

# The Teaching of History and Geography in Italian Schools and the Creation of Stereotypes

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*Abstract:* In this contribution I briefly analyse the history of the teaching of History and Geography in Italian schools between the unification of Italy (1861) and nowadays, and how the structure of these subjects led to the creation of stereotypes both regarding the past and the contemporary world. The setting up of the way of teaching the two subjects has a significant impact on the presentation of the cultures of the past and of non European cultures. One worrying aspect is the effacement of female figures of the past, whom, on the contrary, it might be very interesting to study and analyse with contemporary eyes in order to identify and eventually challenge the stereotypes they contributed to create. I also present briefly some considerations about the literature for children, that is also very important for the storytelling about the world presented to children and teenagers.

*Keywords:* Teaching History and Geography in Italy, creation of stereotypes, misuse of historical characters, children literature in Italy

## 1. Introduction

In the first place, in my presentation, History and Geography are discussed together because they are taught together in our school system.<sup>1</sup> The teacher is

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<sup>1</sup> Giorda 2021: 47-48. Throughout this contribution, when I speak of “school” I refer to public schools, that in Italy are the schools completely financed by the state: in principle, no fee is requested to attend them, but the students have to buy the textbooks and sometimes “voluntary” contributions are requested for specific needs. In the two last years of high school, slightly more than € 20.00 and slightly less than € 50.00 respectively for the fourth and for the fifth year are requested. In Italy we also have “private” schools, from primary schools to universities, that are for the largest majority catholic schools and are very expensive.

one for the two subjects<sup>2</sup> and the way they are dealt with, though using separate texts books written by different authors, is closely related; in fact, the discipline is nowadays called Geo-history.<sup>3</sup> The second important point is that the general teaching-lines of the school programs are set centrally, by the Ministry for Education,<sup>4</sup> and the textbooks must be approved by the Ministry. This may result in a strong influence of the main political trends current when the texts are formulated.<sup>5</sup> The third point is that, for their nature as representations and interpretations of the historical events, and as representations and interpretations of the world outside Italy, History and Geography, more than other subjects, were, and still may be, vehicles of biases and false images of Italy, of the world, and of the position of Italy in the world.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Teaching History and Geography in the newly unified kingdom (1861-1921)

Italy as a unified country was born on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1861,<sup>7</sup> when it became a monarchy governed by the house of Savoy, a lesser French-Italian dynasty who

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<sup>2</sup> In the most recent projects for the reform of school teaching there is no indication about the fact that the teachers of History and Geography should have a degree in these two subjects. The most damaging projects in this sense are those by Mariastella Gelmini (2010) and Francesco Profumo (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Actually, this is the most recent “evolution” of the teaching of these two subjects, that led to a strong, and much contested, cut in the hours of teaching. According to the reform proposed by Letizia Moratti (2004) in the primary and secondary school instead of 2 hours of History + 2 hours of Geography per week, there are now 3 hours of Geohistory per week. In high school instead of 3 hours of History + 2 hours of Geography, there are 2 hours of Geohistory per week. Fatally, teachers usually privilege the subject they know better, or the one they consider more important and quite frequently Geography is the subject they neglect more. In January 2025, the Minister for Education, Mr Giuseppe Valditara, is proposing his reform of education and, apparently, he wants to reintroduce separate teachings for History and Geography, but his project is still in its very first steps.

<sup>4</sup> Since November 11<sup>th</sup> 2022 this ministry has been called Ministry for Education and Merit.

<sup>5</sup> This is quite important for the choice of the events to be presented and for the greater or lesser importance they give to individual periods or events. See, for instance, the great importance given to Roman history in the period immediately after the unification of Italy.

<sup>6</sup> I wish to mention that I am not a teacher of History but the data I provide are supported by my personal experience with teaching in general and, moreover, the debate about the teaching of History and Geography was so heated in my country, following the different proposal of reforms, that we were all involved in the debate and we were all asked, as teachers and professors, to subscribe documents and petitions in support of the teaching of History and Geography. All these attempts at safeguarding the teaching of these two important subjects have thus far been useless.

<sup>7</sup> The union was formally declared after two “wars for independence”, in 1848-49 and 1859-60, and was finally accomplished after the third “war for independence” in 1866. The first war ended with the defeat of the Savoy, whereas the second led to the conquest of a large part of Italy, although the region of Veneto was only conquered in 1866; Rome and the papal state in 1870; and the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia only became part of Italy during the First World War in 1915-18. Classical studies

received in 1720 by the Habsburg of Austria the so-called kingdom of Sardinia, founded in 1297 by the papacy for the kings of Aragon, and including Piedmont and Sardinia.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, the Savoy dynasty, promoting the Wars for Independence, became a protagonist of the unification of Italy, for better and for worse. Until that time Italy had been divided in several states and statelets, frequently fighting against one another. The forced unification under a dynasty that was frequently perceived as foreign, being actually French, created a strong gap between the more developed north and southern Italy, that remained quite underdeveloped, and that still today struggles for industrial development, equal salary levels and female employment. One of the most important consequences of the unification was the cancellation of the ancient agricultural contracts belonging to the aristocratic families and to the clergy: the parcelling of cultivated lands given to peasants led frequently to the impoverishment of the peasants themselves, because the parcels were too small.<sup>9</sup>

Based on these premises I will present how History and Geography have been taught in Italy since the unification of the country and how these two subjects have always been somehow biased as concerns the representation of Italy and Europe, on the one hand, and the so-called less-developed countries. History and Geography have been, and still are, used as means to create stereotypes (good or bad) about peoples from foreign countries and about the role and place of women in history.

The first king of the new unified country, Charles Albert of Savoy, created a Ministry for Public Education in 1847, before the accomplishment of the unification, and after the unification he extended the jurisdiction of the new Ministry to the whole kingdom. Charles Albert's great merit was the wish to provide a form of primary education to the whole population,<sup>10</sup> regardless of their

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about the Risorgimento (Resurgence) and the history of Italy after the unification are Mack Smith 1997; 2010.

<sup>8</sup> As is the case with many regions of Italy, the history of the island of Sardinia is complicated and not easy to summarise. It was created as a fief by Pope Boniface VIII (1230-1303, papacy 1294-1303), and included the island of Corsica on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1297. It was then given to the kingdom of Aragona after the war between Aragona and Anjou for the control over Sicily as warranty for the peace treaty. Control of the region was disputed several times until it became a possession of the Habsburg of Austria, who finally gave it to the Savoy in exchange for the kingdom of Sicily that the Savoy had been ruling since 1713.

