their work inside and outside the home (nonetheless, the anatomic-physiological “weaknesses” of women remains present in his work).

In turn, a peaceful evolution in the relationship between different peoples was also required, it being the only way for humanity to develop: despite the evolution from primitive barbarism to the peak of culture and intellect, social

<sup>7</sup> See: MARHABA, Sadi. *Lineamenti della psicologia italiana 1870-1945*. Florence: Giunti, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> CICCIOLO, Elisabetta; FOSCHI, Renato. “Giuseppe Sergi tra pensiero positivista e impegno politico”, *Physis*, LVII, n. 1-2 (2017), p. 169-192.

contradictions remained to be resolved, preventing general access for all to the product of the human spirit and basic needs going unmet. This inherently undermined further progress of humankind and, perhaps, threatened its very survival.

As Giacomo Cives highlighted in his studies on Maria Montessori, the work of Roman anthropologists finds a pedagogical reference and meaning mainly in the “inspiration” (so to speak) that Maria Montessori drew from it to develop her method and, earlier on, to include elements of social and educational renewal in her work immediately after graduating in medicine.<sup>9</sup>

The first phase of Maria Montessori’s approach can be defined as “anthropological”. Indeed, she even taught in the discipline, in combination with health and hygiene, at several institutions in Rome: the Faculty of Medicine from where she graduated, the Orthophrenic School (Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica) and the Institute of Education for Women (Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero).<sup>10</sup> As Montessori publicly acknowledged, Sergi suggested she look more in-depth at educational issues from an anthropological standpoint. In turn, Montessori herself felt the need to “pedagogically” orient her work, with the original proposal of “pedagogical” anthropology, as she named her early main work. Following on from the reflections of her mentor Sergi, Montessori was able to construct her own pedagogy around the idea of this new pedagogical anthropology. Her “pedagogical anthropology” manual actually has certain continuity connotations (regardless of the numerous and largely “dated” sections that are full of anatomical measurements typical to anthropology from the period) with her most famous work dedicated to the “method of scientific pedagogy”; although here the references to anthropology are already weaker, the book does reaffirm an essential tenet seen in Sergi’s own work that pedagogy and teaching should be based on scientific observation of the child. The search for useful methods and tools for this observation would, in the space of a few years (the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), lead to a substantial departure from anthropology for Maria Montessori towards her new “worldwide”

<sup>9</sup> CIVES, Giacomo. *Maria Montessori pedagogista complessa*. Pisa: ETS, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> The first was a school for the preparation of “orthophrenic teachers”, i.e. teachers for “special” (so-called “differential”) schools and classes for children with of personality, behavioural and intellectual “defects”. The second was the women’s “college” to train teachers for “normal” schools and heads of primary schools. The school and university reforms of the 1920s and 30s transformed these institutions into university faculties and programmes.

perspective as the founder of “children’s houses”, incorporating cultural trends that differed from her original positivistic matrix.

The Roman anthropological school therefore represents a pedagogically important scientific trend for two reasons: on the one hand, for the intrinsic consistency of its sensitivity towards education problems in view of social progress and on the other, for its unquestionably strong influence on one of the greatest educators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936), one of the top Roman anthropologists between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was an important organiser of scientific and educational institutions, as well as a recognised and valued scientist even outside Italy. His pedagogical interest is organically incorporated into his sincere passion for the social question. From an historical viewpoint of pedagogical ideas, his frank Darwinian evolutionism is hugely interesting and he tenaciously defended it until his death in the 1930s, a time when his voice no longer exerted significant influence due to the dominance of neo-idealism in Italy. Within this evolutionary vision—which would remain a theoretical framework for all anthropologists for a long time—Sergi developed the idea of education that conformed to the natural development of the child, where scientific pedagogy based on the observation of children was required. In the light of these foundations, Sergi strongly criticised the pedagogy of the era, at times quite clearly praising figures such as Froebel and his method, which greatly influenced Maria Montessori herself.<sup>11</sup>

Clodomiro Bonfigli (1838-1919) was another outstanding figure: a politician, as well as a scientist, he was the author of a short report on the “social factors of madness”, which marked an important point in the history of Italian psychiatry and had a meaningful influence in the field of pedagogy.<sup>12</sup> Bonfigli identifies a series of educational issues underlying psychiatric work itself and suggests the development of pedagogy as a science in line with a type of “active school” guidelines that would find favour over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bonfigli’s studies on the social factors of madness are significant in the vast and, at the time, highly influential work of spreading new ideas on humankind and society introduced by “progressive” scientists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His booklet aroused considerable interest in Italy not only

<sup>11</sup> SERGI, Giuseppe. *Educazione ed istruzione. Pensieri*. Milan: Trevisini, 1892.

