

Bonjour à tous et merci pour l'invitation. Comme vous le savez, je vais parler en anglais, très lentement. Si vous avez des questions après mon intervention, vous pouvez les poser en français et je verrai ensuite dans quelle langue répondre, peut-être en italien, avec l'aide de Piero.

Je suis un historienne de l'Italie contemporaine et des écoles de l'Italie contemporaine, je ne suis pas un expert en didactique de l'histoire, et mon approche est historique. Je vais essayer ici de lire les problèmes d'aujourd'hui à la lumière du chemin parcouru par l'Italie unie.

### *History teaching and history teachers in united Italy*

#### *Past and present*

In the course of this speech on history teaching in united Italy, I would like to create a dialogue between past and present. I would like to start from the recurrent controversies on history teaching in Italy, which confirm the crucial importance of history teaching for the formation of citizenship in the contemporary age. In 2018, for example, the Ministry of Education decided to remove the history essay from the baccalaureate examination. Prominent intellectuals from the progressive area then signed an appeal to increase the role of history at school and university. **First slide \* «History is a common heritage, its knowledge is a principle of democracy and equality».** It is the first part of the appeal promoted by Andrea Camilleri, writer, Andrea Giardina, historian, and Liliana Segre, life senator and concentration camp survivor. The appeal reflects the pressures on the history teaching (with the growing importance of victims).

In reality, the issue is much more complex and cannot be reduced to a mere political decision. Its origins must be sought back in time, far and near. The controversies are linked to the profound changes triggered by the end of the Cold war. **Second slide.** On one hand, the crisis of the model of State and society established during the so-called Golden Age, which is also a crisis of school policies, not excluding cultural and pedagogical aspects, in essence the crisis of the centralized education system linked to the nation State; on the other hand, the crisis of history, which is also a crisis of history teaching. **Third slide.** The younger generations have profoundly changed their relationship with the past and with memory. Globalization, the web

and computers have not only modified access to knowledge and learning itself, influencing the relationship with reading and writing, but they have expanded space to the detriment of time, as if one were everywhere and nowhere.

### *The weight of the past*

In Italy, this crisis acquires peculiar characteristics: here, the end of the Cold War swept away the party system born after the Second World War, giving way to the so-called Second Republic; all this has meant a confrontation (a sort of showdown) with the heritage of the 20th century, even as far as schools are concerned.

**Slide 4.** In Italy the weight of the past, which also includes Fascism, is stronger than elsewhere. During Fascism, Italy went through a decisive phase of its modernization which left a lasting mark on the school system as well, starting with the organic reform carried out in 1923 by the idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile. The Gentile reform is the founding act of modern Italian school. **Slide 5.** The school designed by Gentile, which is in part still recognizable today, is a selective and hierarchical school, based on humanistic and philosophical culture. Secondary school as a whole is divided into non-communicating channels. Of these, only the classical high school allows access to all university faculties.

The public debate on school is polemical and superficial because of the weight of the past too. Nostalgics are pitted against the innovators according to the logic of political confrontation, which reveals a very poor widespread knowledge of scholastic problems. In the public debate the link between history and citizenship, as we have seen, was placed in the almost exclusive terms of the *historia magistra vitae*; only a minority link the crisis of history to the loss of the future of the new generations.

At the same time, there has been a new interest on the part of historians in teaching history in spite of a very deep-rooted disinterest. This new interest is partly self-defence in the face of the loss of status of their discipline. Historians are thus trying to safeguard their professional future.

**Slides 6, 7.** Historians insist on teaching history as teaching a mental habit capable of placing a phenomenon in a given context, as an approach to a global context. Hence the need to develop a new model of general history, both in terms of content and in terms of teaching, to replace the traditional historicist and Europeanist one: widening the picture to the whole

world. Historians insist on a conception of time not as a univocal dimension, because it depends on the questions that man asks himself today; on the need to open up the historian's laboratory and put the sources at the center. More generally, points of view must be multiplied (an example for all is that of gender history) in order to give the sense of history as an unfinished process, which is made up not only of what remains, but also of what has been lost. **Slide 8.**

### *Long-term issues*

These issues discussed by historians are very important, but they don't take into account the reality of the school, which has always been contradictory to the premises. It is necessary to make some preliminary remarks that concern more generally the history of the school and of the country.

