Those Evil Public School Italian Teachers

Stefano Albertini (February 28, 2011)

A defense of the Italian public school system, attacked by the Prime Minister these days, comes from a New York professor, with an American PhD and who works for a private university. Personal recollections but also references to the history of the Italian school fill this piece which we share completely. As Albertini writes, one must not forget that public school not only had an educational function, but also political. Italian unity was obtained in classrooms. Underpaid but respected teachers created a national sense of belonging by teaching our language, history and literature.

“Freedom means the possibility of educating one's children freely, and freely means not to be forced to send them to State schools, where the teachers want to inculcate principles contrary to the ones of their parents”. (Silvio Berlusconi)

I work in the largest private university of the United States and obtained my PhD in the most prestigious private university of the West Coast, that Stanford which served as an incubator for the Silicon valley, but which also hosted the most esteemed of humanists: from Michelle Serres to John Freccero and Rene Girard. But I am a product of the Italian public school: from my first grade in Bozzolo to the University of Parma. School was also central to the lives of my family: my

grandmother, father, and aunt all dedicated their lives to the public school, without regrets.

The Prime Minister's sentence is deeply offensive towards those I value most in the world, but this is a secondary problem. The President offends millions of Italians on a daily basis and nobody seems to even notice anymore, so I will do the same, but I cannot refrain from sharing my thoughts regardin the sense and value of the public school system in Italy. I am not going to report numbers and stats, but I do want to report that over 90% of students from Elementary through High school attend state schools. We also know that some of these schools are in disastrous structural conditions and lack the areas and equipments they would need. Unfortunately we also know that there are teachers who are unprepared and uninterested. As far as private schools are concerned, apart from some outstanding exceptions, especially among the confessional schools (such as those run by Jesuits and Salesians, always devoted to education), there are many at the service of not so brilliant students, who not being able to finish public schools, move to one of many diploma mills that have sprout like mushrooms during the last few years, where a significant tuition fee assures certain - and often accelerated - promotion and graduation.

Italian public school did not only have an obvious educational function, but also a political and social one. Our country's unity, which we are celebrating this year, was obtained on the battlefields of Solferino, Custoza, and Goito, but the unification of Italians was obtained in classrooms (as De Amicis rightfully reminded us, possibly with too sweet a rhetoric for our sensibility), where underpaid but esteemed teachers created a national sense of belonging by teaching our language, history and literature. Until recently, if one befriended someone who had completed the eleventh grade, one knew that he had read Dante's Inferno and after twelfth grade knew about the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. From Palermo to Trento, from Casalmaggiore to Canicattì all of us learned at school who we are and where we come from.

And how about these inculcating teachers, as Berlusconi calls them, whose beliefs are contrary to the families? I know plenty of teachers: my professors, my parents and their friends and those colleagues of mine whom I taught with before coming to the States. Not all of them were Madame Curie or Benedetto Croce, but some were true teachers: updated, cultured, dialectically effective, able to raise interest and passion to the most abstruse of topics. Some were communists, one was an anarchist, a couple were fascist nostalgics, some were liberal, some we never knew. At the experimental high school Virgilio in Mantua, which I attended for a year, almost everyone was leftist and that experiment was based on the principles of don Milani; they wore turtlenecks and everyone spoke informally to each other. In my Istituto Magistrale Sofonisba Anguissola in Cremona, most of my teachers were extremely catholic unmarried sixty-year-old ladies who wore austere black work coats (this was the 1980s, not the Middle Ages). Everyone spoke formally to each other. I studied history both according to the communist Villari and the catholic De Rosa. The professors usually pointed out who the author was. Our strongly moderate and conservative art history professor used Argan but every so often told us to study it keeping in mind the “he was a communist”. I don't believe mine was a different experience from that of different generations of Italians. I am happy to have met professors with different principles from those of my parents and that dialogue helped me develop my critical spirit and appreciate and respect different opinions and ideas.

My father would spend the month of August touring the farmlands near Mantua and Cremona to convince the farmers to allow their children to continue their studies at the Istituto Professionale (public!) for Agriculture. He taught agrarian economy using three languages: dialect, Latin and Italian. Taken away from barns and put into classrooms for a few years, many of these kids graduated and even finished college. My mother would bring the more difficult scholars home in the afternoon, to the reluctance of my brother and me. My grandmother, with polio, at age 18 went to the newly Italian Istria to teach classes of 70-80 students. She spent more than 40 years in public schools. She was poor like everybody else: during the war a teacher's salary would buy two pounds of salt.

The most serious effect of President Berlusconi's words, as I anticipated, is not offending these teachers, but is the destabilizing and terrible message he is sending to millions of Italian students in public schools. It is as if he had said: your professors aren't there to teach you new things, or explain difficult concepts to you, to open up unknown worlds to you, and to help you think with your head and develop a critical spirit; they are simply political agitators who try to brainwash you. Berlusconi's

sentence de-legitimizes the whole teaching class and places all teachers in the accused box as agitprops. It takes away from the teachers the only thing they have left: the respect and esteem of pupils and fellow citizens.

When my grandmother retired and was brought around town on a wheelchair, the men she met would tip their hats and salute her as “sciura maestra” [Mrs. Teacher], not because she was richer, more powerful, or more clever, but because they knew that she had dedicated her life to the community, not “inculcating principles”, but opening minds and filling them with good things that would make everyone's life better. Italian teachers are among the least paid graduates in Italy (and Europe). Berlusconi is trying to take away even what remains of the respect and esteem that still surrounds them and that is indispensable for their authority in the classroom.

We must not allow him to do so!

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