<sup>9</sup> This difference between northern and southern Italy is known as "La questione meridionale" (the southern question), a concept elaborated for the first time by Antonio Gramsci in several articles published in newspapers between 1916 and 1926, in his intervention at the Congress of the Italian Communist Party in 1926 and in a manuscript published posthumous in 1930. All these materials were later on collected and published together in De Felice / Parlato (eds) 1966. See, also, Barbagallo 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Gaudio 2019. Actually, the name they gave to the Ministry for Education is very interesting: the use of the adjective "public" is a clear reference to the king's wish to reach all the possible social levels of the Italian population. The Savoys, like other rulers in Europe and in the United States, were

social position; his great demerit was the wish to create the new Italian citizen, loyal to the new country they were building up and to the crown, but loyal, at the same time, to the extra-Italian empire the Savoy were trying to create, starting with Eritrea and Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> In their intent, the new Italians should be ready to fight in faraway territories and to leave their homes to colonise them, because they were superior, as they belonged to the European and Christian culture. To this aim, they gave a great importance to Roman history, not so much as a possible connection to common roots, but rather as the history of the only other period, before the Savoy, when the Italian peninsula had been unified, and when an empire had been created.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting how they chose to use the expression “*mare nostrum*”, our (namely Italian) sea, to define the Mediterranean, that was no more a sea among different territories, but rather an Italian property since the time of the Roman empire. Notwithstanding these undoubtedly biases, king Charles Albert must certainly be credited for having faced the problem of public education, whereas before the unification instruction was dealt with differently in each individual state of the Italian peninsula, and, most of all, it was a privilege mainly reserved for the male members of the noble and most wealthy families, who employed private tutors.<sup>13</sup>

The school texts were strongly notional, with simple concepts the pupils had to learn by heart.<sup>14</sup> The primary concept they wished to convey was that the European culture, which the Italian culture belonged to, was superior to the others

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influenced by the reforms in the Prussian education system, started since 1763 (Schleunes 1979). In Prussia a “Department for Schools and Poor Relief” was established in August 1808 (Schleunes 1979: 325), and it became the “Education Ministry” in 1817 (Schleunes 1979: 330). No mention is made of a “public” school system and, though the access to the primary school was free, the whole system was very elitist as regarded the access to the upper levels of schooling. In Italy the Ministry of Public Education underwent several changes in name: between 1929 and 1944, under the fascist regime, it became the Ministry of National Education; between 1996 and 1998, during the first Prodi government, it became the Ministry of Public Education, University, Scientific and Technological Research; between 2001 and 2005, under the second Berlusconi government, it became the Ministry of Education, University and Research; lastly, as mentioned previously, with the actual Meloni government we have the Ministry of Education and Merit (sic!) and the Ministry of University and Research. The adjective “public” has finally disappeared.

<sup>11</sup> Nearly at the same time as the foundation of the kingdom of Italy, the year 1882 saw the beginning of the formation of a colonial empire with the occupation of parts of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The aim of this occupation was to compete with the much larger and more important colonial empires of the great European powers: Finaldi 2016.

<sup>12</sup> The Roman Empire was particularly emphasised in school history texts as it happened to comply with those aims. The Empire had been both the first unifying entity of the Italian peninsula and a great conqueror of territories both near and far: Woolf 2012.

<sup>13</sup> A few exceptions to this may be mentioned, dating from the Renaissance, where several municipal and public schools were opened in some towns.

<sup>14</sup> For a short, but comprehensive history of the teaching of History in Italy, in the period immediately after the unification see Weber 2015.

and had the right/duty to subdue the less civilised peoples; another important point was that Italy was depicted as the most beautiful country in the world for its climate and for the fertility of its soil. People from the different regions of Italy were always represented in traditional costumes, happy and well fed, in sharp contrast with the reality of the many underdeveloped parts of the country, that were providing the largest number of persons for the army and for the occupation of the new colonies.<sup>15</sup> Geography was also adapted to these needs. In 1867, the Italian Geographic Society was founded, for which Africa was the main or, it could be said, the only interest.<sup>16</sup> This speaks volumes about the real aims of the Society: they did not wish to study the Geography of Italy, but they were rather a tool for the imperialism of the monarchy. In 1912, a volume entitled “L'uomo e il suo regno” – “Man and his realm” – by Piero Gribaudi (1874-1950), was published for schools<sup>17</sup>. The work was a great success and was reprinted several times.<sup>18</sup> The strongly anthropocentric vision of the book is obvious from the title, which suggests that the Earth is the dominion of human beings. Moreover, a later edition of the ‘30s refers to the fact that as the European culture was considered superior, Europe could, or rather should, subdue other “less civilised” peoples.<sup>19</sup> Even more marked by the spirit of the times was a textbook by Eugenio Comba for the primary schools, published for the first time in 1898 and reprinted several times.<sup>20</sup> It proposed heavy stereotypes about extra-European peoples: the Arabs were “vagabonds”, the Armenians “barterers”, the Japanese “clever, simple and thrifty”, the Chinese “voluptuous and astute”, the Tartars “belligerent” and the Indians “pacific”.<sup>21</sup> With a more childish language, but with equally negative stereotyped representations, Luisa Barbier explained to children that the Chinese

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<sup>15</sup> Another important phenomenon was the mass emigration of Italians, who went (and still are going) abroad mainly for economic reasons. Three main waves of emigrations are attested. The first one, called the *great emigration*, took place between 1861 and the ‘30s of 1900, and was predominantly directed towards north and south America: Sori 1979. Poverty and political reasons were the main causes to leave Italy. The second wave was called *European emigration*: it took place between the ‘50s and ‘70s of 1900 and led many Italians towards other European countries, where they could find better opportunities. The third wave, the *new emigration*, started after 2008 and was determined by the great economic crisis of 2007-2008. It was calculated that in 2011 there were more than 4,500,000 Italians living abroad, plus 60-80 million descendants from the first emigrants, who sometimes still keep the Italian nationality:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20121101110455/http://www.italiani.lu/mmp/online/website/menu\\_left/associations/2760/84/file\\_76927/allegati\\_statistici.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20121101110455/http://www.italiani.lu/mmp/online/website/menu_left/associations/2760/84/file_76927/allegati_statistici.pdf). See also Stella 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Giorda 2021: 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> Giorda 2021: 88-90.

<sup>18</sup> The most recent edition I have found dates from 1944.

<sup>19</sup> For representations of the peoples of non-European countries as barbarians, or as simple uncultivated peoples ready to bend to the will of the European conquerors, see Giorda 2021: 126-132.

<sup>20</sup> It was certainly reprinted in 1912.

<sup>21</sup> Comba 1898: 39.

loved their long pigtails and killed mice (sic!) and that the people from Africa were childish.<sup>22</sup>

### **3. The school system during the fascist era and after the Second World War (1922-2023)**

During the fascist era an important reform of school teaching was promulgated, which followed some of the ideas of the famous philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952).<sup>23</sup> He spoke for the first time of demography and tried to introduce some element of discussion in school teaching. The reform was the work of Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944)<sup>24</sup> and it radically changed the whole school system: school became compulsory until the age of 14, and a female upper school was created, to prepare the young women for teaching, the only profession they considered suitable for a woman. This school was called Istituto Magistrale, or Institute for Teaching, and implied a choice already after primary school. After the high school cycle (Istituto Magistrale Superiore), it was possible to access an Istituto di Magistero, that became a University Faculty in 1936 (Facoltà di Magistero). In 1995 this faculty was abolished, and the new Faculty of Sciences for Teaching was launched. At the same time, in 1991, the specific secondary and high school institutes for teaching were equally closed, and experimental high schools for “Human Sciences” took their places. This kind of preparation was for a long time considered a female specificity, helpful both when seeking a career more “appropriate” for women and for the caring of the children that women were

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<sup>22</sup> Barbier 1928: 30 (the Chinese people). Of course, due to the period when the book was published and the dominating ideology, the term used to designate the people from Africa is the n. word in a diminutive form (“negrettini”: Barbier 1928: caption to Fig. 8): Giorda 2021: 129-132. Luisa Barbier is the pseudonym of Henriette Susanne Brès (1855-1919) a French pedagogist, who created the system of the nursery schools in France.

