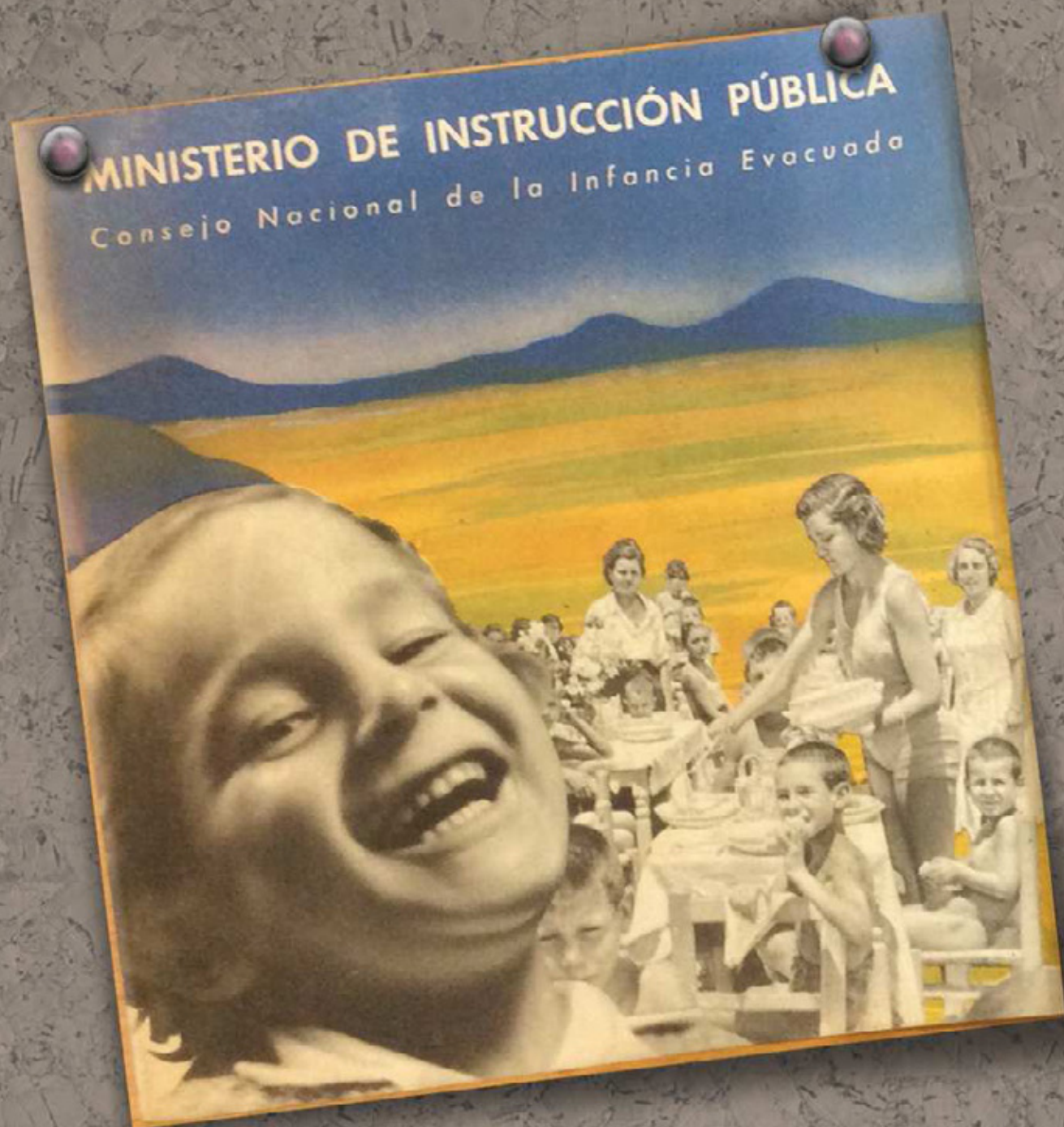


# HISTORIA y MEMORIA

de la  
educación

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Fotografía,  
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# HISTORIA Y MEMORIA DE LA EDUCACIÓN

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Imagen de cubierta: [Detalles del tríptico difundido por el Ministerio de Instrucción Pública para estimular la evacuación de los niños madrileños a las colonias escolares de Levante], Marx Memorial Library, Londres.

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# “INVISIBLE SCHOOLS”. THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTHERN ITALY IN PHOTOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES AND PHOTO-REPORTAGES (1925-55)\*

*“Escuelas invisibles”. La imagen pública  
de las escuelas rurales en el sur de Italia en las encuestas  
fotográficas y foto-reportajes (1925-1955)*

Juri Meda<sup>&</sup>

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**Abstract.** The dissemination of a particular public image of rural schools —ever since the poorest and most disadvantaged schools— has frequently been used by the ruling classes and / or political parties to document the rate of modernity and/or backwardness of the national school system, depending on the respective propaganda needs. Moving from the first photographic surveys conducted in Southern Italy in 1920s by the associations engaged in the socio-economic integration of the South into the Unitary State to get to the photo reportages published in some magazines in the 1950s, the article analyses in depth the manipulation of the public image of these particular schools as it emerges by the circulation of such photographs on daily newspapers and magazines, which reveals its propagandistic use over time.

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\* I would like to thank Andrea Greco for the initial input that triggered my interest in exploring this topic and to Maddalena Cerletti (Archive of the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea in Cinisello Balsamo), Elena Piccini (Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi in Milan), Roberto Lanzarini (Library of the Istituto Parri Emilia-Romagna in Bologna) and Anna Maria Stratta (Historical Archive of the Municipality of Turin) for their kindness in helping me to find and digitalise the photographs I have used to illustrate this article. The article, originally written in Italian, has been translated by Stephen Tobin. The article has been published within the framework of the project “Educational Progressivism and School Tradition in Spain through Photography (1900-1970) (EDU2014-52498-C2-1-P), funded as part of the State Programme to Promote Excellence in Scientific and Technical Research, State Sub-Programme for Knowledge Generation, within the context of the State Plan for Scientific and Technical Research and Innovation 2015-2017 of the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness.

<sup>&</sup> University of Macerata, Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism. Piazzale Luigi Bertelli (Contrada Vallebona) – 62100 Macerata (MC). Italy. juri.meda@unimc.it

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**Keywords:** History of education; History of photography; Rural school; Social perception; Collective representation; Political propaganda

**Resumen.** *La difusión de una determinada imagen pública de las escuelas rurales —desde siempre las escuelas más pobres y desfavorecidas— ha sido utilizada frecuentemente por las clases dirigentes y/o los partidos políticos de la oposición para documentar la tasa de modernización y/o de atraso del sistema educativo nacional, de acuerdo con las respectivas necesidades propagandísticas. El artículo —moviéndose entre las primeras encuestas fotográficas realizadas en las regiones del Sur de Italia por asociaciones meridionalistas en los años 20 y los reportajes fotoperiodísticos publicados en algunas revistas en los años 50, pasando por la cesura fascista— pretende estudiar las alteraciones de la imagen pública de este tipo particular de escuelas comprobables en Italia en el período de tiempo indicado a través del análisis de fotografías escolares publicadas en periódicos diarios y revistas, centrándose en el uso propagandístico que de las mismas se hizo a lo largo de treinta años.*

**Palabras clave:** Historia de la educación; Historia de la fotografía; Escuela rural; Percepción social; Representación colectiva; Propaganda política

## INTRODUCTION

The use of images, and in particular of photography, in the context of the history of education began to acquire currency in the international historiographical debate in the year 2000.<sup>1</sup> There is little point in my engaging, in the introduction to this work, in a methodological reflection on the use of images as sources for the history of education, outlining their potential while at the same time taking the precaution of pointing to the possible risks involved in their use. As an old Latin motto puts it: *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta*. Numerous scholars having scrupulously examined the issue in recent years, suffice it for me to refer the reader to their excellent work.<sup>2</sup> Yet I feel that the crucial point is not

<sup>1</sup> I am basically referring here to the following works: Ian Grosvenor, "On Visualizing Past Classrooms", in *Silences and Images: the Social History of the Classroom*, ed. Ian Grosvenor, Martin Lawn and Kate Rousmaniere (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 83-104; António Nóvoa, "Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing: Public Images of Teachers (19th-20th Century)", *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* xxxvi, no. 1 (2000): 20-52 (the article is part of a monographic edition on "The Challenge of the Visual", ed. Marc Depaepe and Bregt Henkens); Kate Rousmaniere, "Questioning the Visual in the History of Education", *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* xxx, no. 2 (2001): 109-111.

<sup>2</sup> See esp.: María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, "Imágenes e historia de la educación: construcción, reconstrucción y representación de las prácticas escolares en el aula", *Historia de la Educación* 25 (2006):

*how* these particular sources should be used so much as *what* they tell us and thus *what* they can help us to understand. In short, as I see it, the crux of the matter is heuristic in nature. This is the element around which certain Belgian scholars built an essay published in 2005. Taking issue with an article published by the American sociologist Eric Margolis several years earlier,<sup>3</sup> they wondered whether photographic sources could reveal anything regarding the history of school culture and educational practice that traditional sources were not already in a position to disclose.<sup>4</sup> In particular, in one of the more cogent passages in their work they say:

There is nothing to prove that the analysis of these photographs provides him with new insights. Of course it does, he argues: "From a critical perspective, class pictures can be viewed as a historical record of certain elements of the hidden curriculum", he writes. But is it a "record" or an "illustration"? You can see in those photographs that everything is neat and ordered and you conclude that the people liked order. They liked order in presentation, and in their pupils, they liked neat rows of desks, wall charts that were hanging straight, clean floors. They did not like pupils fighting, wall charts hanging upside down and stained books with loose and dog-eared pages, flung on the floor. All of this is true, and if such scenes occurred they were hard on the pupils, but this was not the way the school wished to present itself to the outside world. But we have known this for a long time. We do not need a pile of old photographs to tell us that.<sup>5</sup>

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291-315; Sjaak Braster, "How (un-)useful are images for understanding histories of education? About teacher centeredness and new education in Dutch primary schools: 1920-1985", *Educació i Història: revista d'Història de l'Educació* 15 (2010): 123-148; Maria del Mar del Pozo Andrés and Teresa Rabazas Romero, "Las imágenes fotográficas como fuente para el estudio de la cultura escolar", *Revista de Ciencias de la Educación* 231-232 (2012): 401-414.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Margolis, "Class Pictures: Representations of Race, Gender and Ability in a Century of School Photography", *Visual Sociology* 14 (1999): 7-38.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Catteeuw *et al.*, "Filming the Black Box: Primary Schools on Film Belgium (1880-1960)", in *Visual History: Images of Education*, ed. Ulrike Mietzner, Kevin Myers and Nick Peim (Oxford: Peter Lang: 2005), 203-231.

<sup>5</sup> Catteeuw, "Filming the Black Box", 213.

The question the authors ask —i.e. whether photography may be considered a true source for the history of education or whether it should not rather be used more modestly, if effectively, as a source of illustration to accompany articles and essays on that history— can easily be answered if we explore the crucial work done on this topic by historian Peter Burke,<sup>6</sup> or more specifically, the tough criticism of the iconophobic stance enshrined in the essay published in “Visual History: Images of Education” and formulated by María del Mar del Pozo Andrés in an article published in the Spanish journal *Historia de la Educación*, in 2006.<sup>7</sup>

This, because the real issue here is not whether photography may be considered a genuine historical source but the extent to which it may be of real use to the historian.<sup>8</sup> If we call a “source” any object from which the historian, through the application of his own interpretative criteria, can glean information useful for increasing his knowledge and appreciation of a given historical phenomenon, then we have to ask ourselves what additional information these sources can offer compared to their more traditional counterparts, supplementing rather than replacing them.<sup>9</sup> Questioning the initial indications supplied by Margolis, but also by Grosvenor and Nóvoa, the Belgian scholars pursue their analysis by noting how photographs can be used in the context of research into the history of education in order to study the “visual aspects of the reality of teaching and education” and how “the value of visual source is as part of the historical education reality and not as a representation of it and this value should encourage interest in two particular spheres, the image as a medium of education and teaching, and the pedagogical gaze”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus Catteeuw, Dams, Depaepe and Simon contend that visual sources with heuristic potential consist basically in image-based learn-

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: the use of images as historical evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> del Pozo Andrés, “Imágenes e historia de la educación: construcción, reconstrucción y representación de las prácticas escolares en el aula”, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Braster, “How (un-)useful are images for understanding histories of education?”, 123.

