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Comparative studies in education in Italy. Heritage and transformation

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to investigate the profile of comparative education in Italy, highlighting those elements that have characterised its development in relation to the cultural and political features of the country. This approach inevitably involves the comparison of Italy's specific particularities to those of other countries in the north and the south of Europe, in order to understand whether there are certain features that may place Italian comparative education within the wider framework of the Mediterranean area. What is involved in making a comparative analysis of the profile of a discipline and, more particularly, of comparative education in Italy, concentrating principally on the geopolitical context of its development? What is it that typifies the feature or features that make Italian comparative education quintessentially Italian? What are the main sources of comparative education in Italy, and what are the disciplines with which it continues to interact today? The article argues that in the wider framework of Western comparative education, Italy's voice, rooted in a plural tradition and open to new developments, is an original and important contribution for thinking critically this field of study.

KEYWORDS

Comparative education
history; Italy; heritage;
university; Southern Europe

che mi era in fondo
la tua legge rischiosa: esser vasto e diverso
e insieme fisso
(Montale 1925)

Introduction

In spite of the continuous increase in cross-border academic research, each discipline is influenced in its development and internal dynamics by the differing cultural traditions featured in its national profile. From this viewpoint, Italian comparative education is no exception: while registering new vitality in recent years (Barbieri, Gaudio, and Zago 2016; Callegari 2016a; Paolone 2008; Gallo 2017), its diffusion is relatively poor compared to other European countries, in spite of the research activity of important Italian figures who have for some time been working at an international level. In Italy, however,

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despite this relatively marginal situation of comparative education, we find a well-founded comparative sensibility in educational studies on various fronts (Palomba 2011, 32) well able to perform as one of the heuristic keys frequently used by scholars.

In approaching an analysis of Italian comparative studies in education, therefore, from the outset we can see how the present-day scenario is the result of a plural stratification of both national elements and international dynamics. These two levels fuse together in the complex geopolitical picture of Italy, whose dynamics have had, and still have, an important influence on the development of comparative education. Before being circumscribed within the reality of one single state – the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed in 1861 – the Italian cultural context was like a field into and across which flowed several heterogeneous elements¹: a field well definable by the concept of ‘space’, by now solidly set also into the reflections elaborated within comparative education (Cappa 2017). ‘Space’ should not be understood simply as a territorial indication, but as ‘plateaus’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 1991), a concept capable of shaping and circumscribing many dynamics to endow them with meaning. The conceptual effort of Deleuze and Guattari is addressed to find a key for considering, without any hierarchy, many different elements of a context and opening new ways for unprecedented thoughts: it is in the very moment, fragile but important, of intersection between these vectorial flows and plateaus that former elements acquire specific influence and singularity.

The dynamics to be considered are divided into two categories: political and cultural, both analysed according to two separate dimensions of time, long- and short-term. Particularly for the process of Italian unification, it should be recalled that 1861 is only one point on a long itinerary, a point of complex gestation and important consequences.² Furthermore – and this is an aspect held to be of great importance – in spite of the fact that such dynamics condition the disciplinary ambit on which they act, they are always diversely structured by the individual scholars interpreting and making the most of them in their own way in line with their own formation as much as with their own individual personal identity.

Any attempt to understand the development and specificities of comparative education in Italy, particularly after the state came into being, cannot but investigate how this country viewed such a discipline and how it viewed itself through it, in a constant exchange between the national state and Europe, between Europe and the world. This implies debating certain assumptions, among which European identity stands out; too often has it been considered one single reality albeit with various different shadings. Instead, taking up an observation point in a Mediterranean country profoundly changes the way in which we look at the development of comparative education, understanding it by setting out from the geopolitical conditions typifying Italy which make of this country a case with specific, recognisable features: even now, in spite of the European integration process, that is however increasingly problematic.