First at all, the position of the public school within the administration and the State budget has never corresponded to the importance attributed to the school in principle. In politics and in the dynamics of education – less linear than in other European countries – the path of Italy in the twentieth century, with its lights and shadows, is thus reflected. It is no coincidence that in one of the greatest literary successes of recent years, of international dimensions, the cycle of the *Brilliant friend* of Elena Ferrante, school and culture play a complex role: although their class nature is evident, they are also imperfect instruments of social mobility.

The second issue is the distance between the syllabus and effective school reality. To see how and how much teaching changes, it is necessary to take into account teaching practice within specific contexts, thanks to different components and actors. **Slide 9 \***. In Italy school doesn't mean the abstract institution designed by laws and statistics. These are the main points:

- The gap between laws and everyday schooling
- The inhomogeneity in the country
- The freedom of teaching has always been guaranteed, at least on paper, much more than in other countries.
- importance of school publishing

Textbooks are repositories of collective identity and offer a huge variety of translations of ministerial programme; they incorporate the influences of the political and cultural world, the pressures of the Church and the problems of publishing in different ways.

This contradiction emerges in the case of teachers. **Slide 10.** Teaching has always been conceived as a top-down process, in accordance with an idea of centralized State. Teachers, not students, have always been considered the heart of the school, except for some particular moments like '68 and the '70s. There is indeed talk of teachers' protagonism. **Slide 11\***. These are the related points:

- exponential growth in the number of teachers
- view of teaching as a mission that is difficult to professionalize
- mistrust of didactics, which is nowadays claimed in some progressive circles to be the solution to all ills

In spite of this, teachers are weak professional and social figures, with an uncertain training path, a long period of precariousness and low salaries, an early feminisation, long characterized by marked individualism, political conformism, subordination to hierarchy and resistance to change. At the moment the teaching staff in Italy remains «the oldest among European countries». **Slide 12 \***. **In the hierarchy of the State administration, public education staff are always placed in a lower position than other sectors. The Gentile reform defines the specific position of the teacher, but his position was clearly inferior to that of civil servants with a university degree in other sectors, and has remained so, just as the Education State Authority in periphery (provveditore agli studi) is not on a par with the prefect, as it should be.**

### *The lack of autonomy of history at school*

Moving on to the history teaching. In the Italian school the history teaching has always occupied a marginal role, both today and yesterday. I will try to highlight the reasons for this. It should first be noted that within the school context history teaching has not and has never had an autonomous function, but an ancillary one within literary teachings (which in Italy have an historicistic imprint). In three years of lower secondary school and in the first two years of high school, the history teaching is placed in the Humanities chair (Italian literature, geography, now history and geography

are combined in a subject incomprehensible to most people, the geo-history). In the last three years of high school history is part of the philosophy and history chair, here too in a subordinate position. Teachers have never had an historical background, but a literary or philosophical one; even today, a history degree is the most penalized in terms of access to teaching.

In addition, historians are usually absent from the commissions and working groups set up by the Ministry of Education, as opposed to their numerous colleagues in the social sciences and pedagogy.

This lack of autonomy of history teaching, sedimented in time, means that the construction of the historical sense and of a historical conscience, and therefore of a collective identity, passes through other disciplines. For a long time in secondary school this task is performed mainly by classical literature, Greek and Roman literature as far as ancient history is concerned, and Italian literature as far as the history of the country is concerned, especially poetry, also for the need to make use of emotional channels. On the basis of the primacy recognized to the language in the humanistic tradition, language and literature have always been the real matrices of nationality. The image of a united Italy despite divisions, and the continuation of a tradition of greatness beyond any chronological boundaries thus arrives.