<sup>9</sup> In this connection, Catteeuw and the others stress in their essay that: “In passing, we should comment that this kind of history of school photography cannot be written solely on the basis of photographs. We would need much more information about the circumstances of the scene, the extent to which the school was involved in the setting”. Catteeuw, “Filming the Black Box”, 220-221.

<sup>10</sup> Catteeuw, “Filming the Black Box”, 229.



ing devices (for instance wall boards, and so forth),<sup>11</sup> while photographs cannot be used either to study the evolutionary development of real educational practices conducted in class on a daily basis because they provide an excessively small sample in terms of quantity and quality,<sup>12</sup> or to produce unuseful analyses of the portrayal of education and teaching in pictures.<sup>13</sup>

While admitting that the use of photographs to define real educational practices may lead to risky interpretations, and while agreeing that studies should be based on a broad and multi-faceted corpus of sources not restricted solely to those that are image-based but open also to traditional sources (which is always a good thing in historiography anyway), a number of perceptive studies in recent years have shown that photographs, prints, engravings and paintings can be effectively used as sources for the history of education,<sup>14</sup> demonstrating that any fragile results are a product not of the use of images but of the greater or lesser historiographical expertise of the scholar handling those images.

The conclusions reached by the Belgian scholars, however, are partial also on another count. Their contention that it serves no purpose to analyse the depiction of education in images is based on a restrictive interpretation of the scope of the history of education which has not been fully superseded even today. This approach would argue that the history of education is confined to the study of the school as an

<sup>11</sup> It is by no means my intention to play down the heuristic potential of this historiographical study, which has been admirably highlighted, for example, by Jeremy Howard, Catherine Burke and Peter Cunningham, *The Decorated School: Essays on Visual Culture of Schooling* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Catteeuw, "Filming the Black Box", 229 ("The source material is too limited in its content and number to be a representation of reality and can only really be used as a complement to the textual sources with which it has to be interpreted").

<sup>13</sup> In connection with this aspect, the text refers specifically to Nóvoa, "Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing".

<sup>14</sup> *The Black Box of Schooling: A Cultural History of the Classroom*, ed. Sjaak Braster, Ian Grosvenor and María del Mar del Pozo Andrés (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2011), especially the essays in the first part "Images and Representations of Classrooms" (21-77); Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "Images as Representations: Visual Sources on Education and Childhood in the Past", *Paedagogica Historica* LI, no. 6 (2015): 702-715; María del Mar del Pozo Andrés and Sjaak Braster, "Exploring New Ways of Studying School Memories: The Engraving as a Blind Spot of the History of Education", in *School Memories: New Trends in the History of Education*, ed. Cristina Yanes-Cabrera, Juri Meda and Antonio Viñao (Cham: Springer, 2017), 11-27.

institution and as the home of educational practice and pedagogical experimentation, and that there is no place in it for exploring the ways in which the school has been symbolically depicted over time or the development of society's perception of education and teaching, as indicators for understanding the overall cultural dimension of this complex historical phenomenon. This approach is obviously at odds with what António Nóvoa had intuited in his article published in 2000 (and criticised, of course, by Catteeuw, Dams, Depaepe and Simon), in which he pointed to the possibility of using images to study the development of the public image of teaching between the 19th and 20th centuries. In that connection Nóvoa writes:

In underlining the idea of public images, I intend to understand the game of social mirrors that marks the teaching profession in an epoch of strong social beliefs and convictions on the idea of school as a central institution for progress and citizenship. Here the conflict between opposing images of teachers and the relationships they provoke both inside and outside the profession becomes more obvious.<sup>15</sup>

The Portuguese historian's remark —its innovative importance misunderstood— helped considerably to expand the heuristic spectrum of the history of education in the sense of a historic process rather than as a simple historical source, inasmuch as it prompted scholars not to analyse the school of the past only “from the inside” (in other words, as schools really were, or at least, as they made themselves out to be), but also “from the outside” (in other words, as they were perceived by the ruling classes and by civil society as a whole), in order to develop a broader vision of this historical phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Thus school was not simply an institution or a venue for didactic practice and pedagogical experimentation, it was also a category of the imagination whose imaginary depiction did not necessarily reflect what school really was at any given moment; rather, it reflected the perception of the school harboured by a given social group, or indeed by society as a whole. But Nóvoa went even

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<sup>15</sup> Nóvoa, “Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing”, 24.

<sup>16</sup> See Juri Meda and Antonio Viñao, “School Memory: Historiographic Balance and Heuristic Perspectives”, in *School Memories*, 5.

further, pointing out that the historical importance of images was borne out "by this traffic between individual and collective beliefs, social and cultural representations, memoirs and imagination".<sup>17</sup> This same "traffic" —or what I would call "osmosis"— was to occupy pride of place in the historiographical reflection contained in the introduction to the volume *School Memories: New Trends in the History of Education*, in which education historians are urged to explore the depiction of self-provided by teachers and students in their personal memories and the depiction of education and teaching painted over the years by the culture industry and the media, in addition to the depiction propounded by government institutions in the context of official commemorations in obedience to a specific memory-shaping policy.<sup>18</sup>

## THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE SCHOOL

This paper sets out to analyse the development of the public image of rural schools<sup>19</sup> in southern Italy between the Fascist era and the post-war period through the study of photographic inquiries and photojournalism. There are two basic reasons behind the choice of this specific topic for study: first of all, the realisation that "photo-documents" are far more relevant from a heuristic standpoint than "photo-monuments" or, to paraphrase a famous definition coined by Jacques Le Goff,<sup>20</sup> photographs taken to ensure that the memory of a given event is handed down to posterity (souvenir photographs, portrait photographs and so on); second, the adoption of the interpretative category of the school as a "metaphor of modernity".

<sup>17</sup> The many links existing between images, the imagination and the collective memory in relation to the school past were to be highlighted several years later in Sara González Gómez and Francisca Comas Rubí, "Fotografía y construcción de la memoria escolar", *History of Education & Children's Literature* XI, no.1 (2016): 215-236.

<sup>18</sup> See Meda and Viñao, "School Memory", 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> For a history of the rural school in Italy in general, see Luca Montecchi, *I contadini a scuola. La scuola rurale in Italia dall'Unità alla caduta del fascismo* (Macerata: EUM, 2015); especially in connection with rural school building, Valeria Viola, "The School House. History and Evolution of the Urban and Rural School Building in Italy during the Fascism", in *Espacios y patrimonio histórico-educativo*, ed. Paulí Dávila Balsera and Luis María Naya Garmendia (Donostia: Erein, 2016), 377-389; Valeria Miceli and Valeria Viola, "'A scuola meglio che a casa'. L'edilizia delle scuole rurali durante il ventennio fascista: primi risultati di uno scavo documentario". *Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione* 2 (2016): 83-88.

<sup>20</sup> See Jacques Le Goff, "Documento/monumento", *Enciclopedia* (Torino: Einaudi 1978), vol. V, 38-43.

While the “photo-monuments” is generally intended for private use, “photo-documents” are more typically earmarked for public use. The chief function assigned to the traditional portrait photograph taken on the first day of school or the class photograph taken at the end of the school year is to provide the individuals portrayed and their families with a “memory of childhood”. Photographs taken inside or outside a school building in the course of its construction or official opening, on the other hand, are designed to record the final result of an operation commissioned by a local authority or private association in favour of public education; by the same token, photographs of schools and of the educational activities being played out in them taken in the context of photographic inquiries or of photojournalism and subsequently published in books, newspapers or other media, can be used either to enhance the educational achievements of a given political regime (for obvious propaganda purposes) or to deplore the serious state of neglect of schools in a given area (for equally obvious ideological purposes).

This latter kind of “photo-document” is known as a “photo-propaganda” or “photo-denounce” according to the purpose its public dissemination aims to achieve, whether celebratory or accusatory. Setting out to analyse the evolution of the public image of rural schools over a period of time marked by strong social and political tension, I felt that the adoption of this latter type of “photo-document” would be particularly appropriate. Initially I had thought of using as my sources the photographs in the historical photo archive of the Centro Didattico Nazionale (National Education Centre) in Florence, now held by the historical archive of the Istituto Nazionale per la Documentazione, l’Innovazione e la Ricerca Educativa in Florence, which is the vastest and most varied public collection of photographs relating to schools and education in Italy.<sup>21</sup> Yet no sooner had I begun to dig into the archive than I instantly realised that the photographs it contained were almost all instances of “photo-propaganda” recording the school programme promoted by the regime at the

<sup>21</sup> The Historical Photo Archive of the Centro Didattico Nazionale in Florence holds some 14,000 photographs on school-related topics taken throughout the country between 1929 and 1960, but with a clear preponderance of material from 1930 to 1943. A significant selection of this photographs may be found in *L’obiettivo sulla scuola: immagini dall’archivio fotografico INDIRE*, ed. Pamela Giorgi and Elena Franchi (Firenze: Giunti, 2012). See also the database: <http://www.indire.it/progetto/fotoedu/> (consulted on 1 June 2017), which contains a selection of some 2,000 photographs from the institute’s collection.

local level and the educational practices adopted in them in compliance with ministerial instructions, testifying to the educational apparatus's wholesale subscription to the regime's education policy. Moreover, the marked ideologisation of these photographs was already implicit in the purpose assigned to them when they were collected. Their collection began in 1932 when, on more than one occasion, the Minister of National Education Francesco Ercole urged Italy's schools at every level to send the institute in Florence "all the material required to record their history, condition, activity, methods and so forth".<sup>22</sup> Their collection continued seamlessly over the following years, more or less until the outbreak of World War II. The totalitarian context within which the initiative was promoted, however, significantly distorted the results inasmuch as it did not confine itself to producing a photographic record of conditions in Italian schools or of the activities that took place there, but turned into a kind of collective visual testimonial of the fact that the nation's entire educational apparatus was conforming with the iconic narrative of the school as developed by the regime in its propaganda campaigns. Thus the schools depicted in these photographs are those that conformed to the *mainstream* image of the Fascist school, namely those that subscribed to the aesthetic standard enforced by the regime, thus contributing to the comprehensive visual influence promoted by the regime in Italian society and disseminating in public opinion the "naïve idea" of an extremely positive school system.<sup>23</sup> First of all, in an overwhelming majority of cases these schools were urban rather than rural, the latter (as we shall see) being well-nigh impossible to mould into the stereotyped image of a school that had to conform even on the outside to the 20th century rationalistic trend and the call to order that were to characterise public building under Fascism. The excessive stereotypisation of the image of the Fascist school that emerges from the photographs in the historical photo archive of the Centro Didattico Nazionale in Florence can be explained not only

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Calò, "Il Museo Didattico Nazionale nell'anno 1933. Relazione", *Vita Scolastica* IV, no.10 (1933): 3. For a more detailed history of the Centro Didattico Nazionale in Florence, see Juri Meda, "Nascita e sviluppo dell'Istituto nel periodo fascista (1929-1943)", in *Dal Museo nazionale della scuola all'INDIRE. Storia di un istituto al servizio della scuola italiana (1929-2009)*, ed. Pamela Giorgi (Firenze: Giunti, 2010), 9-31.

<sup>23</sup> For the "totality of the image policy" adopted by the Fascist regime and for the influence that policy had on its social targets, see Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988).



by the fact that the material reflects the criteria of “photo-propaganda”, but also by that it interprets the school as a “metaphor of modernity” and adheres to a given iconic paradigm suited to the depiction of that metaphor. This category of interpretation has gone from strength to strength in recent years in the international historiographical debate, which has shown from many different standpoints how education is a crucial factor in the process of modernising society that occurred in the 20th century.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the construction of a new school building in small rural communities —where schools were frequently hosted in buildings unsuited either in terms of hygiene or functionally to the educational purposes for which they were being used— represented in the local population’s eyes a sign of progress at least as tangible as the arrival of the railway, the telegraph, electricity and the cinema theatre. So in that context, a photograph taken during the opening ceremony of a new school served to commemorate an epoch-changing event marking the community’s emergence from an ancestral condition of backwardness and subordination. Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that these new rural schools —spotless and spanking new in the midst of the endless countryside all around them— are among the few such establishments portrayed in the collection of photographs in the historical photographic archive of the Centro Didattico Nazionale in Florence.