Observing from the ‘South’ the development and the current state of comparative education may be a valuable approach for another reason as well: a discipline of differences *par excellence*, comparative education undergoes extremely strong inner tension, a tension that is not always sufficiently conceptualised. As a disciplinary ambit, educational studies with a comparative approach present a multiple structure (Cowen 2009; Carney 2010; Klerides 2015; Manzon 2018), yet they risk seeing their multiplicity gradually decline through an on-going process of reduction in their conceptual and communicative paradigms

(Palomba 2016). Reiterating the peripheral centrality of another approach, of a particular manner of reading the global and of a plural vocabulary in naming concepts: these can be fruitful tactics in an overall strategy aimed at stopping comparative education from oversimplifying itself. Rooted in dynamic geopolitics, this drift is having remarkable consequences in the academic development of the discipline, among which the insistence on the use of English is only the most obvious feature.

Born in Italy

In the twentieth century, the rise of comparative education was firmly interwoven with the birth of the national states. Thus comparative education had two characteristics. One was finding its coordinates in specific geopolitical conditions widely diversifying the various institutional and cultural contexts; the second was identifying this discipline as a political and intellectual outlook at the same time. In the co-existence of these two dimensions it is easy to see the features found in the biographies of authors who gave input and affirmation to the development of this field of studies, among whom Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris (Di Rienzo 1999; Kaloyannaki and Kazamias 2009, 11–24; Epstein 2017) and Victor Cousin (Brewer 1971; Wilson 2003). Attention on the international level as well as comparison with foreign countries viewed more and more as an inescapable step to reconsider one's own reality are characteristics that the Nineteenth Century, the one said to be quintessentially pedagogical, passed on to the Twentieth Century. Italian examples along such lines are numerous and varied; although some will be dealt with in the following pages, we wish to recall at least two intellectuals at the outset: Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) and Pasquale Villari (1827–1917). Leopardi's anxious concerns for Italy, apparent in his poem *All'Italia* (1818), led him to a real attempt at a comparative analysis of our character as already manifest in 1824, well before political unity, as shown in his work *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degli Italiani* (1824). He also developed a careful sensitivity towards the cultural approaches common abroad, especially in France, in order to gather them within the context of our culture, as he did for the composition of a *sui generis* anthology entitled *Crestomazia italiana della prosa* (1827) (Quondam 2011, 153–164). Villari, a historian and politician as well as the Minister for Public Education in 1891–1892, turned his attention to the education systems in other countries; in 1868 he collected in his *Scritti pedagogici* (Villari 1868) his accounts of travels he had made through England, Scotland, France and Germany in order to study the specific traditions or innovations in their educational systems. This sensibility towards what is beyond one's own cultural and linguistic context is the same that in France was to influence the thoughts of Jullien de Paris and Victor Cousin; later echoes of it would significantly mark the work of Nietzsche towards the end of the nineteenth century. The German philosopher gave examples of this atmosphere in Chapter 23 of *Human, All Too Human* (1878), acutely defining his own times as those of comparison (*Zeitalter der Vergleichung*).

The ripening of such sensibility is rooted in a slow process of political and cultural formation throughout modernity, that in Italy has important precedents. In this sense, understanding the rise of a discipline means considering the features of a culture – a sensibility – which, for my country, does not simply coincide with the dates, however fundamental, of the birth of the nation state: the specific transformations which have delineated Italy from the mid-nineteenth century (Palomba 2009) intersect and complicate a cultural identity

already outlined over the previous five centuries at least, and which survives in the intellectual biographies of scholars who, in different political and social contexts, ponder upon the trajectories of education within and beyond the borders of the country.

In this case too, it is essential to understand to what extent the view from the South represents a precious heuristic element: Mediterranean culture, the cradle of Europe, has always come about through comparison with the 'Other' (Cacciari 1997; Esposito 2016). Diversely according to the times, that large, multi-faceted melting-pot that is our continent has had its keystone in that very acquisition of different cultures, operating continual transfers thanks to the habit of travel and translations (Gregory 2016).