Even with regard to the youngest children, the sense of history was given by reading books, not necessarily written only for school. History teaching has taken on a pervasive character that did not know a too rigid disciplinary boundary.

Thanks to all this, historical knowledge and poetic transfiguration are combined in a sentimental vision. It is on this basis that one learns to read, write, speak. In essence, this is where the structure of thought and being is built.

### *The school, a separated place*

Another issue is the slowness with which history teaching opens up to the more recent past. For a long time history is ancient history and sacred history; and public education hesitated to use recent national history to make Italians, starting with Risorgimento. After the advent of the historical Left, reservations slowly dissolved in the last two decades of the 19th century,

when the need to educate overcomes the fears that at first weighed on literacy. Primary school becomes then "the church of modern times".

The long dominant idea is that schools should be a separate place from politics. History is considered inappropriate precisely because it is politically controversial. Moreover, in the Italian case there is the Roman question, or rather the difficult relations with the Church. The centralized school system was born in competition with Catholicism, but religion is in fact considered the only guarantee against the subversive risk contained in education. In Republican Italy, as we have seen, there is also the difficulty of dealing with the problem of fascism.

### *A long continuity*

Another aspect to keep in mind is the continuity that marks the teaching of history. Excluding changes more on the surface than in substance, in the Crispina era – which in Italy corresponds to the second industrial revolution, the age of imperialism and the years of nation-building – a scholastic narration of history settled down that would find its breaking point only at the end of the 60s (after the economic boom, with the '68 and the protests of the 70s). From this moment on, history teaching is almost exclusively identified with national history, in a very broad sense (from antiquity to the present) and in an ambiguous temporal dimension, suspended between past and present, which in these years begins to culminate in the Risorgimento.

Textbooks, which play a very important role in education, prove to be one of the most powerful vehicles of continuity. In an increasingly schooled society, the State and publishers are gradually becoming indispensable for one another. In publishing houses, it is common practice to continue to use ready-made material, with minor cosmetic interventions.

**Slide 13.** Nothing more than the long school success of *Cuore* is significant of the continuity of teaching of national history. *Cuore* is the book written not specifically for school by Edmondo de Amicis in 1886, at the height of Crispina era. *Cuore* was brought to Fascist Italy by the Gentile reform, despite some resistance from intransigent Fascism, and was fully accepted in Republican Italy as well until the 1970s. Conceived as the diary of a third grader, *Cuore* fostered the mechanism of identification and

transformed the school into a living place, where people became both men and Italians at the same time.

**Slide 14.** In secondary schools, this role was played by Giosuè Carducci's poetic production, which firmly became part of the scholastic canon. Carducci's poetry plays a decisive role in the nationalization of the middle classes: it connects the present to the greatness of the past, near and far, through the privileged instrument of classical tradition.

So literary *exemplum* and historical *exemplum* tend to coincide, according to the principle relaunched by the Gentile reform of 1923.

### ***A periodization***

This does not mean, of course, that from the end of the 19th century to the 60s of the 20th century everything remains the same. I will try to identify a periodization. The narrative of national history, as we have seen, consolidates in the last two decades of the 19th century, when the elite society is overcome and the bases of the State expand, when the basic contrast with the Church makes a civil religion necessary. The electoral reform of 1881 introduced the ability to read and write as one of the requirements for access to the vote, giving an impulse to compulsory schooling introduced by the Coppino law of 1877.

The initial approach is that of the *historia magistra vitae*, which joins the biographism of the *exempla vitae*, an ancient catholic tradition renewed in a secular and patriotic sense.

**Slide 15.** In this period history teaching in elementary schools took on an autonomous, even if ancillary role, and introduces the events of the Risorgimento with the idea of building national identity. In the manuals, the Risorgimento and its protagonists assumed a sacred connotation.