<sup>12</sup> BONFIGLI, Clodomiro. *Dei fattori sociali della pazzia in rapporto con l’educazione infantile*. Rome: Tipografia delle Mantellate, 1894. Bonfigli was the founder of the Lega Nazionale per la Protezione dei Fanciulli Deficienti (1904).

among professionals (psychiatrists, doctors, etc.), but also with the public; in particular, his fundamental thesis that education was the basis of any intervention for preventing many mental illnesses—thanks to the modernity of its formulations—succeeded in strengthening a bridge between the world of scientific research and education and social reforms.

Sante De Sanctis (1862-1935), younger than Sergi and Bonfigli, is considered as one of the founders of child neuropsychiatry in Italy. He was also important due to his participation in educational and scientific activities, promoted by Sergi and supported by other Roman anthropologists (primarily, the aforementioned Orthophrenic School), and the improvements he personally made to the educational activities of physically and mentally “handicapped” children, in the wake of an interest shared by many members of the Roman school of anthropology. In his lectures on “educational psychology” given to students at the Orthophrenic School, he professed an evolutionary approach that was typical of the entire Roman school.<sup>13</sup>

De Sanctis is the main representative of the “second generation” of the Roman school of anthropology. He acquired considerable renown abroad, perhaps even more so than the recognition previously attributed to the head of the school, Sergi. De Sanctis sensed that psychopathology, in particular the study of so-called “mental retardation”, would open up great prospects for research in view of a better understanding of the entire human psyche. In this conviction, he promoted the establishment of “kindergartens” for children with learning disabilities which, in collaboration with the main public welfare institutions in Rome, undertook vast and pioneering activities.

De Sanctis shared an important commitment with Montessori for several years: they both taught at the Orthophrenic School in Rome (the institution mentioned above that trained teachers for special schools for “mentally deficient” people). De Sanctis gave lessons in “pedagogical psychology”, a decidedly unusual term in the academic nomenclature of the time.

His lessons at the school offer a highly incisive and effective perspective on education, particularly characterised by the introduction of foreign studies just then beginning to circulate in Italy. A large part of the pedagogical psychology lessons given by De Sanctis comprised the schematic presentation of the content of the Italian translation of a minor work by William James,

<sup>13</sup> DE SANCTIS, Sante. *Lezioni di psicologia pedagogica*. Roma: Castellani, 1913. This book is a collection of De Sanctis' lessons compiled by his assistants.

*Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals.*<sup>14</sup> James had reached a peak of fame and scientific prestige with his famous *Principles of Psychology*, and demonstrated the usefulness of a “naturalistic” study of the human mind. His courses systematically presented the effects of the main psychological achievements on teaching.

In a break from the traditional approaches of Roman anthropology, and through his continuous references to James' lessons, De Sanctis expressed an intent as far back as the 1910s to broaden the reference framework of his scientific research by incorporating the functionalistic perspective pioneered by James—whose work greatly influenced psychologists and educators when independently applied to their own disciplines—and to organically organise a panorama of already broad and differentiated research at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Called upon to illustrate what could be rightly defined as a forerunner to the teaching of developmental psychology, De Sanctis proposed an American author (who had recently been translated into Italian) to his students, in a clearly avant-garde cultural operation: the reception in Italy of functionalist and pragmatistic thinking, seen as an alternative to dry positivism, without yielding to the temptations of spiritualistic and anti-positivistic currents.

We should also highlight Giuseppe Montesano, the “founder” of psycho-pedagogical research on “handicapped” children in Italy. His intense sentimental bond with the young Montessori, and subsequent break-up after the birth of their son, Mario, played an important role in the progressive distancing of Maria Montessori from the circle of Roman anthropologists. Montesano devoted himself almost entirely to the specific field of research into the multiple forms of childhood physical and mental disadvantage, in accordance with an holistic approach to their education. This is demonstrated in the lessons that Montesano gave for years at the Orthophrenic School in Rome, which essentially covered the “differential” diagnosis of disabilities and aimed to provide future educators and teachers with useful ideas for teamwork with medical practitioners.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> JAMES, William. *Gli ideali della vita. Discorsi ai giovani e discorsi ai maestri sulla psicologia*. Turin: Bocca, 1906.