The political and cultural history of Italy perfectly reflects this slow construction of an identity formed of interdependent layers, a solid base for the very concept of Europe (Cacciari 2008); a feature considered distinctive for a large part of our culture is in fact exactly that openness to on-going questioning of concepts with which to think in general and re-think ourselves. Above all at the dawn of the modern age, fuelled by factors such as geographical discoveries, the break-up of the unity of the Christian church and the rekindling of territorial conflicts, Europe underwent the honing of a specific sensibility capable of radical self-interrogation. Italy played a central role in this picture. A legacy of classical culture, humanism was attempting to adapt such culture to a completely changed context, thus bringing about the burgeoning of a scepticism that was to characterise our tradition profoundly. It is exactly in the role of a positive *epoché* that the prerequisite must be sought for that attention to the Other needful for self-interrogation. Noah and Eckstein defined the first phase of comparative education as the phase of travellers' tales (Noah and Eckstein 1969): albeit the authors were effectively thinking of Jullien de Paris and Cousin. In Italy, this view which is capable of penetrating different contexts took shape as early as the sixteenth century, as is shown by Francesco Vettori and many others; following in Francesco Guicciardini's footsteps,³ these were searching for direct experience in the world. Before Leopardi's disenchantment stated that '*figurato è il mondo in breve carta*' – 'the world is drawn on a slip of paper' – (Leopardi 1820, v. 98), an important part of Italian thought had attempted to go beyond the simple *recognition* of reality, in order to indulge in an accurate *excavation* (Thomas 2009; Settis 2017, 7–11). Guicciardini's discernment ('*discrezione*') was nothing else: a sceptical opening onto the world in order to understand it better, a sensibility full-fledged during a dramatic age of crisis (1512–1530):

It is a great mistake to speak of the things of the world indistinctly and absolutely and, so to say, as a rule; since nearly all have distinctions and exceptions due to the variety of circumstances, which cannot be resolved with one single measure: and such distinctions and exceptions are not to be found written in books, but must be taught by discernment [translated by the Author].⁴

I quote this brief passage to demonstrate a long-term sensibility, since as well as nourishing the Italian outlook over many centuries, humanist culture is a distinguishing trait of the works which, in the nineteenth century particularly, marked the birth of comparative education in Europe, as it appears, among others, in many references and the structure of the best-known of Cousin's accounts (Cousin 1832). There is another interesting point in this Italian tradition: the instability and fragmentary nature of political power and the sixteenth-century foreign invasions seem to have triggered complex dialectics between

centre and periphery, a dialectic that appears to drive comparative sensibility. The weakness of the Italian states yet the centrality of our culture for the Europe of that day allowed intellectuals a privileged viewpoint, feeling part of the continent yet not identifying completely with it. It might be called a 'peripheral centrality' that can enable rigorous, disenchanted investigation: a careful analysis of the real, capable of moving with the changing circumstances of history.

The geopolitical situation of the Italian peninsula after the fifteenth century featured a progressive decrease in unity, since none of the different states within it ever had sufficient strength to propose itself as the single power of reference. Furthermore, two other elements characterised this period: the dependence of a number of these statelets on foreign powers, both through political and economic agreements and through their blood ties; and the presence of the Papal power, which strengthened between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries to take on the characteristics of a fully-fledged State, with policies strongly opposed to any projects for a unified Italy and with solid alliances with foreign powers.

As of the beginning of the nineteenth century, both within the framework of pre-unified states and after unification had been achieved, accounts of journeys made in order to study the educational situations in existence outside the Peninsula started to be published. Cosimo Ridolfi and Gino Capponi, Tuscans, in 1854, visited the agricultural institute of Hofwyl in Switzerland in the Bern canton, where a number of Pestalozzi's pedagogical principles were followed (Ridolfi 2005); later, Enrico Mayer published accounts of his travels in the *Guida dell'Educatore* (1836–1845), later collected under the evocative title *Frammenti di un viaggio pedagogico* (Mayer 1867), in which he dealt with the educational institutions of Switzerland, France, England, Scotland and Prussia. We should also recall the report by the above-mentioned Pasquale Villari, *L'istruzione elementare in Inghilterra e nella Scozia* (Villari 1864), both for the importance of its author and for the humanist sensibility to be found in its pages.