### ***The Fascism***

The other juncture is represented by the twenty years of Fascism. The regime made history teaching, and in particular the closest contemporary history, more autonomous. History is transformed into an indispensable means of manipulating consciences.

However, literature continues to be considered indispensable for building a historical consciousness, especially the political-patriotic production of the classics (e.g. Machiavelli, Leopardi). History did not gain

full autonomy: it was the Gentile reform that anchored history even more closely to the chair of Letters and to high school, combining it with philosophy, discarding hypotheses, although present, of a combination with geography (as the philosopher Benedetto Croce would have wished). As we have seen, Gentile's decision is still in force in the Italian school today. During Fascism, Italian and Latin had the task of showing the seamless connection between the Roman and the Italian world, both from a linguistic and literary point of view, as well as from a moral and historical-political point of view. It is no coincidence that Roman history (and more generally national history) is still looked at with suspicion.

During Fascism, the centre of gravity of history teaching shifted significantly forward, from the Risorgimento to the First World War. The First World War is considered the fourth war of independence and the welding ring between Risorgimento and Fascism, according to a image of substantial continuity of the history of Italy (unlike what happens in Germany with Nazism). From this point of view, Carducci's poems, which link classical greatness to the Third Italy, continue to be the ideal instrument.

With the proclamation of the Empire, all the manuals accentuate the sabaudist and autochthonous reading of the Risorgimento, in order to sever the link with the French Revolution.

There was constant recourse to biographies of Garibaldi, Cavour and Vittorio Emanuele II, and to extracurricular reading books on the Risorgimento. In elementary school, in addition to reading, singing and drawing play an incisive role in shaping the imagination. For fascism emotionally involving students is important.

**Slide 16.** Also in single State Book, introduced by the regime in 1929 in compulsory schooling, are the readings that give the sense of the history, because they act as the glue of the facts and characters. Following the model of *Cuore*, in a fusion of private and public spheres, the readings tell the story of the lives of some children where the history of Italy and the regime are constantly present, well camouflaged in the folds of everyday life.

The overall effect of the State book is to “retrace” national history in a temporal dimension always suspended between present and past, where the idea of national unity is immediately and everywhere present in the most diverse ways, since the Ancient age and Middle Age and the Duce is the savior by the will of God. The strength of fascism was precisely that of uniting an extremely diverse and contradictory history into a single narrative.

## *The transition from Fascism to the Republic*

The transition from Fascism to the Republic is not a linear process and was characterized by an underlying moderation, in accordance with national and international power relations, after the convulsive vicissitudes of the 1943-45 civil war.

The climate of the cold war, the failure to reform the school system, the inclusion of the Concordat in the Constitution, all this seems to oppose the very idea of change. Continuity and rupture are intertwined, as already in the transition from liberalism to Fascism.

For a long time there was an almost total silence at school about Fascism, war and Resistance, just as the intention of a robust civic education on an anti-fascist basis remained a dead letter. The presence of the strongest western communist party ends up replacing anti-fascism with anti-communism.

The difficulty in dealing with recent history is not, however, an Italian feature, but common to the rest of post-war Europe, confirming a deep desire for oblivion, as well as in the case of Nazism in federal Germany and Vichy in France. In Italy the reading of Fascism as a “parenthesis” delays the awareness of what Fascism has entailed in schools and in the country.

In terms of content, all these tensions translate into the recovery of a tested tradition in its seemingly timeless values, God, family, country, where the only valid moral guarantee is recognized in the Catholic religion. The tight dialectic between past and present disappears, but the educational centre of gravity continues to be the Risorgimento until the great war, conceived as the fourth war of independence.