<sup>23</sup> One of the main ideologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism, Croce had a peculiar political life: he became senator of the kingdom in 1910 and was Minister of Education in 1920-21, when he elaborated a reform of the school system that was in part followed by Gentile. He was relatively close to the fascist party at the very beginning, but already in 1925 he distanced himself from the fascists and wrote a “Manifesto of the antifascist intellectuals”, opposed to Gentile’s “Manifesto of the fascist intellectuals”.

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) was a very relevant Italian intellectual, philosopher, pedagogist and politician. He is considered one of the founders of the fascist movement and for this reason he was killed by the partisans in 1944. His reform is dated from 1923 and considers schooling as an eminently meritocratic path. For the complicated events of Italian history, also after the end of the Second World War, Gentile’s reform remains the only completely accomplished one and it still has some influence on the Italian schooling system. On this important figure of the Italian culture during the fascist era, see Romano 2004. We have had 67 republican governments since 1946, nearly each of them proposed a reform of teaching and practically none of the proposed reforms has been completely achieved due to each of them being cancelled by the following government.

going to have in marriage. In popular considerations all these schools and institutes were of a lower level than the classical and scientific high schools, that gave access to proper university faculties. The change in names and the passage of the Magistero from Institute to Faculty helped in changing this perception and led to more males registering. It must be noted that, for many years, the teaching in primary and secondary schools was predominantly, if not uniquely, held by women, whereas the teaching in high schools, apparently more specialistic, saw a larger male participation. Though being a sure progress in terms of public education, it is undoubted that this reform is functional to a male-centred world, strongly influenced by the catholic church.

The end of the Second World War, which led to the fall of the fascist regime and to the victory of the republic over monarchy after a referendum on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1946, did not lead to a clear cut with the way History and Geography were taught during the regime.<sup>25</sup> The same old school texts of history and geography were still in use, simply eliminating the sentences more patently influenced by fascism, colonialism or racism, but leaving the general basic concepts of a society based on the love for God, the homeland and the traditional family. In 1955 the minister for education, Giuseppe Rufo Ermini (1900-1981), of the Christian Democratic party and author of one of the many attempts at reforming public education, stated: "Leave the little girls do their favourite games (care, cleaning, dressing, styling of their dolls) and let them be trained in the simpler and easier home activities".<sup>26</sup> But he was also capable of more acceptable concepts, such as the claim that the purpose of history is to instil love for one's own homeland and feelings of fraternity among all the peoples. The approved school texts had learning verifications based on question-and-answer texts the pupils had to learn by heart and that were of this kind: Question: "Does God want us to love our homeland?" Answer: "God wants us to love our homeland: the sacred history teaches us so, when you read so many times that, when the Jewish people disobeyed God and behaved badly, God punished them, subjecting their homeland to this or that foreign people". Here one can also find a not too covert antisemitism.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the time span of the historical events they had to deal with became gradually larger, introducing elements of prehistory and of the history of the ancient Near East, in the light of the idea that the historical process was a constant progression from barbarism to civilisation, where the *climax* was represented by Christian Europe. Another basic element was the concept that this

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<sup>25</sup> The referendum took place on June 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>, in which women could vote for the first time. There were 2 million more votes for the republic than for the monarchy.

<sup>26</sup> <https://nuovadidattica.wordpress.com/riferimenti-normativi/1955-programmi-ermini/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

progress was the accomplishment of great personalities, prevalently males: kings and emperors, warlords, artists, and inventors. The Roman history allowed to propose “adequate” female models: Acca Larentia,<sup>28</sup> the ancient divinity of Latium, who became in the legend the woman who saved and nourished Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, abandoned in a basket in the river Tiber; Cloelia,<sup>29</sup> the heroic girl offered with other girls as hostages to the Etruscan king Porsenna, who fled, swimming across the river Tiber, and taking all the other captives with her; Cornelia, daughter of Scipio the African and mother of the tribunes Tiberius and Caius Gracchus, a cultivated and strong woman, who, however, became a historical character mainly for her motherly pride. Whereas Acca Larentia and Cloelia are legendary figures, Cornelia is a historical character, and it is very interesting how it was presented in different periods, gradually obliterating her intellectual capacities, while stressing her nobility and austerity, and her accomplishment as a mother<sup>30</sup> These figures held important positions in the History textbooks and became functional to the creation of female models coherent with current ideologies. The focus of the texts was to imbue the pupils with general ideas of love and respect for the family and for their homeland, and of the need to serve it at the cost of their lives:<sup>31</sup> the basic aim, as already mentioned, was to create an obedient, uncritical citizen. On the other hand, these capacities were seen as being the prerogative of boys, whereas girls were only required to learn “simpler and easier home activities”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Beard 1989: 50. On the semi-divine nature of this figure see *Macr.*, *Sat.*, 1, 10, 12-15: 105; on the legend of Romulus and Remus see *Lact.*, *DI*, I, 20, 1-4: 193.

<sup>29</sup> Livy, AUC 2.13.

<sup>30</sup> Dixon 2007: 3, 18-24, 62-67, 80, 93. A sentence of hers was usually quoted when dealing with her figure. It was reported already in Latin authors that she said to a matron parading her precious jewels: “These are my jewels” pointing to her two sons: Valerius Maximus 4.4. A bronze statue was erected for her in the *Porticus Octaviae* in Rome, and the stone basement is still preserved, bearing the inscription *Cornelia Africani F. Gracchorum*, meaning Cornelia, daughter of the Africanus (Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus), mother of the Gracchi (*CIL* 6, 10043 = *CIL* 6, 31610: Hemelrijk, 2021: 299-300, fig. 64). So, a cultivated woman, who was probably quite important in her sons’ political life, will always be remembered as a daughter and mother: Plut. GG 19.4; Hemelrijk 1999: 64-67, 80, 93.

<sup>31</sup> This is the period when the term ‘Iron Curtain’ was created by Winston Churchill in a speech of 1946 in recognition of the separation of the east of Europe from the west. Italy was considered to be at the border with the Soviet bloc, it had a strong Communist Party, and certain fascist and communist militants had not surrendered their weapons, leading to a sense of danger and uncertainty. These were the main reasons for the subsistence of such belligerent statements.

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, this mentality is difficult to eradicate and recently still, school texts for the primary school appeared where they told of the fathers going out to work, and of the mothers staying at home to deal with domestic chores. The important difference is that nowadays these facts are pointed out at, and become the object of controversies and debates, that can lead to the change of the textbook.

