



Book Review

Christine Quarfood

The Montessori Movement in

Interwar Europe: New Perspectives

Cham: Palgrave MacMillan

2022, 310 pp.

This volume is a very original study concerning the reception of the method elaborated by the well-known Italian physician and educationalist Maria Montessori (1870-1952) during the interwar period in different European countries. The research on this new educational method, which was adopted at *Casa dei Bambini* in Rome in 1907 for the first time and quickly spread thanks to an intense media campaign, has recently increased in Italy and abroad (Moretti 2021; Savoye and Ottavi, 2022). Quarfood argues that the success of the movement developed from the start of World War I until the mid-1930s is also due to Montessori's ability to be present on the public scene and to focus media attention on educational problems and social issues.

In this volume Christine Quarfood, professor of history of ideas at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), offers an interesting reconstruction of this movement from a transnational point of view, considering the different actors, debates, dynamics, and expansion in different countries.

This original work is the result of a huge research funded by several Swedish organizations and foundations, which supported the research stays in Italy. Indeed, this research is based on an extremely rich number of documents retrieved from the Italian State Archives

(*Archivio Centrale dello Stato*), the *Opera Nazionale Montessori* in Rome, the *Istituto Svedese di Studi Classici* in Rome and the *Istituto Pasquali-Agazzi* in Brescia. The translation of the work is another remarkable aspect of this important investigation.

The documents analysed shed a new light on the multitude of actors involved in the circulation of the new method, who are studied in their evolving national context. The results of the investigation are presented in nine chapters that can be divided in three parts. The first part about Montessori's educational activity, although already well-known, is clearly described so that the reader can understand the movement, especially in the United States. The *Casa dei Bambini* experiment is described as the mirror of her method, later published in her main work *Il Metodo della pedagogia scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei bambini* (1909). The birth of the movement and the interest towards her method before WWI are thoroughly analysed also in Spain, where Montessori cooperated with the Catalan government and representatives of the Catholic Church in order to teach catechism. This part describes the new teaching strategy involved in her method, the so-called idea of the "invisible teacher", who should not be authoritarian, and the comparison with the other preschool institutions still existing in Italy at the beginning of the century (which mainly adopted the Ferrante Aporti school programme).

The second part of the book presents the impact of her method on the social

and political agenda and addresses the following topics: the “British Montessorism” where the individual work took on a pivotal role, the psycho-pedagogical concepts of Montessorism, and the criticism concerning parental power on the child in the Dutch and Austrian debate. Quarfood deals with “The call of Education” (1924-1925), which was the Montessori movement’s first quarterly published in Amsterdam “appealing to forces for good around the world to join the Montessori movement’s struggle for the emancipation of the child” (p. 93).

This second part of the book also includes the relation of Montessorism with the perspectives of psychoanalysis and psychodynamics systems, that is the connection of the movement with the wider trends of the educational reform. Indeed, preschool pedagogy was one of the areas that was rapidly psychologized. The contacts between members of the Austrian Montessori society and psychoanalytical organization are described in a very original way.

Other aspects highlighted in the second part include the constitution of *Opera Nazionale Montessori* which contributed to the deep interest in the Montessori’s method; the different kinds of activities (journals and lectures); as well as the circumstances that led to Montessori’s exile in 1934 and the dismantling of *Opera Nazionale*.

The third part of the book discusses primarily the politicisation of Italian Montessorism in the context of the Gentile reform (1923) and the criticisms of the Italian pedagogue Lombardo Radice against Montessori. The author widely discusses the problems posed by the establishment of dictatorship for an educational method that promoted

the liberation of the child after 1926. The reader also receives deep insights into Montessori’s participation at the fifth New Education Fellowship (NEF) congress held in August 1929, responsible of the constitution of the *Società Montessori Internazionale* (SMI), first based in Rome, then in Berlin and finally in Amsterdam. In the following years the “many national Montessori societies now had to comply with SMI directives in terms of teacher training, school, materials and sales, as well as general information about the purpose of Montessori movement” (p. 219).

The difficult position of Montessori in Italy is also noted. According to Quarfood, the so-called Sorge affair is very significant in the analysis of the relationship between Montessori and Fascism. This affair concerned the case of a teacher arrested because Montessori schools in Rome were considered “the haunts of antifascism.” Sorge was rehabilitated few weeks later. Only in 1946, after having been declared “*persona non grata*” by Mussolini’s government, Montessori visited Italy.

The last part of the book concerns the diffusion of Montessorism in Germany, and the persecution of German Montessorians. Here, Quarfood explains that the nazi dictatorship considered this educational method dangerous. This is the reason why the third Montessori congress was not organized in Berlin but in Amsterdam, where the *Associazione Montessori Internazionale* (AMI) had been moved. The fourth Montessori congress in Rome reveals the epilogue of the Montessori’s method in Italy, giving rise to a debate concerning child development and needs during childhood. In particular, Giovanni Calò thought

that “elements of authority and discipline” embedded in the fascist pedagogy should convey energy in a positive way. This final part of the book deals with the subsequent period of amnesia about Montessori, with the unavoidable educational decline of Italian preschool institutions that just offered an hygienical approach to the child until the 1970s.

This study is essential to understand how Montessori’s methods circulated in Europe and in the United States. A very useful timeline about Montessori’s life and activity with a final index that concludes this nicely written book.

References

- Moretti Erica. *The Best Weapon for Peace: Maria Montessori, Education, and Children’s Right*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.
- Savoye Antoine, Ottavi Dominique (eds.). “Maria Montessori: regards historiques sur la méthode pédagogique (Allemagne, Angleterre, France, Italie).” *Le Études Sociales-Enquêtes- Éducation-Sciences Sociales* 1, no. 175 (2022).

Dorena Caroli
University of Bologna
dorena.caroli@unibo.it