But leaving aside all the 20th century rhetoric, the advance of progress in rural areas came up, at the social level, against chronic economic depression that did not nothing to facilitate the rapid or painless integration of the rural populace into the 20th century paradigm, and at the cultural level, against the deep roots of customs and traditions that were extremely tough to uproot and replace. This meant that in these areas

<sup>24</sup> In this connection, in particular, see the following works: *Paedagogica Historica* XLI, no. 1-2 (2005), monographic edition on “School and modernity: Knowledge, institutions and practices”, ed. Cynthia Pereira de Sousa, Denice Barbara Catani, António Nóvoa and Frank Simon (especially the introduction, 1-8); Justino Magalhães, *Da cadeira ao banco. Escola e modernização (séculos XVIII-XX)* (Lisboa: Educa/Unidade de I&D de Ciências da Educação, 2010); Francesca Comas Rubí, Bernat Sureda García and Xavier Motilla Salas, *Fotografia i història de l’educació: iconografia de la modernització educativa* (Palma: Lleonard Muntaner, 2012); José António Afonso, *Escolas Rurais na 1ª república portuguesa (1910-1926): discursos e representações sobre a periferia* (Santo Tirso: Whitebooks, 2016); *Sisyphus: Journal of Education* IV, no.1 (2016), monographic edition on “Educational Modernity: Representation and Writings”, ed. Antonio Viñao and Justino Magalhães (especially chapters: Antonio Viñao and Justino Magalhães, “Educational Modernity: Representation and Writings”, 6-11; Antonio Viñao and María José Martínez Ruiz-Funes, “Advertising, Marketing and Image: Visual Representations and School Modernity through Postcards”, 42-66).

—particularly in the inland areas of southern Italy and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia— public education took a long time to put down roots and, as we shall see, school buildings were a far cry both from the aesthetic standards demanded by the regime and from the iconic paradigms of modernity. Once I became aware of the absence of photographic sources useful for studying the ways in which these schools were depicted in the context of the broader public collection of photographs of school-related subjects on a nationwide level, I had to start exploring other collections. I therefore reached the conclusion that, with regard both to Fascism and to the immediate post-war period when the school was still seen as a “metaphor of modernity”, I should turn to the photographic inquiries and photojournalism produced in the inland areas of southern Italy focusing (even if only tangentially) on schools.<sup>25</sup> In the course of the 20th century (from the earthquake in Messina onwards), photographic inquiries were frequently used by pro-South associations and their militants to deplore the terrible social and economic conditions besetting southern Italy and to alert public opinion to the so-called “questione meridionale”<sup>26</sup> (“southern question”). With illiteracy being one of the worst plagues afflicting society in the South, the pro-South campaigners often devoted particular attention to schools, which therefore featured regularly in photographic inquiries. This, because photographs taken in schools in the course of these inquiries were used to alert public opinion to the serious state of neglect and decay besetting education in the southern regions, by publishing them in investigative books and in newspapers and periodicals, showing them at public meetings, and reproducing them on charity postcards distributed to raise the funds required to build new schools. In the post-war era, photographic reportages were to further extend the impact

<sup>25</sup> The heuristic potential of this particular kind of source has been explored in part in the following works: Xavier Motilla Salas and Llorenç Gelabert Gual, “Fotoperiodisme, revistes il·lustrades i educació a Mallorca (1917-1936)”, in *Imatges de l'escola, imatge de l'educació: actes de les XXI Jornades d'Història de l'Educació*, ed. Francesca Comas Rubí, Sara González Gómez, Xavier Motilla Salas and Bernat Sureda García (Palma de Mallorca: Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2014), 253-266; Ian Grosvenor and Natasha Macnab, “Photography as an agent of transformation: education, community and documentary photography in post-war Britain”, *Paedagogica Historica* LI, no. 1-2 (2015): 117-135; Pedro L. Moreno Martínez, “Imágenes e historia de la educación popular: representaciones fotográficas de las misiones pedagógicas en la Región de Murcia”, *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 5 (2017): 73-155.

<sup>26</sup> In Italian historiography this term is used to describe the debate surrounding the reasons that were to lead to and, over time, to aggravate the social and economic underdevelopment of the South in the wake of the Unification of Italy.

of these images on public opinion, thanks also to the parallel rise of the illustrated news magazine, turning them into fully-fledged “mass images” created for the rhetoric of propaganda (we have already seen how social exposé in the course of the 20th century began to resemble fully-fledged “negative propaganda”, responding to specific communication codes) and for widespread dissemination, and “assigning them a specific social function and developing them in direct relation to the social figure of their viewer”.<sup>27</sup> But then, as the American comparative education scholar Gustavo Fischman pointed out in a paper published in 2001 based on the theories developed by Bourdieu and Foucault, we need to remember that photography never represents reality in a neutral manner, it is always an interpretation of reality “socially constructed within specific regimes of truth offering indications of the relationships of power”.<sup>28</sup> This awareness must be kept in the forefront of our mind particularly if we propose to use these sources as part of our research because, shunning the deeply emotional charge that they continue to convey even after all these years, we must not look at what they show, we must ask oneself why what they show is depicted in a given way and what impact that depiction sought to have on the general public.<sup>29</sup>

The sources identified for the Fascist period are a photographic inquiry conducted by Umberto Zanotti Bianco on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (National Association for the Interests of Southern Italy) in the course of trips to Calabria between

<sup>27</sup> Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine*, 4; for this concept, see in particular the paragraph entitled “L'immagine di massa: il culto del Duce”, 62-70.

<sup>28</sup> Gustavo Fischman, “Reflections About Images, Visual Culture, and Educational Research”, *Educational Researcher* xxx, no. 8, (2001): 31. For this concept, see especially Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics* XVI, no.1 (1986): 22-27; Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Definition of Photography”, in *Visual Culture: the Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999), 162-180.

<sup>29</sup> The “photographic exposés” published in the inquiries and reportage, exactly like the “photographic propagandas”, were published for a specific purpose and were carefully selected to that end. By way of an example, here is an excerpt from the appeal made in April 1922 by the Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo (Action Group for People's Schools) to all members of the Touring Club from the pages of the association's official organ soliciting their cooperation in an inquiry into the state of Italy's poorest schools by “sending in photographs capable of documenting the miserable state of schools of which they know” (“Un'inchiesta fotografica sulle scuole rurali”, *Le Vie d'Italia* xxviii, no. 4 (1922): 441). Thus we must beware of falling into the trap of considering “photographic propagandas” to be falsifications of reality and “photographic exposés” to be faithful, debunking reproductions of reality, because in fact they reproduce visual segments of the reality useful for putting across a given message, which is the true object of our research.

1921 and 1928, and the extensive photographic campaign published to illustrate an article entitled "L'edilizia scolastica rurale" by Alberto Latronico in the magazine *Le Vie d'Italia* in October 1926. For the post-war era, on the other hand, I chose to use the photographic reportages on southern Italy produced by Tino Petrelli on behalf of the magazine *L'Europeo* in 1948 and by Federico Patellani for the magazine *Epoca* in 1952.

## THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTHERN ITALY IN A NUMBER OF PHOTOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES CONDUCTED IN THE FASCIST ERA (1921-28)

Numerous inquiries had already been conducted into the situation of education in the regions of southern Italy<sup>30</sup> before the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI)<sup>31</sup> promoted an all-round enquiry —between 1921 and 1928— into the appalling material, hygiene and health conditions prevailing in the rural schools of Basilicata, Calabria and Molise, substantiating its report with a vast amount of photographic material. The inquiry was entrusted to Umberto Zanotti Bianco,<sup>32</sup> who had already conducted an inquiry several years earlier into living conditions in Calabria in the aftermath of the earthquake of 1908 and remarked on the pitiful state of education in Santa Cristina, Scido, Cosoleto, Melicuccà, Oppido Marmentina, Podargoni,

<sup>30</sup> In this connection, see Oreste Dito (Ordy), *Il problema educativo e la questione sociale in Calabria: considerazioni ed osservazioni* (Cosenza: Tipografia della "Cronaca di Calabria", 1909); *I problemi della scuola popolare in provincia di Reggio Calabria: relazione di Giuseppina Lemaire, Sibilla Aleramo, Giovanni Cena e Gaetano Salvemini, relatore, a S.E. l'on. Francesco Guicciardini presidente dell'Associazione fiorentina per l'istruzione popolare nel Mezzogiorno* (Roma: Nuova Antologia, 1910); Raffaele Santagati, "La scuola elementare e le opere di coltura popolare in provincia di Reggio Calabria", *La Coltura Popolare* IX, no. 12 (1919): 20-25. The inquiries mentioned here have been studied in: Mirella Marra, "Questione meridionale e scuola", *Incontri Meridionali* 3-4 (1979): 209-234.

<sup>31</sup> The ANIMI received its mandate from the Opera contro l'Analfabetismo (Institute for the Struggle Against Illiteracy) for running day and evening schools in Calabria, Basilicata, Sicily and Sardinia; a mandate that it held from 1921 to 1928. For the educational work done by the ANIMI, see Giuseppe Isnardi, "L'Associazione nazionale per gli interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia", *Il Ponte* VI, no. 9-10 (1950): 1198-1204; Marcella Fusco, "L'Associazione nazionale per gli interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia nella lotta contro l'analfabetismo: 1910-1928", *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* XCIX, no. 20 (1981): 361-402; Francesco Mattei, *ANIMI: il contributo dell'Associazione nazionale per gli interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia alla storia dell'educazione (1910-1945)* (Roma: Anicia, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> For Umberto Zanotti Bianco, see Sergio Zoppi, *Umberto Zanotti Bianco. Patriota, educatore, meridionalista: il suo progetto e il nostro tempo* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2009); Mirko Grasso, *Costruire la democrazia: Umberto Zanotti Bianco tra meridionalismo ed europeismo* (Roma: Donzelli, 2015).

Sant'Alessio, Villa San Giuseppe, Cataforio, Cardeto, Gallina, Calanna and Campo Calabro, where the soundest buildings still standing were “caverns, damp rooms with rickety doors and windows, without water or sanitary facilities”,<sup>33</sup> and where no wooden school pavilions had yet been erected. Zanotti Bianco, who was deeply shocked by the whole experience, wrote this —among other things— to the educationalist Giuseppe Lombardo Radice in March 1923:

I read the other day about an Italian traveller who organised a scientific expedition to Malaya: “The school in Benculen<sup>34</sup> with numerous students is one of the best in terms of order and cleanliness”. Benculen! [...] the school is one of the best [...] order [...] cleanliness! [...]. My thoughts went instantly, with a sentiment of envy and of bitterness, to the schools in our own poor South: (yet what comparison is possible between the civilisation of our country and that of the distant island of Sumatra?) and I mentally asked myself this question: “What village in our countryside would deserve the honour of such praise?”. It may be an obsession: but for several years now, ever since you met me in your region, wishing to see and to know our national truth in order to act accordingly, my thoughts constantly return —as to a personal grief— to the disastrous state of schools in most of the South [...]. I hope that the publicity I am giving these documents will serve to arouse the interest of the Italians —including those outside the field of education— in the very serious problem of schools in the South.<sup>35</sup>

Zanotti Bianco’s comparison between schools in Malaya and in the South of Italy should seem neither exaggerated nor ungenerous. One has but to leaf through the volume containing the extensive documentation that he collected in the course of his inquiry (emblematically entitled “*Il martirio della scuola in Calabria*”) to realise the true seriousness of the situation. The volume included a memorandum on school buildings in

<sup>33</sup> Giuseppe Maria Malvezzi and Umberto Zanotti Bianco, *L'Aspromonte occidentale: note* (Milano: Libreria Editrice Milanese, 1910), 221.

<sup>34</sup> Now Bengkulu, a province of Indonesia, once known as Bencoolen, a British possession on the Island of Sumatra until 1824.

<sup>35</sup> Umberto Zanotti Bianco, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria* (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1925), 7. The letter is reproduced at the beginning of the volume.