In 1946, with the advent of the republic, several governments tried to propose reforms of school teaching,<sup>33</sup> but the results were meagre, because none of the proposed reforms was fully accomplished, mainly as a consequence of the short duration of the governments. In Italy we have had 67 governments since 1946. This means that only very few of them succeeded in accomplishing the period of five years established in our Constitution. Actually, in our system, when a government in office receives a vote of no confidence in the Parliament, a “crisis” starts, that may lead to new elections.<sup>34</sup>

The reform which seemed to be more promising was that proposed by Tullio De Mauro (1932-2017), one of the greatest Italian linguists and lexicographers, who was minister of Public Education between 2000 and 2001. His proposal introduced the so-called “pictures of societies”, which meant that hunters/gatherers, agricultural, pastoral, nomad, urban, industrial, and post-industrial societies were acknowledged for the first time. In his text, De Mauro also spoke of the need to analyse relations with the environment, socio-political organizations, and cultural expressions. In this project the following statement can be found: the study of classical Greece and Rome and the formation of the system of the European states is basic for the building up of the cultural homeland persona of the Italian and European citizen. And yet, this project was strongly criticised by many university professors of history, because the European contribution was not stressed enough in their opinion. They maintained that the history of Europe and the history of the other continents could not be placed at the same level. A peculiar thought in De Mauro’s project was that the history of faraway countries was important only if the children had classmates coming from one of those countries<sup>35</sup> This text can therefore be viewed as a highly significant attempt to go beyond mere lists of notable persons and events and actually encourage interpretation. However, this project was never accomplished and contained a basic bias of its own. This was that the text maintained that the study of classical Greece and Rome, and the formation of the European states, were

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<sup>33</sup> It is very interesting to observe that nearly all the Italian republican governments tried to change the educational system. While the official motivation was to improve something that was paramount for the formation of Italian citizens, the aim, in my opinion, generally speaking and with a few exceptions (De Mauro, see further on), was to prevent the formation of a critical spirit and to promote a partisan view of the world.

<sup>34</sup> As regards the enactment of laws or the proposals of reforms of the teaching system, after the very first law (Legge Casati of the Kingdom of Italy of November 13<sup>th</sup> 1859), the most important projects were the already recalled law by Giovanni Gentile of 1923 (the only accomplished one), the projects by Giuseppe Rufo Ermini of 1955, Luigi Gui of 1963, Franca Falcucci of 1985, Tullio De Mauro of 2001, Letizia Moratti of 2004, Mariastella Gelmini of 2010 and Francesco Profumo of 2011. As mentioned beforehand, in January 2025 we are witnessing the launch of another project by Giuseppe Valditara.

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.edscuola.eu/wordpress/?page\\_id=964](https://www.edscuola.eu/wordpress/?page_id=964) (progetto De Mauro).

paramount for the building of the cultural “persona” of the European citizen. According to this point of view, classical Greece and Rome provided the cultural and juridical basis for the birth and development of Europe. Nonetheless, this project was strongly criticised, even by left-wing university professors, because it was not considered sufficiently Eurocentric.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, in my opinion, though it is certainly true that a knowledge of the history and cultures of this part of the world is important for a person living in Europe, an appreciation of different perspectives is also required in our modern, connected world.

So, the only reform that has been fully accomplished after the unification of Italy is the one proposed in 1923, during the fascist regime, by the Minister for Education, Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944). This reform created the foundation of our school system, which remains largely in place today. This process in no way improved the overall quality of the Italian school system and was especially harmful for the teaching of History and Geography. In fact, these two subjects are the ones most strongly influenced by politics as they are the most suitable vehicles for a “partisan” representation of past events.<sup>37</sup> It is relevant which events are described and how they are presented: the authors of the History textbooks after the unification of Italy had often taken part in the Wars of Independence on both sides, and they might have had conscious or unconscious biases in presenting the other side. The same phenomenon happened after the Second World War, between people still close to the fascist party and people who had fought with the partisans. It therefore follows that they are the subjects which are most in need of reform so they can be freed from the political conditioning and adapted to technological innovations. In my opinion, the goal should be to make mere mnemonic learning totally obsolete and impracticable,<sup>38</sup> as information can be easily retrieved online. Instead, it should be more relevant to reflect the social changes that have occurred, particularly due to the growing multi-ethnic presence.<sup>39</sup> It is no longer possible to envisage a type of integration through an entirely Eurocentric model, as such a model is extremely schematic and does not even consider the significant differences that exist within the European context.

In the school texts we use nowadays, facing a larger and larger amount of data included in the narrative and that the pupils still have to learn by heart, as this was, and still is the dominating mode, the female figures have totally disappeared,

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<sup>36</sup> Donato 2014: 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> See, in general, Donato 2014, with relevant bibliography.

<sup>38</sup> The presence of reliable online resources offers a much larger amount of data than what can be possibly included in school texts. Thus, it is important to teach how to identify the most reliable sources and how to use them correctly.

<sup>39</sup> According to the last (2019) statistical study by the Ministry of Education, about the presence of foreign students in Italy, they represent 10% of the total, with the largest concentration in the northern regions: <https://www.invalsiopen.it/alunni-stranieri-in-italia-dati-ministero-istruzione/>.

the male figures have been reduced in number and are mainly monarchs and inventors, whereas artists, writers, poets, etc., again predominantly male and Italian, are not dealt with in the history books, but in other disciplines, like Italian literature or art history.<sup>40</sup> It is quite evident, therefore, that the students will have a fragmented and misrepresented image of the historical development; the political and military accomplishments are completely disconnected from the contemporary developments in the arts and in literature. The general picture conveyed by these texts is still very traditional, and it does not deal with problems. This looks particularly sterile in a time when notions and data are very easy to find on the Internet and the students should rather be taught how to correctly use the search engines and to single out the most trustworthy ones.

Students are frequently requested to prepare short essays, namely, to individually study more in depth some aspect of what they are finding in the textbooks. These essays, usually called “researches” (ricerche), are calibrated to the teaching level: from primary school to high school the students will present from a few pages with many pictures<sup>41</sup> to a proper research made through books other than the texts books and the Internet. Thus, parallel publications were developed, aiming at providing such in-depth analyses. In this case, the texts are not submitted to scrutiny by the Ministry; therefore, they represent in whole and without filters the authors’ ideas and are chosen based on the correspondence between the authors’ ideas and the ideas of who purchases the book, who is usually a parent or relative and not the student. In one of these books,<sup>42</sup> that I consider quite acceptable, besides the narrative of the events, there is a sector devoted to problems, like Italian emigration or the question of the African Americans, but no mention of the female question or of the problem of the vote for women.<sup>43</sup> In another book, for the children in primary school – between 5/6

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<sup>40</sup> The study of the individual subjects does not necessarily proceed in the same steps: the student may at the same time deal with different periods in History and in Literature, quite afar in time, making the connections between historical events and cultural developments nearly impossible. This makes the study more mechanical: the student is led to learn by heart a series of events, instead of being led to understand what was globally happening in one specific historical period.

<sup>41</sup> It is possible to find in the bookstores books explicitly produced to help in this “research”: those for the primary schools have short texts and many figures that are meant to be cut off the book to be inserted in the “research”.

<sup>42</sup> Bettazzi 2010 (for children aged 8+). As is quite frequent with volumes of this kind, there is a great importance given to illustrations and there is a possibility to cut away pictures to illustrate the student’s research.