Other studies of the period with a comparative approach founded on descriptions of the situations abroad were Giovanni Scavia's account (1866) of his journey commissioned by the Ministry of Public Education of the Kingdom of Italy, the essays of Aristide Gabelli (1867, 1873) and the work by Francesco Venali on teacher education (1885). It is important also to recall the visit carried out under the leadership of Adolfo Pick: an Italian delegation of seventeen scholars went to Nääs in Sweden in order to study the specific education method of manual work according to the principles of Otto Salomon. This experience, of which Villari was part, gave rise to a number of publications (Paroli 1888; Villari 1888) and a translation from Swedish of Salomon's work (Salomon 1893).

For further understanding of this historical period which saw Italian unification, the particular conditions of Italy within its borders and the international scenario must be remembered. The unification process inevitably brought problems due to the heterogeneity of the states involved and to the difficult economic situation of many; in addition the presence of a Papal State and Pope Pius IX's refusal, reiterated in 1870, to give up temporal power, were elements that denoted a structural weakness in the new Italian State, involving it in continuous and difficult work of mediation throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

State, societies (and university)

This period of commentaries and analyses by those travelling outside of Italy was an important stage in the advancement of the comparative domain in this Country (Orizio 1977, 151–156) which did not, however, turn into real development of the discipline at university level. Although the twentieth century brought a decided growth and a first organisation of comparative education in a number of countries, Italy's specific features favoured, yet again, a particular view which had to make its way through various hindrances. The twenty-year Fascist period favoured an autarkic vision of Italian culture, which caused adverse consequences on the international front, particularly on the question of comparative education. The common approach at the time concentrated on the specific features – real or assumed – of Italian tradition and innovations, notably reducing any comparison with other countries. In the same period, however, the *Concordato* between Italian Government and the Vatican, signed in 1929, brought to an end the contentiousness between the two States. One of the most important points of the agreement was the official acknowledgement that the City of Rome belonged to Italy, with the creation inside the City of the small state of the 'Città del Vaticano'.

Later, the history of comparative studies in education in Italy became closely interwoven with that of Europe in the long-term cooperation which still today, in such a different geopolitical situation, enlivens the national scene. It is however not surprising that there was difficulty in achieving autonomous development in the demanding Italian scenario post-Second World War. On June 2 1946, in a highly-debated referendum, Italy voted to create a Republic, abandoning the previous monarchist regime and exiling the Savoy family; the way was open for the new Constitution, achieved on 1 January 1948. In spite of the different positions of the various political parties, in this period a partial convergence was created between them, founded on the determined disavowal of the previous Fascist regime. The balance was, however, brief: following international changes and the creation of the two blocs, the West and the East, the internal policy of republican Italy experienced right from the start a very particular situation. Although being part of the western bloc, after the Yalta Conference (1945) and the first general elections (1948) that saw the defeat of the Left, the latter continued to look to the Soviet Union as its main point of reference, with a vision that was at least officially revolutionary; this in fact meant the impossibility of any real alternation in the leadership of the country. Furthermore from that moment on, the Catholic forces, whose links with the Vatican remained strong, took an active part in Italian political life; and in 1955 the country became part of the United Nations. A new geopolitical situation was being designed, where once more, the influence of external powers conditioned Italian political life, with important consequences for education in general and comparative education in particular.

Even in such a complex scenario, especially from the sixties onwards during the so-called 'thaw' (which among other things led to the first centre-left governments in Italy), there was renewed attention on the part of scholars to the international horizon and comparative studies in education, elements to be found in the initiatives taken by European scientific societies. Even though at home conditions were not favourable for the development of a clear national approach in comparative education, Italian scholars devoted themselves to the fundamental work of translating a number of works essential for this discipline (Schneider 1960; Hans 1965; Hilker 1967; Bereday 1969; Vexliard 1972).