<sup>15</sup> DI POPI, Bruno. *L'educazione dei minori “anormali” nell'opera di Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano*. Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2008.

## 3. THE YOUNG MONTESSORI FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO EDUCATION

A great deal has been written about Maria Montessori and there is little need to re-tread the different maturation stages of her philosophy.<sup>16</sup> The bond that tied Sergi and other anthropologists to her was a main element in her development and, in turn, she herself contributed to the Roman school of anthropology through her studies on “pedagogical anthropology”.<sup>17</sup>

Maria Montessori was one of the first Italian women to graduate in medicine. She attracted the attention of her teachers, who wished to involve her in their research activities after graduation, offering different opportunities to continue her studies. Thanks to these experiences, she achieved a certain renown and not merely in the scientific field; indeed, she participated in certain major international conferences, such as the women's and pedagogical congresses of 1898, which were among some the most significant experiences in her youth.<sup>18</sup>

For many years Montessori's activity was concentrated in Rome, studying “abnormal” children and how to educate them. During this initial work stage, Montessori came to discover methods devised by Itard and Séguin that would prove crucial for her to develop her own method; in fact, in the early years of its implementation, her method was considered by many to be equivalent to the approach developed by the two French doctors.

During this activity period—which would culminate in the foundation of the first “children's house” in Rome—Maria Montessori also taught university courses, obtaining a “libera docenza” at the Faculty of Medicine,<sup>19</sup> as well as hygiene and anthropology at the Istituto Superiore Femminile di Magistero in Rome, and at the aforementioned Orthophrenic School.

She considered Sergi to be one of her main guides and publicly thanked him for his help in directing her studies towards education issues. Thanks to Sergi, Montessori deeply internalised the positivistic culture of Roman anthropology, even though the groundwork for this influence was laid by the reflections of a relative of her mother, Abbot Antonio Stoppani, a well-known

<sup>16</sup> CATARSI, ENZO. *La giovane Montessori. Dal femminismo scientifico alla scoperta del bambino*. Turin: Il Leone Verde, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> PESCI, FURIO. *Antropologia e pedagogia a Roma da Giuseppe Sergi a Maria Montessori*. Rome: Aracne, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> KRAMER, RITA. *Maria Montessori. A Biography*. Op cit., p. 19-105.

<sup>19</sup> The “libera docenza” was permission for non-faculty members to teach, albeit only complementary and non-compulsory courses.

Catholic scientist in Italy who, a few decades earlier, had attempted to instil a primary need for contemporary culture as part of a possible reconciliation between religious faith and scientific research.<sup>20</sup> The strong religious notes in some later works by Maria Montessori, as well as her personal approach to the religious beliefs professed in the countries she visited during her continuous travels around the world, are better understandable when the influence exerted on her by the prevalent values of her own family is considered.

The first stage in Montessori's thought and work was, in any event, clearly marked by the experimental research she undertook in a positivistic, epistemological and methodological context. The lessons she gave at the Institute of Education are among the most organic and fundamental documents in her work. Her texts from this period clearly incorporate the interest of the Roman school of anthropology in education problems with explicit reference to Sergi himself, who had entrusted Montessori with the specific task of specialising in the application of anthropological methods to school activities, mainly in the care of "mentally deficient" children (*frenastenici*), subsequently extending her experiences to "normal" children too.

Montessori, in the course of her study on childhood psychology and "abnormalities", came to formulate her own line of research, essentially comprising the recognition of a "pedagogical" anthropology (alongside other specifications that anthropology had taken on, particularly through Cesare Lombroso's "criminal anthropology" and the work of scholars such as De Giovanni and Ferri) interested in analysing individual and typological variations in children's mental development and, at the same time, the introduction of teaching methods and forms of scientific assessment in order to optimise the performance and skills of primary school pupils.

Montessori's pedagogical anthropology lessons, now forgotten and not reprinted since their first edition, constitute the starting point of her subsequent pedagogical reflection. The manual that contains them runs to four-hundred large-format pages, filled with statistics tables on anatomical measurements of various parts of the body during childhood, in particular the skull.<sup>21</sup> These sections are clearly dated and rightly negligible. Nevertheless,

<sup>20</sup> STOPPANI, Antonio. *Il dogma e le scienze positive ossia, La missione apologetica del clero nel moderno conflitto tra la ragione e la fede*. Milan: Dumolard, 1884.