<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned, in Italy, women voted for the first time in history for the referendum monarchy/republic of June 1946. It seems quite peculiar, therefore, that this event is not mentioned frequently in history texts for the schools, nor do they recall that 21 women were elected in the parliament and five of them (Maria Federici, Angela Gotelli, Nilde Jotti, Teresa Noce and Lina Merlin) became members of the panel that elaborated the republican constitution, promulgated in 1948, that

and 10/11 years of age – meant as a support for the study of Geography,<sup>44</sup> the countries of the world are described in half a page, one page or one page and a half, without any clear precise reason for this different length; the written text is very short and there are many figures, representing aspects of folklore, monuments, or food. A very small paragraph is dedicated to the history of the country and this paragraph may be even missing.<sup>45</sup> Apparently, it is more frequently missing for countries from which a strong emigration comes to our country. This choice conveys and supports the idea that people come to Italy because they are poor, their countries are inhospitable and they do not have a past of which they might be proud, but they only have a hope for a future in our privileged countries.

The formulation of the presentation of historical events as a sequence of facts to be learnt by heart, with great importance given to the figures of the great leaders, warlords, and inventors, almost exclusively male, is also reflected in the urban landscape we inhabit and live on a daily base. Our towns are eminently androcentric spaces: only 3-5% of the streets are named after a woman, and the woman most frequently mentioned is Mary mother of Jesus, followed by Maria Montessori<sup>46</sup> and by Mother Teresa of Calcutta.<sup>47</sup> The same attitude reflects in the presence of public monuments or statues exhibited in public spaces and depicting females: in October 2020, only 289 statues of women were acknowledged, 1/3 of which depicted women of the clergy and many others represented not real characters, but rather symbolic figures (peace, freedom, justice, etc).<sup>48</sup> Whereas

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guaranteed equal rights and dignity to women in every sector of social life. In this respect, we may say that our constitution has not yet been fully applied.

<sup>44</sup> Mills (ed.) 2021: this is actually the translation of a volume printed in Great Britain in 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Actually, rather than being a proper paragraph, it is a sentence. For instance, Turkey has two pages, and the section “History” says: “In 1923, after the defeat of the Ottoman empire in the First World War, the Republic of Turkey was born” (my translation). The only other mention of the Ottoman empire is in the caption of the (small) figure of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent: Mills (ed.) 2021: 132-133.

<sup>46</sup> Carrieri / Forcella / Piazzì 2021-22: 5. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was one of the first women to gain a degree in Medicine in Italy and was strongly engaged in favour of women’s emancipation and equal pay, but she is mostly known because she created an educational system that was adopted in many schools all over the world. Paradoxically she had a larger success abroad than in Italy, and, as she died in the Netherlands, her personal archive is in Amsterdam: Kramer 1976; Standing 1957; De Giorgi 2012; Valerio 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Carrieri / Forcella / Piazzì 2021-22: 5. I am using here the name of Calcutta, instead of the more correct Kolkata, because Mother Teresa is usually mentioned in association with the more traditional, or rather “colonial” name of Calcutta and she was canonised as Mother Teresa of Calcutta: Alpion 2007 is considered one of the most important works dealing with this figure.

<sup>48</sup> Ducci 2023: 156. There are no general statistics on the presence of male statues, but it is quite easy to observe that all the squares in Italian towns and villages feature a statue: usually these monuments depict a king of Italy, more frequently Giuseppe Garibaldi or some illustrious personage of the past

kings and leaders are frequently depicted on horseback, only one equestrian monument dedicated to a woman is known: in 1932 the statue of Anita Ribeiro on horseback was inaugurated in Rome on the Gianicolo hill, placed on a high pedestal where the remains of the heroine were buried. Yet, Anita Ribeiro is mentioned by her husband's family name, namely Garibaldi.<sup>49</sup> In fact, she was the young wife of the general, and she actually is a figure of the greatest historical interest, albeit in Italy we only remember her for her relationship with the general and for her untimely and tragic death for fever. Benito Mussolini himself pushed for the accomplishment of the monument and personally approved the sketch proposed by the sculptor Mario Rutelli<sup>50</sup> and asked to add the figure of a baby. The statue represents the woman on horseback, holding a gun in one hand and the baby at her breast with the other hand. The stereotype is here quite clear: though acknowledging her role as fighter, they wished to underline her primary role as mother and wife and, in fact, her family name is not mentioned, and I believe that only a few in Italy know her real name and her accomplishments prior to her marriage to Giuseppe Garibaldi.<sup>51</sup>

#### **4. The literature for children and teenagers and a famous case in the popular culture of the '30s**

In the same periods considered for school textbooks, also the area of children's literature developed, that is also important to create shared feelings about several aspects of our life. In this field, authors and editors can be less dependent from ideologies and freer to express their ideas, and yet, the general picture is often mainstream, with a few interesting authors presenting different points of view. On the one hand, in the '30s a volume by Arpalice Cuman Pertile was published,<sup>52</sup>

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or present, who is important for that place. Female statues are quite irrelevant as regards their number, and they are frequently placed in more secluded spaces, like the parks.

<sup>49</sup> Ducci 2023: 156. Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) is considered the hero of the war for the unification of Italy. He is frequently depicted as a kind of romantic hero, who fought also for the independence of some south American countries and for this is usually called the "hero of the two worlds". He met Ana Ribeiro, who was 18 years old, in Brazil.

<sup>50</sup> Mario Rutelli (1859-1941) was a renowned sculptor and was the author of many important monuments in his hometown Palermo, in Sicily and in many other Italian towns. He is also the author of Wolfgang Goethe's monument in Munich and of the War Memorial of Aberystwyth in Wales, UK.

<sup>51</sup> About the important figure of Ana Maria De Jesus Ribeiro, the history of this young revolutionary before her meeting Garibaldi and the construction of her – false – image related to that of the Italian leader see Cavicchioli 2017. It may be interesting to mention that, when Mario Rutelli made the statue, he was not able to find a picture of Ana Ribeiro. In fact, they are very rare, whereas paintings and photographs of Giuseppe Garibaldi are quite numerous. Rutelli, therefore, used as a model his daughter, as is mentioned by his great grandson, Francesco Rutelli, a contemporary Italian politician, who has been mayor of Rome and minister of culture.

<sup>52</sup> Cuman Pertile 1936.

where a poem appears dealing with the roundabout for brotherhood with all the peoples of the world. On the other hand, since 1886 a book written by Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (“Heart”),<sup>53</sup> became a must for children, being preferred to more “open” books like Pertile’s. De Amicis’s prose was heavily moralistic and clearly represented the opinions of the bourgeoisie in the period following to the unification of Italy. The book describes the everyday life in a school and its main aim is to make the children of the bourgeoisie accept the presence of children of different social background, albeit underlining a certain sense of kind and paternalistic superiority in the more privileged classes. Some secondary stories are interspersed in the main narrative, and they deal with the heroism of children during the Independence Wars, or with the epic of the Italian migration to America, always seen through children’s eyes. All the characters in the story are well-recognisable stereotypes: the good bourgeois father teaching his son how to deal with his less privileged school mates; the poor child wishing to improve his social condition through study, or who sacrifices himself to help his family. I am using here male pronouns because all the children are male. One teacher too is male, a solitary, melancholic, unmarried man, whereas the other teachers are all female (remember that teaching was considered a good profession for women). One of these teachers has become a kind of epitome of the primary school teacher: her name is not given, but she is always called the “Young teacher with the red feather” (“La maestra dalla penna rossa”), because she wore a hat with that ornament. I have translated “maestra” as young teacher, and this is correct, and yet I would like to stress that “maestra” is a diminutive: she is a positive, beloved character, but she is not a person of authority, and the only man who teaches in this primary school is also positive and good, but he is diminished because he never married and is melancholic, not authoritative (I use this term in the positive way).