Calabria addressed to the Ministry of Public Education, a sweeping report by an inspector from Reggio Calabria on the state of education in his province, and a detailed description of elementary schools in every municipality in the provinces of Reggio Calabria, Catanzaro and Cosenza, as indicated by teachers in their letters. Referring to the state of classrooms in his own province, the inspector remarked:

Some ninety percent of schools in the province of Reggio consists in shacks built immediately after the earthquake of 1908. Very few of them have double walls. Most of them are full of cracks that let the wind and the rain in. The shacks measure 8x4 metres (they are often divided into two classrooms); they have one door and two windows, almost invariably devoid of shutters or glass. The floor stands some forty to fifty centimetres off the ground, thus the wind and the *stench* of the *manure* piling up and fermenting in the streets penetrates through the cracks. All the schools have desks of the old type with four places, normally occupied by six or even seven students *crowding* together. The desks are *unsuitable* for the children's stature, nor do they have ink-wells sunk into their tops. There is a table for the teacher, either in *rough* wood or covered in paper or a carpet by the teacher herself, and a blackboard. No class has sufficient desks, and in many of them the blackboard consists in the remains of a rectangular blackboard, while in several there is quite simply no blackboard at all. The teacher makes up for this absence by writing on a panel or even on the wall. Everything else is wanting: There are no educational aids, no images capable of fostering good sentiments, no libraries, no museum, not even any chalk. A few teachers purchase a register and diary with their own money. Thus these schools appear *squalid*, *gloomy* and devoid of beauty.<sup>36</sup>

The texts were accompanied by twenty-three black-and-white photographs published as separate plates in the volume, their explanatory captions consisting in excerpts from the report and from the teachers' letters.<sup>37</sup> The photographs depicted the elementary schools of Arangea

<sup>36</sup> Zanolli Bianco, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria*, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> The photographs had been taken by the teachers themselves to corroborate the contents of the letters they sent to the author.

Superiore (a suburb of Gallina), Palmi, Perlupo, Placanica, Purelli (a suburb of Bagnara), Orti Superiore and Tritanti (a suburb of Maropati) in the province of Reggio Calabria, the school of Favelloni (a suburb of Cessaniti) in the province of Catanzaro and the school of Luzzi in the province of Cosenza. The description of this latter school building, in particular, was accompanied by four photographs whose captions underscored the fact that the rickety floor of its only classroom was held up by four wooden props and that the rooms adjacent to the classroom were occupied by stables and pigsties from which issued “the animals’ breath and the nauseating stench of their excrements”.<sup>38</sup> The volume contains no photographs of Africo —a small village on the slopes of the Aspromonte, to which we will soon be returning at some length in this paper— whose school was described thus in a letter from the teachers:

There are three classrooms and they consist in three *ram-shackle* sheds without glazed windows. Their condition might be described as frankly deplorable. The furniture consists in a *primitive* table, a chair, a blackboard and a few pictures on some of the walls. Plans have been drawn up for new school buildings but construction will not get under way until the next century.<sup>39</sup>

When analysing the photographs published in this volume, one is struck by the jarring discrepancy between what they show and the descriptions in the text, which are brimming with absolutely horrific nouns, verbs and adjectives (*stench*, *manure*, *crowding*, *unsuitable*, *rough*, *squalid*, *gloomy*, *ram-shackle*, *primitive* and so on) while the photographs actually portray situations which, while admittedly squalid, are not totally beyond redemption. In

<sup>38</sup> I feel it might be useful here to engage in something of an anthropological digression, pointing out that in the social context and historical era described above, it was normal in rural homes for the family’s living quarters to be adjacent to those of their beasts, both so that they could keep a closer eye on them and so that they could heat the rooms using the heat given off by the beasts’ natural metabolic processes. Nor were byres in small rural communities intended solely for housing animals. They were also meant for socialising. In fact, they were used during the long winter wakes for handing down traditions from generation to generation and for community bonding, but also for conducting minor business deals and for forging new family relationships. Thus reports of the deplorable hygiene conditions prevailing in most school buildings in Calabria, while unimpeachable on health grounds, effectively point to the observer’s complete lack of familiarity with rural families’ way of life and to his membership of the city-dwelling bourgeoisie and of a totally different social and cultural environment. At the end of the day, this “cultural otherness” could not help but have a detrimental impact, worsening the observer’s critical interpretation of the rural environment.

<sup>39</sup> Zanotti Bianco, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria*, 19.

other words, we see a basic inconsistency between the “school as narrated” and the “school as depicted”, in which the state of the schools described in the reports and letters is considerably worse than their state as portrayed in the photographs. One might object that a sense of shame clearly prevented photographs being taken of schools in the most dilapidated state. Yet a trawl through the photographic collections in the historical archive of the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d’Italia in Rome led to the discovery of numerous photographs showing schools in a considerably more pitiful state than those taken by the author of the “Il martirio della scuola in Calabria” in the course of his numerous expeditions.<sup>40</sup> We find proof of this in three photographs taken in 1923 of the travelling school in Piani d’Aspromonte, with the teacher busy holding exams with a makeshift blackboard hanging on the front of a shed made of wooden poles and unbaked clay in the midst of a desolate plain, and in photographs taken in 1922 in the day schools of Malfone Ferrito, San Carlo di Condofuri and Sarrotino, in 1923 in Terratelle (a suburb of San Pietro in Guarano) and Vuturino, in 1924 in Spropolo and Ursini and in 1925 in the day school in Belloro.<sup>41</sup>

It is not known what criteria Zanotti Bianco adopted for choosing the photographs for publication in his investigative book, but we may legitimately surmise that he deliberately chose not to illustrate the texts with excessively crude, gut-wrenching pictures in order to avoid exposing his flank to the new Fascist regime,<sup>42</sup> which might well have siezed the opportunity to brand as defeatist and unpatriotic an association such as the ANIMI whose leading members<sup>43</sup> had on more than one occasion

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<sup>40</sup> The series entitled “Photographs” (1904-1966) comprises approximately 13,000 photographs, slides and drawings recording the association’s action in the educational, economic and health-related spheres in the southern regions.

<sup>41</sup> These photographs have not been reproduced here inasmuch as it has been impossible to obtain the authorisation required to do so.

<sup>42</sup> We should remember that only a few months earlier —following the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the Unitary Socialist Party in the Italian Chamber of Deputies after the scission of the Socialist Party— Zanotti Bianco was one of the first to make a stand against the reactionary nature of Fascism, publishing a long article in the English “Contemporary Review” in which he critically rejected the contention that Fascism sunk its roots in the Risorgimento and demonstrated its ideological nature, developing a fascinating contrary theory linking the struggles of the Risorgimento with democratic interventionism and anti-Fascism (see: Umberto Zanotti Bianco, “The Anti-Risorgimento. Risorgimento v. Fascismo. The work of Fascismo in Italy”, *Contemporary Review* 126 (1924): 567-576).

<sup>43</sup> In addition to Zanotti Bianco, they included, among others, such thinkers with known anti-Fascist leanings as Michele Cifarelli, Giustino Fortunato, Giuseppe Isnardi, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, Manlio Rossi Doria and Gaetano Salvemini.

evinced their political dissent and their disapproval of the triumphant tone adopted by the regime's propaganda, and to have thus deprived it of its authority in the running of day and evening school in Calabria, Basilicata, Sicily and Sardinia. Zanutti Bianco probably realised that the public scandal triggered by photographs showing in too crude a fashion the conditions prevailing in schools in the "New Italy"'s most backward regions would have ended up indirectly undermining the job of alerting Italian public opinion "to the extremely serious problem of education in the South",<sup>44</sup> which he considered to be part and parcel of the tasks with which the ANIMI had been entrusted.

Yet despite these precautions, the investigative book of 1925 still managed to cause a huge stir among experts. In a review of the volume published in the periodical edited by educationalist Giuseppe Lombardo Radice,<sup>45</sup> writer Bianca Rossi praised the enquiry for recording the tragic state of schools in Calabria—including with the use of photographs—and voicing the hope that the government would learn a due "lesson from this extremely useful book".<sup>46</sup> We can gauge the deep impact that the photographs had on public opinion from a small article published in the periodical *I Diritti della Scuola* regarding the transformation of the old convent in Luzzi into a school building. The article tells us that "the political press has often referred to them [photographs] so that people could appreciate the seriousness and the urgency of the problem of finding homes for schools in southern Italy and the islands".<sup>47</sup> By the same token, an article carried in the Rome-based Istituto Italiano di Igiene, Previdenza e Assistenza Sociale<sup>48</sup>'s magazine pointed out that the book made "an unforgettable impression, brought home even more harshly by the clear illustrations testifying to the miserable living conditions of the unfortunate people of Calabria" and urged the government to "make

<sup>44</sup> Zanutti Bianco, *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> It is worth pointing out that a few months earlier Giuseppe Lombardo Radice had resigned his post as Director General of Elementary Education at the Ministry of Public Education during the incumbency of Giovanni Gentile following the Matteotti murder and was harshly persecuted by the Fascist regime thereafter. In this connection, see Giacomo Cives, *Attivismo e antifascismo in Giuseppe Lombardo Radice* (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> *Educazione nazionale* VII, no. 3 (1925): 53.

<sup>47</sup> "Un esempio", *I diritti della scuola* xxvii, no. 16 (1926): 230.

<sup>48</sup> I.e. Italian Hygiene, Welfare and Social Assistance Institute.

haste in erasing this blot".<sup>49</sup> The official bulletin of the Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo, for its part, stressed that the rural school building issue was a problem throughout the country, not just in the South,<sup>50</sup> and it voiced its scepticism regarding the possibility that the government really could manage to remedy the situation, calling on public opinion to bring greater pressure to bear over the issue.<sup>51</sup> What school director Giovanni Turci wrote in his review of the volume published in *La Nuova Scuola Italiana* is emblematic:

If loudly raising an issue leads to setting out down the path to its solution, then we must give Zanotti Bianco's book [...] the credit for having the courage to denounce an ill even if its dishonours us. Ills can be cured only when they are discovered and we are not afraid of them. [...] We in Italy are a little too accustomed to looking the other way when something shames us, as though failing to look where the pain lies were capable of soothing the suffering limb. And the state of public schools in the South, and especially in Calabria, is truly painful and pitiful.<sup>52</sup>

The regime did not appreciate Zanotti Bianco's "revelation of shame", and it immediately homed in on the numerous initiatives in support of public education promoted by the ANIMI in the South, such initiatives

<sup>49</sup> "Le condizioni della scuola nel Mezzogiorno", *Difesa sociale* IV, no. 2 (1925): 44.

<sup>50</sup> The Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo in Milan had already promoted "an inquiry into the state of Italy's poorest schools" in 1922 and in an attempt to make the inquiry even more effective it was "collecting photographs illustrating school buildings" ("Un'inchiesta fotografica sulle scuole rurali", *Le Vie d'Italia* xxviii, no. 4 (1922): 441), in the awareness that it was necessary to forge "a public opinion determined no longer to tolerate the present disgrace" and that "only the press, the voice of the lecturer and the screening of revealing photographs can succeed in forging this public opinion" ("Il Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo", *Ingegneria* IV, no. 8 (1925): 310). In 1931 —also in order to put the public perception that rural school buildings were an exclusively southern problem into its proper perspective— the Milan-based organisation promoted an inquiry into the state of the school buildings in Lombardy, its results subsequently being published in a volume entitled: Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo, *Le condizioni edilizie delle piccole scuole della Lombardia: inchiesta* (Milano: Tumminelli, 1933). In connection with these initiatives and, on a broader level, with the awareness campaign promoted in relation to this issue, see Maria Maddalena Rossi, *Il Gruppo d'Azione per le Scuole del Popolo di Milano* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2004), 206-208.

<sup>51</sup> "Il martirio della scuola", *Bollettino* VII, no. 25 (1925): 24.

<sup>52</sup> *La nuova scuola italiana* II, no. 23 (1925): 357. It also argued, among other things, that "The education system is the yardstick of a people's degree of civilisation and the cornerstone of a nation's progress", thus confirming the central role played by the modernist paradigm in the debate on the public image of the school.



being in danger of relegating the Ministry run by Pietro Fedele to the background or even of showing it in a bad light. In a review published in the magazine *Levana* edited by Ernesto Codignola in 1925, Nazareno Padellaro levelled an unmitigated attack on the book, faulting the teachers who cooperated with the author for their defeatism and roundly condemning the aid-based vision of the welfare state that they showed they harboured.