With regard to the membership of scientific societies in this field, I recall the presence of Italian scholars when CESE (Comparative Education Society in Europe) was founded in 1961, followed by an on-going active participation with Lamberto Borghi (who was vice-president), Giuliana Limiti (a member of the Executive Committee), Mario Reguzzoni, Alessandro Leonarduzzi, Paolo Orefice, Battista Orizio and Raffaella Semeraro. In later years, these scholars were joined by Mauro Laeng (committee member and then vice-president), Luciano Corradini, Carmela Di Agresti, Donatella Palomba (committee member and president), Gastone Tassinari, Vittorio Telmon, and Corrado Ziglio. Such activity at international and comparative level was not however limited to the European context; Italy was part of the earliest, wide-ranging, research projects, such as those of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which saw the participation from the Seventies of dedicated scholars such as Aldo Visalberghi and Mauro Laeng.

At this time, there were no full professorships in Comparative Education; many Universities, however, set up teaching appointments which permitted such teaching. Likewise, there were publications in this field of study by, among others, Neri (1966), Limiti (1960), Orizio (1977), Sinistrero (1963); Gozzer (1948, 1973), Reguzzoni (1966). While not forgetting the importance of education systems as its specific object of attention – see the foundation in 1955 of the *Rivista di legislazione scolastica comparata* – comparative studies were often devoted in Italy to foreign educational theories and authors, particularly to the classics of education. In dealing with these decades, a brief comment should be made about the terminology used to identify this field of study in Italy.

It was indicated both as *pedagogia comparata* and *educazione comparata*, offering various shades of meaning according to the context, at times closer to the Italian tradition that has always seen *pedagogia* as a general discipline including various different approaches, while at other times more in line with foreign ambits, adopting the terminology of Comparative Education. From this viewpoint, two books are relevant, both published in 1977, the first by Battista Orizio, *La pedagogia comparativa* (Orizio 1977), the second by Carmela Di Agresti, *La ricerca pedagogica: problemi di fini e metodi della pedagogia comparata oggi* (Di Agresti 1977). Furthermore, in some cases a different definition was offered (Bertin 1978, 204): comparative research was included as a specific offshoot of *educational research*, on a par with *empirical, theoretical and historical research*.

This aspect is important since it shows the vitality of a discipline that had not ceased its interchange with one of its most productive sources: philosophy. There is no doubt that many Italian scholars in education came from (indeed, still come from) philosophy-related studies; although always fully acknowledging the autonomy of educational sciences, they have never broken their ties with a humanist tradition so typical of the Italian context. Besides the books, there were several periodicals that encouraged comparison, among which we should remember the review *I problemi della pedagogia*, founded and directed by Luigi Volpicelli who had had wide international relations, which together with his personal interest in foreign educational contexts (Volpicelli 1950a, 1950b) allowed him to create several monographic numbers of the review devoted to education in foreign countries.

In the early Eighties this interest in comparative education made possible the creation of a scientific society expressly for this field of study (Niceforo 2017). SICESE (the Italian section of the Comparative Education Society in Europe – CESE), as is evident from the

