



## Book Review

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Christine Quarfood

*Montessoris pedagogiska imperium: Kulturkritik och politik i mellankrigstidens Montessorirörelse*

Göteborg: Daidalos  
2017, 499 pp.

The Italian doctor, educator, and feminist Maria Montessori (1870–1952) became internationally famous for her pedagogical notions on self-education and interactive teaching materials during the first decades of the twentieth century. These educational ideas and learning materials were first developed for mentally challenged children and later successfully adjusted to the educational setting in preschools and schools. In earlier studies, the scientific dimension of Montessori's pedagogical program and teaching material, along with her fascinating persona, have often been examined as central features for the international popularity of her pedagogy. However, there has been less focus on the organisational movement and network around Montessori, as well as the movement's idealistic and cultural critic notions.

In *Montessoris pedagogiska imperium: Kulturkritik och politik i mellankrigens Montessorirörelse*, Christine Quarfood presents interesting insights into the social engagement and political dimension of the Montessori movement in the interwar years. Through a contextualising close reading of a rich source material, such as journals from the International Montessori Association, as well as published works by supporters, opponents, and Montessori herself, Quarfood reconstructs

the establishment of the first national Montessori associations in the 1910s, and follows the debate on Montessori's pedagogy to different contexts such as the United States, England, the Netherlands, and Italy. The study ends in 1936, when Montessori, who lived in Barcelona at the time, went into exile due to the Spanish Civil War, and the fascist regimes of Europe banned Montessori's schools.

The book consists of ten chapters and is divided into four parts, beginning with the intellectual history of Montessori's pedagogy. Hereby, Quarfood adds an account on the early and often overlooked influences of Montessori's work by embedding two pioneers in the education of the senses, Francis Bacon and Johan Amos Comenius, into the historiography. The first part also covers the preceding debate on preschools in Europe and gives readers an overview of the predecessors of Montessori's preschools in Italy, namely Aporti's infant asylums in the early nineteenth century, and the later Aggazi method. Drawing on these traditions, as well as Ellen Key's and Montessori's mentor Giuseppe Sergi's critique of Fröbel, Quarfood analyses how Montessori disqualified Fröbel's concept of kindergarten as too ritualized and governed by the teacher. Instead, Montessori emphasized the liberty of the child and the importance of early cognitive training and self-education in her pedagogical program, which became highly successful.

The second part of the book explores the successful expansion and internationalization of Montessori's pedagogy. Beginning with the story of the rise

and fall of the Montessori method in the United States in the 1910s, readers are introduced to Montessori's struggle with controlling the conceptualization and implementation of her pedagogical program, as well as an interesting account of the critique of John Dewey's successor William H. Kilpatrick. Moreover, Quarfood analyses the important expansion of Montessori's pedagogy from preschool to elementary school through Montessori's book *L'Autoeducazione nelle scuole elementari* (1916). Through an in-depth study of Montessori's pedagogical principles and the role of teacher, Quarfood makes a noteworthy argument of how the principles of non-intervention and thorough documentation of the children could have affected the relationship between the "invincible" Montessori teacher and the observed children.

The third part deepens the analysis of the Montessori movement as an idealistic, cultural critic association that wanted to influence public opinion. As a corrective to earlier historiographies that highlight Montessori as a controlling, commercial entrepreneur or didactical innovator, Quarfood convincingly argues that the utopian idea of the emancipation of the child was a central aspect for Montessori and the engagement of the movement's teachers, who were frequently female. Furthermore, the movement's cultural critic developments in the British and Dutch contexts are presented and discussed through the analysis of educational periodicals, such as the first worldwide Montessori journal, *The Call of Education*, distributed from Amsterdam in 1924.

The fourth and last part of the book describes the politicization of the movement during the interwar years. With a substantial analysis of the Italian Montessori movement's connection to the

fascist leader Benito Mussolini, who financially supported the national association and became its honorary president in 1926, Quarfood contributes with new perspectives on this "odd alliance." For example, Montessori and her supporters were clearly fascinated with Mussolini's persona and shared the imperial notion as well as the regime's interest in the mobilisation and training of children. According to Quarfood, however, the objective was not to ideologically spread fascism. Instead, the movement was interested in a worldwide distribution of *Montessorism*, in which the emancipation of the oppressed child was central.

The book ends rather suddenly with the termination of Montessori's official collaboration with the fascist regime, and here a concluding chapter would have been useful for the reader. Furthermore, the passages where Quarfood critically contextualizes Montessori's work from a gender perspective were appreciated and could also have been recognized as an analytical frame in the introduction, to enhance the premises and transparency of the analysis. Nevertheless, this study is a nuanced and well-written contribution to the intellectual history of Montessori pedagogy. It is recommended to anybody interested in the history of educational ideas in the interwar years, since it expands the historiography on Montessori as a single actor to the diverse movement that surrounded her, and shows how pedagogical considerations, cultural critic ideas, and the political will to change society intersected in an international educational movement.

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