Those who make do with inhabiting filthy, unhygienic schools are unworthy of having any other. [...] What should we think of people who cannot be bothered to find out the facilitations granted by the state for the erection of school buildings? In its decree dated 31 December 1923 the state says: “Those municipalities with the highest percentage of illiterates must be helped first”. That in itself is sufficient to unhinge the political arrogance of the North, if indeed it ever existed. As Lombardo Radice says in a letter published therein, those favoured by the law are the South, all the other scholastically poor areas like the South and small rural centres: and the man who inspired that decree should certainly know what he is talking about.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the regime’s explicit adoption of a stance, the spotlight was to continue to shine on rural schools for a long time to come. Almost a year after *Il martirio della scuola in Calabria* was published, a teacher named Alberto Latronico published—in the “Problemi da risolvere” column—a lengthy reportage on rural school buildings in Italy in the Touring Club Italiano’s monthly magazine, illustrating his article with numerous photographs.<sup>54</sup> Latronico explicitly states his aim in his opening paragraph:

The problem that is broadly addressed in this article, with a wealth of figures and with the heat of passionate interest, may on the face of it appear to be somewhat unrelated to our association’s agenda. But as our readers are well aware, we do not intend to publicise or to protect only our country’s natural beauty and artistic riches. We want Italy to be able to be on a par in every aspect with

<sup>53</sup> *Levana* IV, no. 1-2 (1925): 140-141. The review was an explicit attack on the ANIMI and on its entire management group, but in particular on Giuseppe Lombardo Radice who, as we have seen, was guilty of betraying Giovanni Gentile, and Codignola was Gentile’s staunch disciple.

<sup>54</sup> Alberto Latronico, “L’edilizia scolastica rurale”, *Le Vie d’Italia: rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano* xxxii, no. 10 (1926): 1089-1099.

the most advanced nations in the world and know that the first tool of education and civilisation is the school. This article explains how appropriate government measures may be supplemented by local authorities and private citizens and how to win the great battle on which all other victories depend: the war on illiteracy.<sup>55</sup>

Latronico's premise is interesting inasmuch as it points to the school as a "tool of education and civilisation", achieving this by resorting to the "metaphor of modernity" category whose crucial role in this paper we highlighted earlier. Basically, a modern country like Italy that aspired to take a seat alongside Europe's other great powers could no longer tolerate the dearth or inadequacy of rural school buildings. To back up his statements, Latronico, who hailed from Molise himself, provided several figures:

The condition of school buildings has deteriorated considerably today. According to official statistics for 1922, Italy has 37,199 unsuitable or missing classrooms, which accounts for 48.5% of existing classes. The southern regions are missing 62% while the northern regions are 38% behind. If we take a closer look at these figures, we may feel cause for concern. The average percentage in the North oscillates between considerable extremes according to the demographic philosophy of the various areas. In Basilicata, a characteristic southern region, the percentage of unsuitable classrooms stands at 99% of existing classes; in Lazio and in the provinces of Foggia and L'Aquila that figure stands at 71%; in the province of Reggio Calabria it stands at 68%; and in the provinces of Caserta and Lucca it stands at 67% and 62% respectively.<sup>56</sup>

Latronico continues his examination by citing the recent inquiries conducted by Umberto Zanotti Bianco and Giuseppe Isnardi<sup>57</sup> in

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<sup>55</sup> Latronico, "L'edilizia scolastica rurale", 1089.

<sup>56</sup> Latronico, "L'edilizia scolastica rurale", 1090-1091.

<sup>57</sup> Giuseppe Isnardi directed all of the schools run by the ANIMI in Calabria from 1921 to 1928. From 1925 to 1954 Isnardi was to devote almost every article he published in the Touring Club Italiano's magazine to small, isolated villages in Calabria (such as Pentedattilo, Praja a Mare, Tiriolo, Tropea etc.) and to their history and local traditions; particularly interesting in that connection is his article entitled: "Pentedattilo", *Le Vie d'Italia* xxxi, no. 7 (1925): 772 *et seq.* For Isnardi, see the thorough (if somewhat dated) biography by Tommaso Pedio: "Giuseppe Isnardi", *Archivio Storico Pugliese* XVIII, no. 1-4 (1965): 303-313.

Calabria on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale per gl'Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia, and by Giuseppe Stolfi in Basilicata,<sup>58</sup> although he stresses that the problem is by no means confined to the southern regions but concerns the Peninsula as a whole and is particularly acute in depressed rural areas, in the areas of the Appenines furthest inland and in the more distant reaches of the Alps. Following in the footsteps of Zanotti Bianco and the photographs that he used to illustrate his investigative book, Latronico provides his own article with a rich illustrative apparatus comprising twenty-four black-and-white photographs recording the pitiful state of schools in central Italy, for example in Pietracamela (in the province of Teramo) and Montevitozzo, Elmo Pianacce [fig. 1] and San Quirico di Sorano (in the province of Grosseto), and in northern Italy, for instance in Varsaia (in the province of Pavia), in San Bernardo di Venasca (in the province of Cuneo), in Regina Fittarezza (in the province of Milan) and in Sant'Antonio di Teglio (in the province of Sondrio) [fig. 2]. The captions describing the buildings depicted consist in excerpts from letters sent in by teachers. For instance, the school in San Quirico di Sorano is described thus: "It is a pokey classroom that was used as a storeroom until not so many years ago. It receives very little light from a single small window. It is extremely damp and unhealthy, also on account of the fumes from a sewer running along the back wall and from a public washing trough below".<sup>59</sup> The caption for the school in Sant'Antonio di Teglio reads: "The exterior requires no comment. The interior consists in a room in a pitiful state with little light coming in from two tiny windows in the west wall. A hayloft sits above the school, a stable below it".<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> In connection with Basilicata, the author referred his readers to: Giuseppe Stolfi, *La Basilicata senza scuole* (Torino: Piero Gobetti, 1923), summarising arguments and considerations previously expounded in a number of articles published by Stolfi in Gobetti's magazine *Energie Nuove* a few years earlier: 5 (1919): 95-98; 6 (1919): 120-124; 10 (1919): 213-216; 12 (1920): 249-252. Giuseppe Stolfi (1902-1976) was born in Basilicata and studied law in Turin, where he met anti-Fascist thinker Piero Gobetti—who had a major influence on him—and wrote for the periodicals *Energie Nuove* and *Rivoluzione Liberale*; he was one of the people in December 1924 who signed the "Appello ai meridionali", drafted by Guido Dorso, urging southern intellectuals to establish a new political elite capable of reviving the fortunes of the people of the South while simultaneously renewing the foundations of Italy's Unity.

<sup>59</sup> Latronico, "L'edilizia scolastica rurale", 1094.

<sup>60</sup> Latronico, "L'edilizia scolastica rurale", 1091.



Figure 1. *Exterior of the elementary school in Elmo Pianacce*  
[from: *Le Vie d'Italia* XXXII, no. 10 (1926): 1093]



Figure 2. *Exterior of the elementary school in Sant'Antonio di Tegli*  
[from: *Le Vie d'Italia* XXXII, no. 10 (1926): 1091]

This umpteenth series of “photo-denounce” published in the Touring Club Italiano’s monthly magazine was the last to be tolerated by the regime. It is well-nigh impossible to find any trace of further photographic campaigns dating to the years immediately thereafter, despite the fact that conditions were still disastrous in numerous rural schools all over Italy. The so-called “leggi fascistissime” (including a law curbing freedom of the press) and the subsequent directives issued by Gaetano Polverelli, Benito Mussolini’s press attaché, in 1931 drastically limited the freedom of the press and began to steer information on the basis of government orders. To grasp the pervasive nature of the regime’s heavy-handed intervention, it is worth looking at a few excerpts of these directives in relation to some of the elements present in the photographic inquiries mentioned above:

Point 2 – Check reports and articles from a national and Fascist viewpoint, in other words checking if are the publications useful or harmful for Italy and the Regime.

[...]

Point 4 – Infuse the newspaper with optimism, trust and confidence in the future. Eliminate alarmist, pessimistic, catastrophic or depressing news.

Point 5 – Focus on the operational side [of social work], not on the pitiful side. We must not give the rest of the world an impression of serious poverty, which does not exist.

[...]

Point 15 – Photographs of events and panoramas of Italy must always be examined from the standpoint of their political impact. [...] in the case of new roads, monumental areas and so forth, discard those that do not give a good impression of order, activity and traffic.

[...]

Point 18 – No longer use the term South. The South in the New Italy can begin south of Sicily.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Riccardo Cassero, *Le veline del Duce: come il fascismo controllava la stampa* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 2004), 10-11. For the relationship between information and propaganda under the Fascist regime in general, see also Nicola Tranfaglia, *La stampa del regime, 1932-1943: le veline del Minculpop per orientare l'informazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 2005).



The regime's orders were explicit: no further criticism would be tolerated. The publication of any more pictures of dilapidated schools would be considered a serious blot on the image of Fascist Italy and would be harshly repressed. The press would depict schools using only photographs portraying the new, spotless school buildings built by the regime and the orderly ranks of Balilla and Piccole Italiane (Fascist Youth Organization) busy with their educational activities in a vision as idyllic as it was hollow.

Albeit in a now seriously hampered context, the ANIMI was able to pursue its activities for another three years, until 1928 when the mandate it received from the Opera contro l'Analfabetismo was finally repealed due to the impossibility of reconciling the ideological positions of the regime with those of its directors. 1928 is a crucial year in our reconstruction of events<sup>62</sup> because that was the year in which Zanotti Bianco spent a few weeks in the company of Gaetano Piacentini in Africo. This small mountain village, isolated by a deep gorge created by the Aposcipo stream, suffered from endemic sickness and chronic malnutrition and was almost totally devoid of classrooms. The photographs taken by Zanotti Bianco that year show the village children posing in filthy rags, the squalid interiors of the hovels in which they lived, and their mothers carrying the material required to furnish the new kindergarten built by the ANIMI on their heads up well nigh impassable paths.<sup>63</sup> The photographs were never published, nor could Zanotti Bianco ever publicly reveal the feelings triggered in him by his stay "among the lost folk" before the collapse of the Fascist regime.

## THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTHERN ITALY IN PHOTOJOURNALISM AFTER WORLD WAR II (1946-55)

In the aftermath of World War II —after the oblivion determined by the stringent propaganda measures enforced by the regime on the most critical

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<sup>62</sup> 1928 is an important year also for another reason: the French writer Hélène Tuzet travelled in Calabria and Sicily from January to March to study the state of teaching in Italy in relation to the social and political situation at the time, on behalf of the Laura Spelman-Rockefeller Foundation. Tuzet published a detailed report of her experience, placing particular emphasis on the role played by the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia, in a volume entitled: *Calabre et Sicilie: une enquête* (Ginevra: Slatkine, 1928). In this connection, see Hélène Tuzet and Jules Destrée, *In Calabria durante il fascismo: due viaggi-inchiesta* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> These photographs have not been reproduced here inasmuch as it has been impossible to obtain the authorisation required to do so.

situations in the national education system—the public image of the school thankfully shook off its phony uniformity. On the one hand, depictions of school continued to seek their inspiration in the modernist paradigm discussed above, reflecting the subordination of education to the “race for modernity” that was to become such a characteristic feature of the “economic boom” years;<sup>64</sup> while on the other, the media started once again to expose the most spectacular instances of dilapidated schools by publishing photographic reportages with more or less explicit political aims.