As regards popular culture, and the creation of stereotypes about the Islamic world, one very famous case is that of the stickers’ albums created between 1935 and 1937 by two important and related food companies.<sup>54</sup> The stickers were created based on the very successful broadcast *The Four Musketeers*, sponsored by the two groups. The program was mainly a satire and it did not only represent

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<sup>53</sup> De Amicis 1886. It is interesting to observe that Cuman Pertile’s volume was never reprinted, whereas De Amicis’s book is still considered a must for the children’s libraries: I found a recent edition of 2018, but there probably are also later reprints. So, this book is still considered important for the education of children, with all its flaws and biases.

<sup>54</sup> The contest was sponsored by Buitoni and Perugina: Buitoni was a pasta factory founded in 1827 by a woman, Giulia Buitoni: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buitoni>; <https://www.buitoni.it/it>. Perugina was a chocolate confectionery company, founded in 1907 by four persons, among whom Francesco Buitoni: <https://www.perugina.com/it/mondo-perugina/storia>. The two companies merged in 1988 and were afterwards acquired by Nestlé in 1988.

the characters from Alexandre Dumas's novel, but also other, even exotic characters totally foreign to that story.<sup>55</sup> In these stickers, the characters like the four musketeers and other characters, mostly movie characters or movie stars,<sup>56</sup> were depicted in the traditional way, more similar to the historical reality, as concerned costumes and attitudes, with only slightly caricatural aspects, particularly as concerned Porthos – short and thickset – and Aramis – tall, slender and effeminate. On the contrary, other personages look strongly characterised, with a positive or negative aspects, that give the impression of a well-defined vision of the world, with strongly biased opinions particularly against African or Asiatic characters: Othello, the Moor of Venice, becomes a caricature of a black American jazz player; Isis's priest from the opera Aida wears a carafe as head-dress and the Pharaoh Ramses wears an upturned watering can; the Great Turk is stocky, very angry and carries a kind of bottle under his arm, to represent a hookah he is smoking; a carpet seller, Ali, is depicted as an African with accentuated ethnic traits. Among these foreign characters there is also a heterogeneous group of women: Aida does not appear, but three daughters of Ramses' are depicted as fashionable flappers, with short, tight dresses, hair cut in a bob and jewels matching the colours of their dresses; the "beautiful Shulamite" wears a veil covering her face and torso (possibly hinting at nudity in this sector), her belly is naked and she wears "harem pants"; Cleopatra wears a tight gown, her hair in a bob, many jewels and she smokes a cigarette!<sup>57</sup> A particularly biased couple included one Putifa (Potifarre?) and his wife (no personal name given): he is depicted as a caricatural African, wearing an alarm clock as pendant in a necklace, a top hat and striped trousers and carrying a ladle. His wife wears a short straw skirt, white heeled shoes and earrings made of strings of tin cans. But the most famous character, because the sticker was very rare, was the Cruel Saladin.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_quattro\\_moschettieri\\_\(programma\\_radiofonico\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_quattro_moschettieri_(programma_radiofonico)).

<sup>56</sup> Among them, Marlene Dietrich (beautiful and mysterious, wearing trousers), Maria Mercader and Vittorio De Sica, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (called Cric and Croc), Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo (her beautiful face emerging from a film roll). These personages are usually called by their first names, with the exception of Vittorio De Sica, simply called De Sica. It is also interesting that he is depicted in the same sticker with Maria (Mercader) who was not his legitimate wife, but who had been accepted by De Sica's fans.

<sup>57</sup> At the time, though smoke was not prohibited as it is today, it was very unusual and very unpopular for women to smoke in public.

<sup>58</sup> This character is a clear reference to the sultan of Egypt and Syria Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (Tikrit c. 1137-Damascus March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1193), great protagonist of the Crusades and well respected also in the European countries. During the Middle Ages there were some depictions of the sultan as a cruel warlord, but the judgment about him was largely positive: Dante Alighieri in his *Comedy* included him among the great leaders. It is precisely with the Buitoni-Perugina stickers that he was transformed into a grotesque, cruel warrior, depicted as a dark-faced man with strong down-turned nose and grinding teeth: Gibb 1973; Phillips 2019.

These stickers had a huge resonance, because those who were able to complete 150 albums of 100 stickers could win a Topolino, the car every middle-class Italian was dreaming of.<sup>59</sup> It is evident that the stickers fixed in the Italians' minds some stereotypes, that were particularly strong for the most exotic characters and that are still in use to-day, when the Cruel Saladin is mentioned as the epitome of a bad guy even if the memory of what it really represented is completely lost and probably very few know that he is a historical character.

On another side, there is the publication of the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*,<sup>60</sup> translated in Italian in 1784 for adult readers, based on the French version by Antoine Galland, the so-called *belle infidèle* for the undoubted quality of his writing, for the freedom of the translation and for the inclusion of tales not belonging to the original text, like Aladdin and Ali Baba. Antoine Galland (1646-1715) published his "translation" between 1704 and 1717: actually, he may somehow be considered the author of the work we usually call *A Thousand and One Nights*, because his translation started with a manuscript including the adventures of Sindbad the sailor man, to which he added the translation of a Syriac manuscript of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century, including a version of the *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>61</sup> He created a text, that later on included also the tale of Aladdin, that had a huge success and was translated in many languages, contributing to the diffusion of a very peculiar vision of an exotic world, considered Arab, or Islamic, *tout court*, and of many stereotypes. One of the stereotypes, that is certainly present in the tales and that was stressed in the shortened versions of this work, was that the honest upper-class women usually did not leave their homes, whereas the slaves were frequently the protagonists in the tale, and they had many skills, like the capacity to play instruments and to sing, and were very smart, witty and frequently wise.<sup>62</sup> These skills and their capacity to go outside led oftentimes to underline their malice or mischievousness.

Galland's poetic and frequently much rehashed version was very well known and appreciated, it was translated in many languages, and was the origin of much

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<sup>59</sup> This car was designed by FIAT upon a clear commission by Benito Mussolini, who asked for a car every Italian might be able to buy, and it was produced between 1936 and 1955:

[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiat\\_500\\_%22Topolino%22](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiat_500_%22Topolino%22); Sannia 2007.

<sup>60</sup> This fascinating work is, notoriously, a collection of tales of different origins, predominantly Indian and Persian, with the story of Sultan Shahriyar and his wife Sheherazade as the unifying thread: the Sultan discovers the betrayal of his brother's wife and after of his own wife. He kills the two women and decides to marry a woman every day, killing her the morning after. Sheherazade succeeds in procrastinating her fate telling every night a story to the Sultan: she leaves the end hanging until the following night, arousing the Sultan's curiosity, and thus surviving until she runs out of stories but saves herself presenting the Sultan the three children she has meanwhile begotten:

[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\\_mille\\_e\\_una\\_notte](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_mille_e_una_notte).

<sup>61</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine\\_Galland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Galland).