<sup>21</sup> MONTESSORI, Maria. *Antropologia pedagogica*. Milan: Vallardi (the year of publication is not indicated in the title page, but is probably 1910). This book was also translated and published by Araluze in

the book contains numerous indications, reflections and insights that still deserve to be read today given their historical interest as the main documents of Montessori's initial working stage.

Montessori met Niccolò D'Alfonso—a full professor of education—at the Institute of Education. D'Alfonso taught a type of philosophy of education fundamentally based on his idea that it was possible to reconcile the two great 19<sup>th</sup> century approaches: idealism and positivism. Like Montessori, D'Alfonso was also a doctor; he taught in the Institute of Education continually from 1890 to 1923, when he was forced into early retirement by the minister Giovanni Gentile who held no regard for him and wanted to give the teaching position to his own pupil, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice.<sup>22</sup>

D'Alfonso was not highly regarded. Indeed, it is helpful to recall the judgement of Luigi Credaro, professor of education at “La Sapienza” University and a prominent voice in Italian culture at the time, who had chaired the ministerial commission that evaluated D'Alfonso for advancement to full professorship. Credaro's opinion is substantially positive with regard to the candidate's industriousness and it was for this reason that the commission finally approved the final proposal to promote D'Alfonso's advancement. Nonetheless, Credaro's assessment of D'Alfonso's pedagogical perspective is sharply critical, stating that D'Alfonso failed to provide any historical or philosophical evidence in support of his views, and that he was an “independent and solitary” scholar. In my opinion, this definition is highly useful in characterising D'Alfonso's status: it is interesting that his pedagogy was organically grafted onto the foundations of medical anthropology and hygiene, taking an interest in everything that affects human bodily growth; indeed, nutritional theory was the first topic of his pedagogical teaching. For D'Alfonso, pedagogy was the convergence of all the sciences aimed at the physical and spiritual wellbeing of humankind, even if Credaro observed that D'Alfonso's “serene, empirical conviction” was not founded on a “broad basis of experimental doctrine and philosophical speculation”.<sup>23</sup>

Credaro's perplexities were those of a scholar with a strong philosophical background, who was highly engaged in the political life of his era. Soon after

Barcelona some years later.

<sup>22</sup> D'ALFONSO, Francesco. *L'onesto solitario. Vita e opere del filosofo Nicolò D'Alfonso*. Reggio Calabria: Città del Sole, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> D'ALFONSO, Niccolò. *Sommario delle lezioni di pedagogia generale. L'educazione come economia*, Rome: Loescher, 1912.

D'Alfonso's assessment, Credaro became minister for public education and his political work led to a major reform: Italian primary schools fell under direct administration of the state, leading to greatly improved working conditions for teachers and teaching quality.<sup>24</sup> A figure such as Credaro found it difficult to appreciate a pedagogue with medical training but lacking a philosophical background, moreover one so little known in the cultural world of the time as D'Alfonso was. In any event, D'Alfonso's importance in the context of this study lies in the fact that Maria Montessori, when given the task of teaching anthropology and hygiene in the Institute of Education in Rome, collaborated with him, especially in examinations for their respective subjects, as well as finals.

#### 4. MARIA MONTESSORI AT THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION FOR WOMEN IN ROME

Montessori's entry into the Institute of Education for Women at the beginning of 1900 was decided by the minister Guido Baccelli (also a renowned doctor, as well as a politician) and can be considered the first major position taken by Maria Montessori, at the age of thirty. Above all, she could now attain a level of economic stability that she had never before experienced. The teaching staff at the institute, however, opposed her appointment. At the request of the minister himself to assess the candidate's qualifications, the institute responded by leaving all decisions up to the minister, failing to acknowledge the curriculum and documents submitted by Maria Montessori or a positive opinion on her position. It is significant that Clodomiro Bonfigli agreed with the minister and insisted on assigning the post to Maria Montessori. In turn, it is also interesting to recall the considerations that the board expressed about Maria Montessori, merely appreciating the assiduity and diligence of the young doctor as a student, as well as her aptitude for the medical profession, without deciding on the merit of her jointly authored publications not related to hygiene education. The council unanimously recognised that the only submitted document that mattered was the certificate of a "distinguished degree in medicine and surgery". In the absence of other teaching candidates, the council decided to leave to things to the minister's discretion as to whether or not a degree in medicine and