This trend was headed up, once again, by Umberto Zanotti Bianco, who published a report on his time in Africo in December 1928 in novel form, in episodes carried in the authoritative literary review *Il Ponte* (founded by Piero Calamandrei) from May to August 1946.<sup>65</sup> The novel, entitled *Tra la perduta gente (Africo)* dwelt on the miserable living conditions afflicting the people of Africo, holed up in their hovels without heating or sanitary facilities, undernourished and beset by endemic sickness that had considerably boosted the local infant mortality rate. The novel devoted a great deal of space to the school:

This morning, before beginning my customary inquiry, I chose to visit the school. Favasuli accompanied me to meet the meek little teacher who runs the second and third elementary classes combined. She has a mere twenty-six pupils on her register, and of those, only twenty or so actually attend class. Given that it is impossible to teach children in the dilapidated shack with no floor and no windows in which I saw two mules tethered, the poor woman teaches in her bedroom, almost in the dark. “Only four pupils have paid for their reports”, she told me disconsolately. “I should send the others away [...] but how can I? Poverty is truly widespread, as you will have noticed. I do not have the heart to do so [...] The other day I sent a child home because he did not have a pen, in the hope that

<sup>64</sup> In this sense —also in the light of the results achieved by Antonio Viñao and María José Martínez Ruiz-Funes— it would be interesting to analyse the depiction of schools in photographic postcards printed in Italy from the 1940s to the 1960s, when alongside the landscape, architectural and cultural beauties of the localities portrayed, they also began to carry pictures of more modern civil engineering works such as dams, bridges, railway lines and school buildings in an effort to testify the march towards modernity (see Viñao and Martínez Ruiz-Funes, “Advertising, Marketing and Image”).

<sup>65</sup> Umberto Zanotti Bianco, “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – I”, *Il Ponte* II no.5 (1946): 405-414; Id., “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – II”, *Il Ponte* II, no.6 (1946): 509-519; Id., “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – III”, *Il Ponte* II, no. 7-8 (1946): 642-648.

he would go and buy one. He has not been back since. Only four children have paid the five lire for the textbook... I ordered it some time ago... but nothing has arrived yet. You see [...] we lack any form of exercise book, or pen nibs for poor children. Exercise books cost 25 cents each, while nibs cost three lire the pair [...] who has that kind of money? I would be happy to pay but I barely have enough to get by on myself". The first-year teacher, whom some passerby had called, peered in through the door. She is in exactly the same condition. She has fifteen pupils on her books, but none of them have paid for the report card. She has merged her first-year pupils with the only pupil in the fourth year of elementary school. I noted down everything they needed and I shall send it to them from Reggio, but in my heart I feel a sense of rebellion welling up. Are these poor wretches wrong to see the state simply in the guise of the taxman or the forest guard trooper? For twenty years these people have been living in conditions so degrading that anyone with a modicum of pride in humanity would blush for shame.<sup>66</sup>

Zanotti Bianco's widely acclaimed tale had the merit of focusing the public debate on the "questione meridionale" so long ignored by Fascism, presenting its resolution as a necessary precondition for the social and economic growth of a country that had so recently emerged from a devastating war. The pitiful state of education in the southern regions was placed once again at the very heart of this matter.

Zanotti Bianco's crucial job in alerting public opinion is, however, unlikely to have been sufficient to shine the media spotlight on the distressing condition of schools in the inland regions of the South without the presence of three other factors: the spread of photographic agencies specialising in news photography in the aftermath of the war, which in turn spawned the profession of photo-reporter and the growing use of the camera as a tool for social exposé; the thirst for truth that swept a country accustomed over the previous twenty years to the idyllic depiction of reality fed to it by the Fascist regime's propaganda, which was undoubtedly reassuring but was at the same time both monotonous and distorted; and the extraordinary success enjoyed by richly illustrated news magazines distributed nationwide that dealt with current events, lifestyle and topical stories, and that

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<sup>66</sup> Zanotti Bianco, "Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – II", 513-514.

enjoyed a peak circulation of 4,500,000 copies a week from 1947 to 1952.<sup>67</sup> In this connection, Uliano Lucas and Tatiana Agliani write:

It began with photos of the reconstruction, with pictures of life resuming in the big cities, with factories rebuilding and reopening, and with the long-hushed up backwardness of the South, documenting the major current events, the crime and love stories that Mussolini's Italy had hidden from the Italian people's gaze and that a people thirsting for knowledge and desperate to see the country's true circumstances demanded of this new press, of the morning and afternoon papers, of the weeklies that began to spread and increase in the space of a few years until by the early Fifties to reach the highest number of such publications in Europe in proportion to its population.<sup>68</sup>



Figure 3. *Interior of an elementary school in an unknown locality (1950?)*

[Giovanni Battista Poletto © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, fondo "Gazzetta del Popolo", fototeca 1, busta 5230]

<sup>67</sup> This information comes from: Silvia Pizzetti, *I rotocalchi e la storia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1982), 22.

<sup>68</sup> Uliano Lucas and Tatiana Agliani, "L'immagine fotografica, 1945-2000", in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 20. L'immagine fotografica 1945-2000*, ed. Uliano Lucas (Torino: Einaudi, 2004), 5 (in this connection, see especially the paragraph entitled: "La scoperta della fotografia realista nell'Italia del dopoguerra", 4-19).





Figure 4. *Interior of an elementary school in an unknown locality (1950?)*  
[Giovanni Battista Poletto © Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, fondo  
"Gazzetta del Popolo", fototeca 1, busta 5230]

This complex pattern of concomitant causes in the immediate aftermath of the war led to a boom in "photo-denounce", the very emblem of the country's newly rediscovered press freedom. Influenced by the Neorealist trend then very much in fashion in the film industry, the press sought to depict reality in a markedly realistic vein, without filters or interpretation getting in the way, and focusing in particular on the living conditions of the poorer classes.<sup>69</sup> The school in the South, whose age-old problems were once again in the public eye,<sup>70</sup> was a perfect subject to portray.

<sup>69</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the potential interaction between photography and Neorealism, see Ennery Taramelli, *Viaggio nell'Italia del Neorealismo: la fotografia tra letteratura e cinema* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1995).

<sup>70</sup> The most important teaching periodicals in the South began to carry their first inquiries into the theme at this very time; in this connection, see Vincenzo Muro, "L'analfabetismo in Italia e la necessità di combatterlo", *Scuola nostra: rivista quindicinale della scuola elementare del Mezzogiorno* III, no. 13-14 (1948): 3-4; "3.000 alunni in 16 aule!", in *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud* I, no. 5-6 (1948), 22; Nicolò Piccinni, "Il problema della scuola nel Mezzogiorno", *Scuola Nostra* IV, no. 7 (1949): 1-2.



So it was not mere coincidence that prompted the weekly *L'Europeo*<sup>71</sup> to publish, in March 1948, a series of photographs taken in Africo where time appeared to have stood still since 1928. The photographs, which are extraordinarily powerful in visual terms, were taken by the photographer Tino Petrelli,<sup>72</sup> a correspondent with the Publifoto Agency, to illustrate a multi-facetted inquiry into conditions in the South, promoted by Arrigo Benedetti and conducted by the journalist Tommaso Besozzi on the Milan-based weekly's behalf. Petrelli's photographs were published with two articles: the two shots taken inside the school in Africo were used to illustrate an article on the Calabrian mystic Fortunata Evolo,<sup>73</sup> while another two pictures documenting the shameful living conditions in the village houses with men and animals living side by side, were published in the next edition to illustrate an article on Africo itself.<sup>74</sup> The two photographs taken in the school were described in masterly fashion by Vito Teti:

<sup>71</sup> This topical weekly —founded by Arrigo Benedetti in 1945 and published by Editoriale Domus until 1953, when it was sold to Rizzoli— became famous for its adoption of an innovative graphic formula based on using the same format as daily newspapers, thus allowing it to host innovative graphic solutions and to have an extremely flexible layout.

<sup>72</sup> Valentino (Tino) Petrelli (1922-2001), a photographer, began to work for Vincenzo Carrese's photographic agency Publifoto in 1937, developing negatives and printing photographs. Carrese was the first person in the postwar era to intuit the potential of the new editorial market and he transformed the agency into what would soon become the biggest supplier of photojournalism images to Italy's leading mastheads. Hired as a professional photographer, Petrelli became one of Carrese's closest assistants, producing numerous successful photographic reportages, for example on Piazzale Loreto (1945), Africo (1948) and the Polesine flood (1951). Among other things, it is worth pointing out that Petrelli also produced a well-known photograph (taken on the Appennines in the province of Modena in 1959) showing a group of boys and girls from the villages of Barletta and Castellino crossing the river Panaro on a rudimentary cable car (consisting in a metal cable and a handful of pulleys) to reach the nearby elementary school in Guiglia; the historical archive of the Istituto Luce in Rome —in the "Cinegiornali "Mondo Libero"" series— has a cinema newsreel entitled "Scolari appesi a un filo" ("Schoolchildren hanging on a thread") dated 14 May 1959, also portraying the brave schoolchildren of Guiglia. For this photographer, see *Tino Petrelli: fotogiornalismo in Italia*, ed. Italo Zannier (Pordenone: Edizioni Concordia Sette, 1980).

<sup>73</sup> Tommaso Besozzi, "L'errore del vescovo di Mileto. Da dieci anni la scienza studia Natuzza dei Morti ma per i calabresi essa è la donna del miracolo", *L'Europeo* IV, no. 11 (1948): 8.

<sup>74</sup> Tommaso Besozzi, "'Troppe strette le strade per l'ombrello aperto'. Il più disperato paese della Calabria", *L'Europeo* IV, no. 12 (1948): 6. Among other things, the article stated that: "In Africo [...] there is neither water nor electricity; there are neither shops nor inns; people eat chocolate-coloured bread made of wild lentil flour; the houses, apart from a very few, have only one room and that is shared by people and animals alike. In Africo there are only three houses with lavatories, and only three people own an umbrella. But given that the village streets are too narrow to open an umbrella, they can only use them when they go to Bova or to Motticelle". The article mentions Umberto Zanotti Bianco, calling him "Africo's great protector", although it erroneously states that he "produced a courageous report which caused a huge stir" and resulted in his being sent into confinement; it is true that Zanotti Bianco was monitored by the Fascist police from 1928 (as we can see in his personal file, no. 55044, now held in the Casellario Politico Centrale at the Central State Archive in Rome), but he was not sent into confinement until 1941.

Six girls are seated at wooden desks, four facing the camera and four seen from the side. They're all busy poring over their primers, almost as though they were searching for something hidden, something deep. None of them are looking at the camera. They all seem to be mesmerised by figures and words; a girl in the second row appears to be looking at something she can't quite grasp, while another has a woollen headdress on her head that allows her hair to peep through. The floor planks, out of kilter, tell us that we're in an old and unsound environment. A torn map of Calabria hangs on the back wall on the left of the shot. Two girls are barefoot as they try to warm their feet over two metal braziers containing ashes and charcoal set by the desks.<sup>75</sup>

It is worth noting here that the photographs of the pitiful state of the school in Africo were not published, as one might have expected them to be, to illustrate the article on the village described only two years earlier by Umberto Zanotti Bianco in the magazine *Il Ponte*, but to accompany an article on a woman who frequently received people from all over the world in her home seeking news of their deceased loved ones or information regarding their ailments, a living witness to the survival of ancestral superstitions and beliefs in the backward culture of southern Italy. The combination of words and pictures, once again no mere coincidence, implicitly prompted the reader to ask the question: how can the people of the South possibly pull into line with the modern world if even their schools, the very beacon of civilisation, are in such an appalling state? With the visual strength of his images, Petrelli succeeded in bringing out the comprehensive condition of backwardness that assailed the South through the portrait of a school which not only fails in every possible way to meet the aesthetic paradigm of schools as a factor for modernisation, but which reveals the serious underdevelopment and paralysis afflicting southern society as a whole. His "timeless scenes" evoked the past, not the present or the future. What we see does not tie in chronologically with the date we intuitively assign the picture on the basis of objective criteria (the frame, the definition of the image, the quality of the print and so on). That is why we are so often disoriented by it. In

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<sup>75</sup> Vito Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi: memoria e storia dei paesi abbandonati* (Roma: Donzelli, 2004), 222.

his reportage, Petrelli expressed the intense capability for ethnographic exploration (just as Patellani was to do at a later date) which was crucial for a correct interpretation of the mournful scenes of daily life that he recorded in Africo.<sup>76</sup>



Figure 5. *Interior of the elementary school in Africo (1948)*  
[Valentino Petrelli © Archivio Publifoto – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]

<sup>76</sup> Suffice it here to point out that, in those same years, numerous photographers recorded the scientific expeditions conducted by Italian anthropologists in the South in the context of their demological and ethno-musicological research; for example, Arturo Zavattini and Franco Pinna. For ethnographic photographs, see Diego Carpitella, "Franco Pinna e la fotografia etnografica in Italia", in Franco Pinna, *Viaggio nelle terre del silenzio. Fotografie di Franco Pinna*, (Milano: Idea Editions, 1980), 4-11; Clara Gallini and Francesco Faeta (eds.), *I viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto de Martino* (Torino: Bollati-Boringhieri, 1999); Francesco Faeta, "Il sonno sotto le stelle. Arturo Zavattini e le prime fotografie etnografiche demartiniane in Lucania", *Ossimori* 8 (1997): 56-57; Francesco Faeta (ed.), *Arturo Zavattini fotografo in Lucania* (Milano: Federico Motta Editore, 2003); Francesco Faeta, *Fotografi e fotografie. Uno sguardo antropologico* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006); in particular, see the chapter entitled "Il sonno sotto le stelle. Arturo Zavattini, Ernesto de Martino, un paese lontano", 113-139.