<sup>62</sup> Gabrieli 1941-48: xxiv.

amended versions for children. These versions circulated also in Italy, but had a limited diffusion, mainly in upper class libraries, whereas in 1952 the Italian writer Mary Tibaldi Chiesa (1896-1968) and the artist of Ukrainian origin Vsevolod Petrovič Nikulin, known in Italy as Vsevolode Nicouline (1890-1968) produced a version of the novels for children, that had a great success,<sup>63</sup> eliminating all the tales including rough elements and where women were the main characters, but including Aladdin and Ali Baba, that in the popular culture were always considered an integral part of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The general frame was changed, too, clearly to adapt it to younger readers: sultan Shahriyar simply becomes the brutal killer of his wives, without any reason, and Sheherazade wins his heart with her sweetness. In this strongly adapted version, where the sultan is simply a cruel “oriental” monarch and Sheherazade a defenceless, sweet woman, the illustrations by Nicouline, that mixed Arab, Indian, Russian and Chinese figurative elements, contributed to create a fantastic, almost dreamlike world, of great beauty and richness. The same line was recently followed by a similar couple, including the Dutch writer Arnica Esterl and the Russian painter Olga Dugina,<sup>64</sup> who mostly used the same tales as Tibaldi Chiesa and Nicouline. Meanwhile Aladdin and Ali Baba became independent characters and archetypical representations of the Arab world. A more recent edition features a choice of 9 tales, and its illustrations are more closely related to a generic “Arab” world,<sup>65</sup> whereas in the web page of the editor, one keyword only is given for the book, namely “princesses”.<sup>66</sup>

A beautiful, complete translation of the tales into Italian was edited between 1941 and 1948 by a group of translators led by Francesco Gabrieli:<sup>67</sup> it included four volumes, each translated by one different scholar, and was based on original manuscripts in Arabic. Therefore, the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves is not included, whereas the tale of Aladdin is included as an appendix, in Gabrieli’s own translation. This translation is very close to the Arabic original and it is considered very difficult to read: as mentioned before, Galland’s version is usually called *la belle infidèle* (the beautiful unfaithful), for its undoubted literary qualities and distance from the original, whereas Gabrieli’s work is usually called

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<sup>63</sup> Tibaldi Chiesa 1952.

<sup>64</sup> Esterl 2006; this book was published in several languages at the same time.

<sup>65</sup> I mean, for instance, a kind of standard attire. Men always wear a turban or fez, baggy trousers and an overcoat reaching shortly below the knee. Women wear a light veil on their heads, baggy trousers like men and an overcoat longer than the males’ one. Both wear typical shoes with upturned points and the women, regardless of their social position, always exhibit jewels, necklaces, earrings and ornaments on their heads. These attires seem to be inspired by the Ottoman world.

<sup>66</sup> Roncaglia / Guicciardini 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Francesco Gabrieli (1904-1966) is considered one of the greatest, or rather the greatest Italian specialist of the Arabic language and culture.

the *sacrosanta* (sacrosanct) for its faithfulness to the original. But the popular knowledge of the *Thousand and One Nights* among Italian children is dependent from books like those of Tibaldi Chiesa and Nikouline and of Esterl and Dugina, even if shortened versions of Gabrieli's translations were produced for young readers, but they never became a part of the popular culture.

We must also recall the huge imaginative work by Emilio Salgari (1862-1911), the prolific author of novels about far away countries he never visited,<sup>68</sup> of which he gave an image always oscillating between the fascination for the exotic and the horror for the uncontrolled violence, typical, in his opinion, of underdeveloped or savage peoples. He composed two main cycles, the cycle of the Pirates of Malaysia ("The Mompracem tigers") and the Black Corsair saga, but he also wrote a book called "*Le figlie del Faraone*" ("The Pharaoh's daughters"). These books feature interesting female characters: in the pirates of Malaysia saga the main character, the pirate Sandokan, falls in love with an English lady, related to the cruel governor James Brooke,<sup>69</sup> who rejects her origins and follows her love, but unfortunately dies very soon of cholera. In the Black Corsair saga there is also a difficult love story because the corsair falls in love with the daughter of a Flemish duke,<sup>70</sup> the corsair's fiercest enemy. Though loving her, he abandons her on a small boat in the ocean but reunites with her after a shipwreck on an island, where she had fortunately landed, and had become the queen of the local tribes.<sup>71</sup> They have a daughter, who follows in her father's footsteps and becomes a corsair, too.<sup>72</sup> As is clear from the title, the main characters of the Egyptian story are two princesses of the pharaonic court. These books do not have any more a large audience among the younger generations, but they left deep traces in the collective imagination. The same atmospheres can be found in videogames of the type of *Assassin's Creed*, that is considered a successor of the videogame's series *Prince of Persia* and is based on the history of the medieval sect of the Hashashin.<sup>73</sup> All these works seem to depict the "exotic" atmospheres of the *Thousand and One Nights*: a generic "Orient" including areas between the Indian Ocean and Africa, where there are very

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<sup>68</sup> Salgari was a very prolific writer, with more than 200 published books, notwithstanding his untimely death at 48 years of age. He committed suicide for the grief for the loss of his wife for a mental illness.

<sup>69</sup> This figure is inspired to the historical character of Sir James Brooke (1803-1868), rajah of Sarawak.

<sup>70</sup> Unlike James Brooke, the figure of Van Gould, governor of Maracaibo is completely fictional.

<sup>71</sup> I am not going to discuss here the attitude of this woman – Honorata van Gould –, who after being abandoned, clearly to perish at sea, does not object at all to the corsair's wish to be reunited with her.

<sup>72</sup> We might say that we have here a peculiar mixture of females' attitudes, alternating, sometimes in the same character, between strength and acquiescence.

<sup>73</sup> The Order of the Hashashin was active over a large territory between Persia and the Levant between 1090 and 1275. Based on their strict religious principles, they killed many Muslim and Christian leaders, using daggers or poison. In the Italian language their name became a common name for killers ("assassini").

beautiful and mysterious women, huge treasures, brave, albeit folkloristic, heroes, a kind of primeval wildness, presented as an essential part of a human nature still somehow primitive. Stereotypes become consolidated: these worlds are foreign to us (namely the “civilised Europeans”), they fascinate and frighten us at the same time, they attract and repel us in the same measure. We like to live them in our fantasies, but we do not wish to know them in real life, unless we are bound to conquer and “civilise” them.

Luckily enough, in our contemporary times, books where an attempt is made at getting out from the cage of stereotypes are more and more frequent. A much-appreciated series of booklets called *Good Night Tales for Rebel Girls (Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli)*,<sup>74</sup> wrote in Italian and translated into many languages, presents in a very simple way only figures of females, among whom we find Cleopatra, but also Hatshepsut, and certainly Marie Curie, but also Malala Yousafzai, Rosa Parks and Emmeline Pankhurst. We should note, however, an interesting use of words: in this series they speak of “rebel” girls, whereas in other books they speak of “brave” girls, and this change is, in my opinion a positive one, because in Italian the word “ribelle” (rebel) frequently has a negative value. So, for instance, in the translation of the title of a cartoon movie by the Disney production group, while the protagonist, a Scottish girl, is called in English *Brave* in Italian she is called “rebel”, that gives a slightly negative connotation to the character. This slight negativity becomes stronger when considering that this girl has ginger, curly hair, which in the Italian popular culture are not considered too well.<sup>75</sup> Other, commendable works try to widen the panorama of the literature for children and teenagers, with books translated from other languages or books that refer to other cultures: one very interesting specimen is the adaptation of parts of the work by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Rumi by Anna Villani with illustrations by the Iranian artist Nooshin Safakhoo.<sup>76</sup>

## 6. Final considerations and some proposals

At the end of this rapid review I think that some points can certainly be made.