<sup>24</sup> CREDARO, Luigi. *La pedagogia di G.F. Herbart*. Turin: Paravia, 1902.

surgery was a sufficient qualification to teach hygiene and anthropology at a higher education institution—a particularly harsh judgement probably due to jealousy of the young scholar among older teachers who were little inclined to innovation and, in large part, linked to the spiritualistic culture of the Risorgimento that had inspired the previous generation of Italian intellectuals (the poet Giovanni Prati had been the first dean of the institute in 1872). Nevertheless, Maria Montessori was indeed appointed shortly afterwards as a lecturer and began her courses (the previous lecturer had died a few months earlier).<sup>25</sup>

The combined teaching of hygiene and anthropology was based on the aims of an anthropological-pedagogical project, in line with a hygienic-sanitary approach that easily represented a “prophylactic” and preventive proposal for “degenerations” and diseases that science of the time feared would spread, especially among the lower classes.

In outlining the fundamental characteristics of her teaching, Montessori stressed the need to make a distinction between common hygiene and the new science-based pedagogical hygiene—indispensable not only in the treatment of “deficient” children, but also in prevention and general public health. She considered this teaching approach to be better suited to a woman who could delicately deal with topics that particularly concerned women as mothers and educators.

Montessori’s argument followed two main lines: on the one hand, it highlighted the social purpose of the work of the hygienist/anthropologist in the education field and, on the other, emphasised the need to improve the cultural and professional training of teachers, particularly women.

The project behind Maria Montessori’s course illustrated the lines of teaching anthropology aimed not only at transmitting knowledge, but also at having a direct impact on social reforms. In the letter requesting confirmation of her teaching role at the end of her third year of practice, Maria Montessori wrote that she interpreted her own “mission” by steering teaching toward family and social education that would give women not only skills in hygienic culture, but also awareness of their great mission in safeguarding family health and as a contribution to social prevention, making her teaching pleasant and practical with many trips to visit the main hygienic institutions in Rome and the surrounding area.

<sup>25</sup> PESCI, Furio. *Pedagogia capitolina. L'insegnamento della pedagogia nel Magistero di Roma dal 1872 al 1955*. Parma: Ricerche Pedagogiche, 1994, p. 44-46.

Anthropology was explicitly defined as a “complement of positive science to pedagogy”, introducing students to the individual anthropological and physiological study of children and recognising weak or “abnormal” students in need of “special pedagogical hygiene”. The same letter points out the concurrent training activity she undertook with students at the Orthophrenic School, defined as a “school of positive pedagogy”, so much so that Montessori intended to establish a hygiene and pedagogical anthropology office in the Institute of Teaching itself.

Teaching at the Institute of Education in Rome was one of Montessori’s principal commitments in the years preceding the foundation of the first children’s house. After opening the first children’s houses in Rome and their rapid spread around Italy and abroad, Montessori began to reduce her teaching activity. In 1913, she was assigned to the ministry to “develop and supervise the application of her method in the schools of Rome” and, within a few years, this activity became incompatible with her teaching duties, which finally came to an end in 1919.<sup>26</sup>

The gradual waning of Maria Montessori’s ties with her previous mentors can also be linked to the conclusion of this activity. Since at least 1913, Montessori had also become well-known abroad, travelled and lectured in European cities and the United States, and personally promoted and held several courses for teachers who wanted to learn her method. She had surpassed all the anthropologists with whom she had studied in terms of renown and recognition, and above all had broadened and updated her cultural and scientific perspectives, going far beyond the positivistic culture in which she had trained.<sup>27</sup>

If the beginning of her teaching at the Institute of Education in Rome at the age of thirty could be considered as the moment where she started to transition from training to affirmation in the field of science and pedagogy, its conclusion coincides with new horizons opening up that her publications of 1920s and 30s effectively document, making her method one of the most relevant 20<sup>th</sup>-century experiences of progressive education and “active” schooling.

<sup>26</sup> PESCI, Furio. *Pedagogia capitolina*. Op. cit., p. 46-50.

<sup>27</sup> DE SERIO, Barbara; LORENZO-RAMIREZ, Nuria. *L’infanzia “Montessori”. Dal neonato al padre dell’uomo*. Turin: L’Harmattan Italia, 1994.