Yet those photographs also served a different purpose, which emerges from an analysis of the original captions published in *L'Europeo*. The caption to Figure 5 read: "There are no windows, the heating is whatever pupils can bring from home in the way of embers in an old basin. The problems of the South are legion, but the schools there embody them all. The problems weren't resolved by the Fascist dictatorship and they won't be resolved by any other dictatorship, but by the country concerning itself with the issue". The caption to Figure 6 appeared to carry on the thread: "Now, on the eve of the elections, even the poverty of the people of Calabria is in danger of becoming an election campaign issue. The propagandists are coming up from the plains, seeking to rouse men and women whose brains are weakened by need".<sup>77</sup>



Figure 6. *Interior of the elementary school in Africo (1948)*

[Valentino Petrelli © Archivio Publifoto – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]

<sup>77</sup> *L'Europeo* IV, no. 11 (1948): 8.



Figure 7. *Interior of the elementary school in Jotta (1952)*

[Federico Patellani © Studio Federico Patellani – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]

It is clear from the captions that these “photographic exposés” were being used as a subtle form of propaganda by a secular, liberal weekly whose three basic political aims were: to denounce the *débâcle* of the previous regime which, for all its myriad proclamations, had failed to ease the vicelike grip of illiteracy that continue to hold the South in a stranglehold; to implicitly condemn the cynicism of Communist propaganda-mongers prepared to speculate on the ancestral poverty of these people “whose brains were weakened by poverty” in order to garner the votes required to govern (the “other dictatorship” incapable of resolving the problem was the pro-Soviet dictatorship which, according to the anti-Communist rhetoric typical of the Italian public debate in this political phase, would take power if the Left won the election);<sup>78</sup> and lastly, to

<sup>78</sup> On 20 January 1945 the people of Africo attacked the local carabinieri barracks, forcing the officers present to seek refuge in the cellar and only releasing them after disarming them; following this episode, Socialist Party and Communist Party sections and a Chamber of Labour were set up in the village. For this episode, see Vito Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi* (Roma: Donzelli, 2014), 225-226.



subliminally present to public opinion the potential consequences of a suspension of the Marshall Plan announced by the US Administration in the event of a Communist win in the general election called for 18 April 1948, in other words only a few days after the photographs' publication. Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that —four years after Petrelli's photographs were published in *L'Europeo*— they were used once again by the Communist monthly *Noi Donne* to illustrate an article stating that they had been published for propaganda purposes by a bourgeois magazine in an article which did not even bother to address the reality of school or the issues of illiteracy or of under-age labour by which the popular front set such store.<sup>79</sup>

Another photojournalism campaign probing the state of schools in the South was published by the photographer Federico Patellani<sup>80</sup> in the weekly magazine *Epoca*<sup>81</sup> in June 1952.<sup>82</sup> Patellani was involved at the time in producing a sweeping report on the South of Italy as a whole for the weekly magazine *Tempo*,<sup>83</sup> owned by the same publishing group,

<sup>79</sup> "Bambini italiani 1952", *Noi Donne* VI, no. 16 (1952): 6-7. In this connection, in particular, see Martina Caruso, *Italian Humanist Photography from Fascism to the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 94 (on a broader level, see the paragraph entitled "The Politics of Miseria and the Communist Debate", 94-98).

<sup>80</sup> Federico Patellani (1911-1977), a photographer, began to work exclusively for the weekly *Tempo* in 1946, profoundly renewing the way readers were informed thanks to what he called "photo-texts", which consisted in extensive photographic coverage with long captions that he penned himself, totally overturning the hierarchical relationship between text and image. He ceased working for *Tempo* in 1952 and founded Pat Photo Pictures, becoming a freelancer and availing himself of the cooperation of numerous photographers. For this figure, see Federico Patellani, *Federico Patellani: documenti e notizie raccolti in trent'anni di viaggio nel Sud* (Milano: Editphoto, 1977); K. Bolognesi and G. Calvenzi (eds.), *Federico Patellani: fotografie e cinema 1943-1960* (Prato: Archivio Fotografico Toscano – Regione Toscana, 2005), and *Federico Patellani: professione fotoreporter* (Cinisello Balsamo: Museo della fotografia contemporanea – Silvana Editoriale, 2015).

<sup>81</sup> This illustrated weekly, founded by Alberto Mondadori in 1950 and published until 1997, stood out in the broad panorama of its fellows for its unique graphic layout making abundant use of glossy paper and of photographic reportage.

<sup>82</sup> Federico Patellani, "Le scuole impossibili: scantinati, antiche stalle, corridoi senza finestre sono diventati aule; in qualche classe mancano i banchi, gli sgabelli e perfino il gesso per scrivere sulla lavagna", *Epoca* III, no. 90 (1952): 44-48.

<sup>83</sup> This illustrated weekly —founded by Alberto Mondadori in 1939 and sold to Aldo Palazzi in 1946— took its inspiration from the US weekly *Life* and set out to compete with *Oggi*, the weekly published by its competitor Rizzoli. It was the first Italian colour magazine to assign equal importance to journalists and photographers, and indeed all its photographs bore the name of the photographer at the bottom in the same way that its written articles bore the name of the author.

entitled “Italia Magica”.<sup>84</sup> As had been the case with Petrelli’s reportage, a combination of the ethnographic interests expressed by the author and of his documentary intentions mould the perspective from which the report looks at the situation in schools, except that in Patellani’s case the idea of social exposé is central to his purpose and his pictures are not subservient to political ends. Patellani wrote in the article:

You have to visit the region to grasp the seriousness of the school problem in certain areas of the South, a problem which the rhetoricians have kept hidden away in the cupboard for decades. In some villages children have to travel over ten kilometres on foot to get to school. And their schools are almost invariably situated in windowless corridors, former stables and cowsheds or agricultural tool sheds where the only opening is the door. The photographs published here describe these incredible scenarios better than any words ever could. Often, close by the erstwhile stable there is a functioning cowshed and the teacher’s words are permanently underscored by the lowing of cattle, or even the grunting of pigs. In one small village in Calabria I actually saw a classroom through which a cow and her calf had to pass in order to reach their pasture, because the classroom had only a plank wall separating it from the byre. When the calf was not in the meadow, he was particularly restless and noisy, smashing away at the planks with his horns and his snout, so the classroom contained in effect not just the teacher and his pupils but the teacher, his pupils and a calf. In winter, huge clouds of steam would issue from the animal’s mouth and, quite frankly, that didn’t help to make the air any purer. Yet neither the calf nor the teacher and his pupils seemed bothered by each others’ presence. (Unfortunately, the scene was witnessed also by a British journalist who was conducting the same inquiry as me).<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup> The reportage began with the article “Le streghe di Benevento hanno paura dei fari”, which stated: “With this illustrated article *Tempo* is launching the publication of a series of reportages that Federico Patellani has produced by wandering around Italy without any particular aim but simply listening to what people have to say, seeking the opinions of the simple people too far removed from the benefits that civilisation offers the more fortunate amongst us, in search of legends, personalities and situations that still contain a little of that magic that progress has not managed to snuff out” (*Tempo* XIV, no. 16 (1952): 18). The series ended with the article: “Si vince il gallo se si conosce la Traviata”, *Tempo* XIV, no. 29 (1952): 30-31.

<sup>85</sup> Patellani, “Le scuole impossibili”, 45.



Figure 8. *Exterior of the elementary school in Jotta (1952)*

[Federico Patellani © Studio Federico Patellani – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]



Figure 9. *Interior of the elementary school in Jotta (1952)*

[Federico Patellani © Studio Federico Patellani – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]



Figure 10. *Interior of the elementary school in Ghiandaro (1952)*

[Federico Patellani © Studio Federico Patellani – Regione Lombardia / Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milano-Cinisello Balsamo]

Patellani went on to depict the situation he encountered in the rural schools in Jotta and Ghiandaro, two small suburbs of San Marco Argentano in the province of Cosenza: in Jotta “the desks were so huge that the pupils, even clambering up onto their strawless chairs, could barely get their chins up over the top of them”, while in Ghiandaro “in the second-year kindergarten classes the desks were so small that the children could hardly sit at them and had to squeeze to fit in”, because they were a donation from a north Italian kindergarten. He concluded:

Very little has been done for the children that go to school in certain areas of the South. It is with a hint of remorse that we think of the numerous pompous public buildings in the big cities (the railway stations with their Assyrian and Babylonian columns, the marble-clad exhibition cities, and the mausoleum-like post offices) when we see the classrooms in Jotta, Ghiandaro, Matera and countless other villages in Calabria, Basilicata and



Puglia: these villages where the children grow up at impossible desks, endlessly repeating the school year until they're old enough to go to work and relegate school to their memory: a memory of straw and crumbling plaster falling from the ceiling. [...] Putting it in a nutshell, this journey to the region of improbable schools has prompted me to conclude that in certain regions everything needs to be done from scratch [...] Without exaggerating, one can say that many decades have been completely wasted in a large number of villages in the South.<sup>86</sup>

The article was accompanied by five photographs that Patellani himself took in the classrooms of the rural school in Jotta and another three taken at Ghiandaro.<sup>87</sup> The shots have the same visual force today as they did back then and as those of the photographs that Petrelli took in Africo four years earlier. But while *L'Europeo* used Petrelli's shots, as we have seen, for ideological purposes in the heated electoral debate then taking place, Patellani used his camera to record the pitiful state of rural schools in the South (symbolised by the two Calabrian villages) in order to draw the public's attention to the problem, but also to point the finger of accusation at the Fascist regime for long hiding the shameful state of school buildings in the South and wasting public money on the erection of monumental buildings whose sole purpose was pompous self-glorification.<sup>88</sup> Rubbing the South out of the public debate for over a decade in the wake of the directives issued to the media by Benito Mussolini's press attaché in 1931<sup>89</sup> and the regime's fictitious claim to have resolved the "questione meridionale" helped to ensure that "many decades have been completely wasted" in countless villages in the South. Once again the visual impact told of a backward society behind the times, certainly not of the modernity that the rest of the country in search of redemption, of a second chance, was so busy chasing after. Yet even as Patellani published his exposé, however aware he might have been of the emotional impact

<sup>86</sup> Patellani, "Le scuole impossibili", 46-47.

<sup>87</sup> Only three of these photographs are reproduced in this article (figs. 7-8-9). The entire reportage, now in the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea in Cinisello Balsamo, consisted in over thirty photographs.

<sup>88</sup> On this topic see the work of Bruno Tobia, especially "Salve o popolo d'eroi...". *La monumentalità fascista nelle fotografie dell'Istituto Luce* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> Cassero, *Le veline del Duce*, 10-11 (see point 18).



that photographs capable of describing “these incredible scenarios better than any words ever could” would be likely to trigger, it is interesting to note that he, too, yields to the call of shame when he mentions the inquiry being simultaneously conducted by a British journalist who saw and noted down the same impressions as him and who would thus shame our national education system in the eyes of the world. This, because in his wish to expose the situation, he needed to overcome the natural sense of shame that tended to safeguard, against all evidence, the public image of an institution such as the school whose crucial role in the country’s modernisation was universally recognised.