1. The teaching of History and Geography in Italy, since the foundation of the unified state in 1861, has thus far been inadequate and too much dependent on political directions and exploitations. This attitude might have had some

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<sup>74</sup> Cavallo / Favilli 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Of course, ginger hair is very rare in Italy, and they are thus perceived as alien and contrary to the norms. There have also been popular songs hinting at the fact that the curly hair is an indicator of a whimsy nature and ginger hair may actually be associated with a rebellious character.

<sup>76</sup> Rumi 2014. There may be other examples in this line, but this is the only one I know.

explanation and even justification immediately after the unification of Italy, when they wished to create or enhance a sense of nation in the peoples inhabiting the peninsula, who had been always separated and fighting with one another since the fall of the Roman empire. It is perhaps possible to understand why this attitude was still dominant during the fascist era, when the idea of creating an empire was quite strong, but it cannot be accepted any more, more than 70 years after the transformation of Italy in a democratic republic.

2. The type of teaching thus far adopted is not meant to stimulate discussion and individual in-depth analysis, but it rather led to the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. These stereotypes regard the representation of the so-called western world in general, and of Europe and Italy in particular as places privileged by nature, culture, and the level of their civilisation. Thus, the West appears as an ideal that should be achieved by all the peoples on the earth.<sup>77</sup>

3. The not western peoples and cultures may be represented in an explicitly negative way (like the Austrians in the book *Cuore*), or, anyhow, always as a contrast with “our” way of life, alternating a paternalistic attitude with a mere interest for folklore.<sup>78</sup>

4. In my opinion, as regards the presentation of female personalities there has even been a regression. Whereas at the beginning some female characters in Roman history were depicted as a kind of archetypes, as ancient but positive models – the heroine challenging the enemy (Clelia), the mother proud of her children (Cornelia) – we are now in a phase when, probably refusing those models, these figures have been cancelled and none other has taken their place. And yet, those archetypes are still unconsciously influencing our culture. The same regression can be noticed in public images. I mentioned previously that the public monuments depicting women are a minority and are predominantly dedicated to stereotypical figures – wives and mothers. In the most recent decades, the number of female statues has increased, but too frequently these images – in majority made by male artists – albeit representing historical characters, indulge in the complacent exaltation of women’s bodies. As a result, these statues, also for their placement in secondary urban spaces, instead of being

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<sup>77</sup> The concept of “West” is now the object of a deep and hot debate. I wish to recall here only two important works, dealing with the subject: Asor Rosa 1992 and Liverani 2021.

<sup>78</sup> One very negative consequence, in my opinion, is the presentation of personages of other countries, especially those with whom there are political problems, in a not too subtly denigratory fashion, using “traditional” titles like tzar, sultan, or pharaoh for the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Egypt, just to mention a few examples, as a way to reduce them to characters of folklore, rather than of modern politics.

motivations for memory, become urban decorations, frequently the object of selfies and salacious comments on the social media.<sup>79</sup>

Summing up, in my opinion, the study of History and Geography in the Italian schools of every level needs to be thoroughly revised, leaving apart bare notions – which are useless at this point – and rebalancing narrations both as regards the representation of the cultures of the ancient world and of the countries outside the European or more generically “western” areas, and the analysis of female roles. The “static” learning of notions provided in a top-down presentation should be abandoned, favouring in its place a “dynamic” learning, stimulating discussion and the development of a critical spirit. As concerns the literature for children and teenagers, the representation of female characters not stuck in traditional roles should be strongly increased and the representation of male dominating characters should be discussed. The problem of tales and fairy tales is a very complicated one, because this literature is meant to somehow introduce children to the world they will live in through metaphors, and the traditional tales are probably no more meaningful in this sense. The discussions on how to update or discard them are heated and thus far have not yet produced convincing results.<sup>80</sup> Also, the representation of persons belonging to other cultures should be more equal and positive, allowing, on the one hand, the young Italians to relate themselves in a more correct way with their peers belonging to other cultures, and, on the other hand, to young foreign persons to better integrate themselves without harbouring groundless senses of inferiority.<sup>81</sup> It might be very interesting, in my opinion to let the children and teenagers discuss with their peers how history is taught in the different countries and which tales each of them is told. This might lead to find points of contact and to fruitful discussions about the differences. Last but not least, the representation of women must radically change, from a larger presence in the institutions – that is slowly but gradually getting better –, to a presence in

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<sup>79</sup> Ducci 2023: 161, 165-166. Some recent cases became quite famous, or rather infamous, like the statue of a laundress in Bologna, depicted naked and kneeling with great evidence given to her forms (Carrieri / Forcella / Piazzì 2021-22: 8-9). The case of a fountain dedicated to two journalists killed during their work is even worse. For some mysterious reason the two women – Ilaria Alpi and Maria Grazia Cutuli – are naked: Ducci, 2023: fig. 8. Ilaria Alpi (1961-1994) was killed in Mogadishu with her cameraman in obscure circumstances, while she was making enquiries for the Italian National television about weapons trafficking. Maria Grazia Cutuli (1962-2001) was assassinated in Afghanistan with other journalists; she was working for the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most important Italian national newspapers and also the circumstances of her death were not completely ascertained.

<sup>80</sup> In my opinion, it is useless to “update” traditional fairy tales: the result is often a mismatch of the main story and of “modern” characters or attitudes without a real change in the perspective. It is better to support the creation of new contemporary stories.

<sup>81</sup> See, at this regard, the observations in Grandi 2015.

public spaces – street names and public monuments – that must overcome the still dominating androcentrism, where even the allegorical or metaphorical characters, when they are female, are represented as subordinate to the male character. Some feminist collectives are carrying on important actions to remember the great and forgotten women protagonists of the Italian Risorgimento (Resurgence) of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the women who fought in the partisan groups against Fascism and Nazism during the Second World War.<sup>82</sup> Frequently, however, these actions lead to the production of posters or murals, namely transient elements, that do not become permanent landmarks in the urban landscape. It seems certain, in my opinion, that the little or no presence of women in the urban spaces and, as a consequence, in the collective memory, is closely related, on the one hand, with the fact that the Italian society is still strongly patriarchal and, on the other hand, with the lack of historical knowledge.<sup>83</sup> It seems quite evident to me that it is of paramount importance to intervene on both these aspects without letting too much time elapse.

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<sup>82</sup> Carrier / Forcella / Piazzesi 2021-22: 15-21.

<sup>83</sup> Several pleas were presented by the teachers of History, facing reforms more and more punitive for the teaching of this subject. The most recent one is of 2019: <https://francescomacri.wordpress.com/2019/04/26/scuola-lappello-la-storia-e-un-bene-comunesalviamola/>. The lack of historical knowledges and the acquiescence to social and political biases is, in my opinion, quite strong in the actual Italian political class.

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