School publishing was a powerful vehicle for continuity with Fascism. Textbooks were defascistized only on the surface. The harshest phases of the Cold War initially favoured Catholic publishing houses above all (the DC obtained an overwhelming majority in 1948 and remained the majority party for a long time), reflecting the Church’s attention to school. However, the new democratic framework guaranteed greater freedom and history textbooks for high school showed themselves to be a little less impervious to change (see the textbooks by Armando Saitta and Giorgio Spini). With the publication of Gramsci's Prison notebooks (the part on the Risorgimento appears in 1949) the historiographic debate became livelier; and from the mid-1950s the progressive forces and the PCI in particular took an interest

in schools, identifying precisely in history one of the pivots for the re-foundation of cultural models.

### *The economic boom*

However, it was only with the tumultuous transformations produced by the economic boom at all levels that the break came. The beginning of the center-left government, in the early 60s, projected the Resistance at the centre of public discourse, arousing in young people a desire for knowledge of the near past; the introduction of the united middle secondary school posed new challenges to an education that was now mass and, at least on paper, democratic; the boom produces a mental shock. It is no coincidence that the new history programmes for secondary schools launched at the beginning of 60s offered the possibility of a thematic and chronological broadening that extended to non-European realities and to Fascism, even if the programmes did not mention it explicitly. The increase and rejuvenation in the teaching staff had a positive function to this effect; and in mass and consumer society the role of teacher changes profoundly.

### *The '68 and the protest*

**Slide 18.** The irreversible break is in the 1970s, when the sense of continuity between generations was broken and Italy experienced high levels of political and social conflict. It is no coincidence that the protest of the 70s, due to the pressing need to come to terms with the past, insisted on a radical revision of the reading of national history and its shift towards the present day.

The scholastic protest, in the wake of 1968, identified its objectives in teaching methods and contents now irremediably outdated, which seemed to be holding back the democratization of the State and society.

The demolition of the Risorgimento rhetoric ended up overwhelming the concept – and the word itself – of homeland. The unveiling of Risorgimento as a bourgeois revolution halted the scholastic fortune of Risorgimento, not only in the unanimous and sabaudist image but also in its democratic and popular currents, Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cattaneo, Pisacane, cautiously re-evaluated since the mid-1950s. Similarly, a profound revision of the anthological canon starts, even if the analysis of individual textbooks

would reserve some surprises, due to the tendency of publishing houses to reuse ready-made materials.

**Slide 19.** The problems of teaching history in today's school are tied in part to these long-standing problems, and more generally to a scholastic tradition which has always been reluctant to recognize an autonomous role in history teaching. First at all, the hours dedicated to the history teaching are only two a week, as it has always been since the Gentile reform. This makes any real impact of the history teaching hypothetical.

Now the more recent past is no longer excluded from the curricula, but the history of the twentieth century bears again the weight of an approach of the type *historia magistra vitae*. The insistence on memory and civil rhetoric manifests itself in a privileged focus on Resistance and Shoah, for example, and shows that the history teaching is still too immediately susceptible to political and non-critical use. The weight of an educational use of history in a progressive sense is no less suffocating than the traditional one.

It's also evident the insistence on prehistory and ancient history. In current programs the path from antiquity to contemporary history is repeated in two cycles: a first cycle from 8 to 14 years, between elementary and middle school, and a second cycle from 14 to 19, in high school (but the obligation ends at 16 years).

To these ancient defects are added more recent ones. After 1968, the demolition of the tradition swept away the narrative dimension of history, the facts and characters with which young people could identify (as had been the case with the Risorgimento). As if it were a guarantee of the scientific nature of history, the use of abstruse concepts and cryptic language has greatly reduced the didactic effectiveness of the history teaching. The demolition of history and homeland rhetoric has made the Italian history teaching of itself suspect, as if it were completely irrelevant. To this is added the insistence on a world history approach, in itself legitimate. However, the result is that Italian students arrive at university today without knowing Italian history. What students know about national history still comes through literary teaching.

In conclusion, these are all elements that traditionally weakened history's position within the Italian school. All elements that today characterize in this country the crisis of history, whose range is much wider, and reverberates at different levels, beyond the strictly scholastic one.