The “impossible schools” of Jotta and Ghiandaro caused a huge public stir nationwide and sparked a new wave of inquiries into the state of education in the country’s southern regions. It is interesting to note how, even in these inquiries conducted by ministerial officials and educationalists, photographic documentation began to be widely used. We can see examples of this in the inquiries conducted by Gustavo Sessa on rural buildings in the South,<sup>90</sup> which includes a photograph of the rural school in Vallazze, a suburb of Cercemaggiore in Molise, and a 19th century etching by Antonio Piccinni entitled “Scoletta rurale”, and by Luigi Volpicelli on the “agony of the school” in the South,<sup>91</sup> which includes two photographs, one of them taken by Giovan Battista Poletto<sup>92</sup> a few

<sup>90</sup> Gustavo Sessa, “La casa della scuola”, *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud* I no.2 (1952): 23-25.

<sup>91</sup> Luigi Volpicelli, “Il martirio della scuola nel Mezzogiorno”, *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud* I, no. 8 (1952): 12-14. The inquiry referred at length to a memorandum of almost the same name drafted by Umberto Zanotti Bianco on education in Calabria in 1925, specifying that, where school buildings were concerned, the south actually began at the gates of Rome, as one of his students had thoroughly documented in 1950 in a graduate dissertation on the state of schools in the Ciociaria region, and pointing out that many of the photographs attached to the 1925 investigative book showed “schools in better condition than they appear in my student’s documentary” (12). The student was in all likelihood Luigi Borrelli, who published an essay several years later entitled “La situazione scolastica e culturale e gli atteggiamenti verso l’educazione in un centro agricolo della Ciociaria”, in *Educazione e condizionamento sociale*, ed. Aldo Visalberghi (Bari: Laterza, 1964), 87-108. No references have been found in the records held by the Historical Archive of Rome’s Università degli Studi “La Sapienza”.

<sup>92</sup> The provenance of this photograph from a possible photographic inquiry conducted by Poletto into schools in the South has not yet been verified, but it will form the object of future study; similarly, we will also be taking a closer look at the output of two other Italian photographers: Mario De Biasi, who produced a celebrated photograph of the elementary school in Rocca Imperiale (Cosenza) in the course of a reportage on the south for the magazine *Epoca* in 1954, and Ando Gilardi, who produced a number of photographs of schools and after-school facilities in deplorable surroundings in Melissa, Crotone and Palermo, published in the CGIL’s illustrated weekly from 1954 to 1957.

years earlier (fig. 4). The following year the hygienist Giuseppe Sangiorgi—adopting the motto coined by Patellani on the basis of a phrase uttered by a teacher in a school in the district of Matera—<sup>93</sup> published an article in a well-known medical journal under the title “Cristo si è fermato a Jotta”, in which he praised the inquiry sponsored by *Epoca* on the grounds that it had “touched the most sensitive fibres of our heart”,<sup>94</sup> and he proposed that every Rotary Club in Italy should “adopt a small rural school, on condition that it is in as poor a state as the school in Jotta”.<sup>95</sup> Patellani’s article was still being held up as a “visual testimony” of the appalling living conditions in the rural schools in the region in 1954, in a report on health and hygiene in Calabria contained in a national report drafted by the Italian Commission for the study of backward areas, pointing to the extraordinary permanence of the stir caused by the vision of the “impossible schools” in two small Calabrian villages in the Italian public opinion.<sup>96</sup> The echo of the “agony of the school in Calabria” was to drag on until as late as 1963, when the Touring Club magazine hosted a substantiated article by the journalist Franco Abruzzo, right in the middle of the so-called “economic boom”, on the pitiful state of schools in Calabria, illustrating it with a hard-hitting series of Femia photographs showing pupils in the elementary school in San Nicola, in the province of Reggio Calabria, sitting barefoot at rickety old wooden desks.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Patellani, “Le scuole impossibili”, 44. The teacher’s original words were: “According to Carlo Levi Christ stopped at Eboli. But in our view Christ stopped at Matera”. Here refers to Carlo Levi’s autobiographical novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (“Christ stopped at Eboli”), published by Einaudi in 1945, become a masterpiece of Italian Neorealism.

<sup>94</sup> Giuseppe Sangiorgi, “Cristo si è fermato a Jotta”, *Athena: rassegna mensile di biologia, clinica e terapia* XIX, no. 12 (1953): 393-395 (cit. 395).

<sup>95</sup> Sangiorgi, “Cristo si è fermato a Jotta”, 394. The article was taken from a report delivered to the Rotary Club in Bari on 24 March 1953.

<sup>96</sup> Francesco Serra and Mario Misasi, “La Calabria”, in *Atti del Congresso internazionale di studio sul problema delle aree arretrate* (Milano, 10-15 ottobre 1954), ed. Centro nazionale di prevenzione e difesa sociale, vol. 1: *Rapporto della commissione italiana di studio sulle aree arretrate italiane* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1954), 891-979 (especially the paragraph entitled “Condizioni culturali”, 974-976). Serra, the director of the Cosenza Provincial Hygiene and Preventive Medicine Laboratory, once again recalling Zanotti Bianco’s inquiry of 1925, had this bitter remark to make: “The propaganda action conducted by illustrious special envoys who detected the pitiful state of certain rooms and cellars called schools [...] did not serve to draw the state’s attention to resolve this important problem and thus to put Calabria on an equal footing with the north of Italy” (974-975).

<sup>97</sup> See Franco Abruzzo, “Calabria senza scuole”, *Le Vie d’Italia* LXIX, no. 4 (1963): 437-448. These beautiful photographs recall those taken in the same years by the Greek-American photographer Constantine Manos in the village school of Karpathos in Greece.



Figure 11. *Interior of the elementary school in San Nicola (1963)*  
[from: *Le Vie d'Italia*, LXIX (4), (1963): 443]

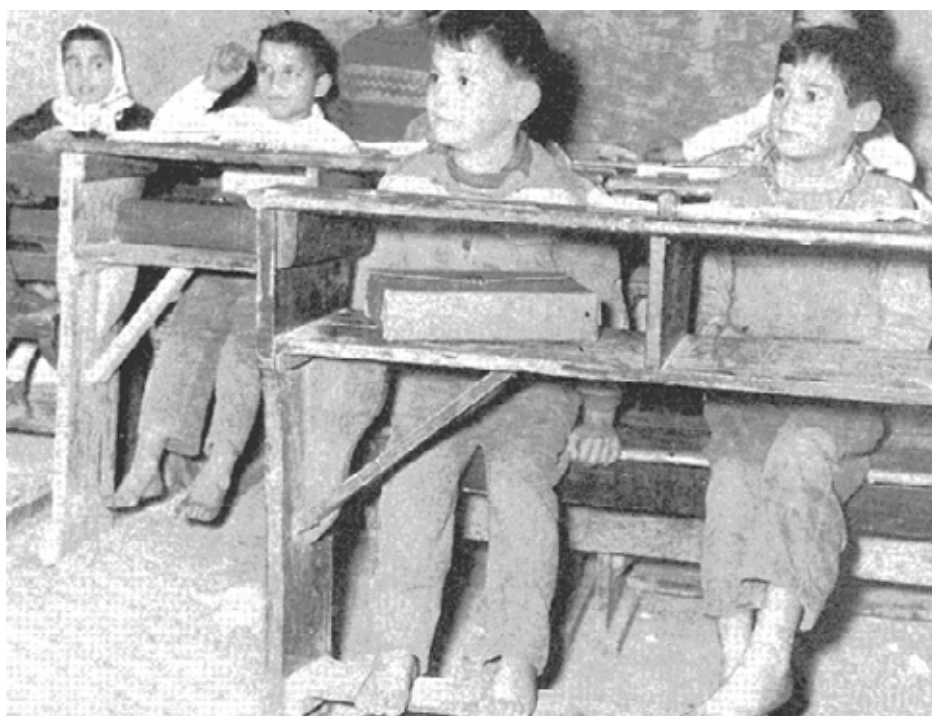


Figure 12. *Interior of the elementary school in San Nicola (1963)*  
[from: *Le Vie d'Italia*, LXIX (4), (1963): 443]

## CONCLUSIONS

I shall now rapidly endeavour to formulate the first conclusions that the research conducted hitherto into the depiction of the rural school in the South in photographic inquiries and in photojournalism between 1925 and 1955 allows us to draw. There existed a red line not to be crossed in the photographic depiction of schools and that red line was the image of the school as a "temple of modernity", an image that served both a cultural purpose (subscription to the model of progress) and a political purpose (the creation of consensus). I believe that is why even today these photographs grate on our sensitivities. Few photographers dared to cross that red line, and when they did so, they did so with the intention of triggering a short-circuit in public opinion, exposing the failure of the *vulgata* that the leading classes and the media tended to propose to reflect reality. The focus of this paper is not the appalling degree of backwardness still existing in rural schools in the South at the time, which went way beyond what anyone might have imagined, but a factor to which education historians have hitherto devoted little time, namely (harking back to Pierre Bourdieu's work on the social use of the image) the social image of schools and the public use made of that image over time.

The bias in the visual depiction of the Italian school that emerges from this analysis —initially enforced by the *élites* but ultimately subscribed to by the country as a whole on the basis of a complex dynamic involving the collective oblivionisation of certain phenomena generated by feelings of shame—<sup>98</sup> has led to the creation of a kind of "collective scholastic hologram" on the basis of which schools often appear broadly idealised in reconstructions of the school of the past in museums of education or in other contexts. In other words, we are not shown "schools as they really were" but schools as they should have been or as we would like them to have been.<sup>99</sup> The schools in Africo, Jotta and Ghiandaro have no place in these representations of the past, because after causing a stir, they were

<sup>98</sup> For the relationship between memory and oblivion and their mutual interaction, see Marc Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli* (París: Payot, 1998); Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (París: Éditions du Seuil, 2000).

<sup>99</sup> For this concept, see especially Juri Meda, "La escuela del pasado y su conmemoración en los museos de la escuela italianos: tendencias y perspectivas", in *Pedagogía museística: prácticas, usos didácticos e investigación del patrimonio educativo*, ed. Ana María Badanelli Rubio, María Poveda Sanz and Carmen Rodríguez Guerrero (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2014), 509-521.



simply repressed, going back to become as invisible as they were before a handful of photographers turned their cameras on them and preserved them forever on film. They are “non-places of memory” every bit as much as the “abandoned schools” studied by Martin Lawn in a paper presented at a major international conference in 2011, capable of generating an identity “in the dimension of the memory of those who inhabited them”<sup>100</sup> but which also fuel a deep sense of disquiet because they do not represent themselves alone but schools in general, the cultural significance that we attach to the concept of education and its role in society.<sup>101</sup> That is why they cannot help but prompt us to ask ourselves questions regarding “the fate of schooling and its relation to modernity”.<sup>102</sup> ■

### Notes on contributor

Juri Meda is PhD in History and Associate Professor in History of Education at the University of Macerata (Italy). He is member of the Executive Committee of the Italian History of Education Society —CIRSE (2016-2018) and secretary of the Italian Society for the Study of School Heritage— SIPSE (2017-2018). Member of the scientific board of various scientific journals, among which *Historia y Memoria de Educación* (since 2015), *Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione* (since 2016) and *History of Education & Children's Literature* (since 2016). He has published numerous monographs, essays and articles, the majority of which have been devoted to the processes pertaining to the nationalisation of childhood in the contemporary age; more recently, his research has begun to focus on the material culture of school and on the history of the economic processes associated with the development of mass schooling.

<sup>100</sup> For this concept, on a broader level see Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi* (especially the chapter entitled “Africo”, 209-258). In the light of the results achieved by a young American scholar studying identity relationships between the school and the local community through photographic elicitation in a small rural community in Georgia, it would be interesting to use the same method to verify to what extent today's Africo community still remembers the old school despite the fact that the entire settlement was relocated following the flood of 1951; in this connection, see Alice Vera Sampson-Cordle, “Exploring the Relationship between a Small Rural School in Northeast Georgia and Its Community: An Image-Based Study Using Participant-Produced Photographs” (Phd diss., University of Georgia, 2001), 411.

<sup>101</sup> See Martin Lawn, *Abandoned Modernities: images of the materialities of schooling*, paper delivered at the international conference on “Os Rituais Escolares, em Gestos e Objectos” (Lisbon, 18 February 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Lawn, *Abandoned Modernities*.



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