name chosen, declares a particular link with CESE, although from its foundation it was completely independent of the latter.⁵ A first declaration of intent was issued by the Italians taking part in the X CESE Conference (Geneva, 1981). Two years later, in accordance with agreements made during the XI CESE Conference in Würzburg (1983), on the initiative of Aldo Visalberghi, then the President of the CEDE (Centro Europeo dell'Educazione), SICESE was legally created and a provisional Executive Committee was appointed with Lamberto Borghi (President), Aldo Visalberghi (vice-president), Mauro Laeng and Vittorio Telmon. Two more years were to go by, however, before activity officially started. During the CESE Conference celebrating the 25 years of the Society, strategically held in Garda (Verona, Italy, 3-6 October 1985), on October 5 approximately forty Italian scholars enrolled in SICESE, approved its statute and elected the board which confirmed President Borghi and elected Reguzzoni vice-president; as well as Visalberghi, Laeng and Telmon, the other board members were Tassinari, Pusci, Palomba, Orizio and Semeraro. The volume published in 1988 (Orizio 1988), collecting the Proceedings of the Garda Conference, once more shows Italy's particular position with respect to Europe and comparative education: while having set up one of the Italian scientific societies expressly dedicated to comparative education, and in spite of the fact that most of the scholars involved were of international standing and indeed had been among the first members of CESE, the volume speaks of the small importance accorded to the discipline in Italian universities. At that time in fact only six universities had activated teaching appointments related to comparative studies in education,⁶ while in other universities such teaching was only laid down in the Statute.⁷ However, during those years relevant contributions were published affirming this disciplinary field, among them Donatella Palomba's, *Strutture e politiche educative d'oggi: problemi di pedagogia comparativa* (Palomba 1981). Mention must also be made of two encyclopaedia entries: that of Limiti, *Pedagogia comparata* in the *La Pedagogia*, directed by Luigi Volpicelli (Limiti 1982), continuing an interest shown ever since 1968 (Limiti 1968), and that of Giuseppe Flores d'Arcais, *Pedagogia comparata* in the *Nuovo Dizionario di Pedagogia* (Flores d'Arcais 1982). In this latter contribution, the author attempted specifically to underline how, in spite of several contributions addressing the methodology of the discipline (Inzodda 1972), in order to define it correctly it was necessary to consider both its theories and the educational intention of such theories, placing the discipline in an exact historical moment:

In fact comparative exigencies must be considered recent, since they investigate not individual scholars but an international situation such as that of the post-war years, aware of the crisis schools in all countries worldwide and the absolute insufficiency of certain countries (indeed, of many: those belonging to the areas of the so-called Third World) in providing education even at primary level [translated by the Author].⁸

Only two years later, in 1984, Laeng gave a brief overview of comparative studies in education in Italy in the CESE *Newsletter* itself (Laeng 1984), distinguishing four working ambits, giving the names of the scholars involved in each one of them: (1) translations; (2) studies of educational systems in other countries; (3) studies of educational reforms in different countries; (4) comparative studies on the outcome and assessment of the educational systems. In 1986, Placido Alberti and Corrado Ziglio gave a definition of the discipline in the volume *Concetto e metodologia dell'educazione comparata: precedenti storici e prospettive* (Alberti and Ziglio 1986), followed by a miscellany edited by Ziglio

alone (Ziglio 1987). The following year, in the above-mentioned Proceedings of the Garda Conference, an article by Vittorio Telmon offered a survey of the discipline within the Italian context, to which reference should be made for a more detailed examination of the different Italian approaches of those years (Telmon 1983).

This point in the history of Italian comparative education is important since it is on one hand the end of a complex process of development and on the other the beginning of a new road ahead. SICESE has for over twenty years been the place of reference for Italian comparative education, over time electing scholars of international stature as its presidents – Vittorio Telmon (1995–2002), Antonio Augenti (2002–2006), Donatella Palomba (2006–2014), and Ignazio Volpicelli (since 2014) – signalling full continuity with the European approaches in this field of study and with Italian educational studies. As we have seen, in fact, many of them who have been – and still are – dedicated to this society were the greatest experts in the discipline in the Seventies and Eighties.

The last thirty years

In order to understand the following decades marking the development of this field of study, we need to mention certain Italian peculiarities, in which once more elements of the geopolitical situation of the country and its specific academic features are interwoven. The Eighties came to an end with the important novelty of a scientific society devoted to comparative education, numerous new publications by scholars working on original proposals, a new translation of a text by De Landsheere with a preface by Laeng (De Landsheere 1989), and with two important entries drawn up by Orizio for the *Enciclopedia pedagogica* edited by Laeng, *Pedagogia comparativa (analisi epistemologica)* and *Pedagogia comparativa – Storia della* (Orizio 1989). The Nineties began with further publications on this discipline. They proved the continuity with the Italian approach to comparative education (Zani 1990, 1993), the on-going attention on educational systems (Colapietro 1991) as well as the appearance of certain affinities that were to characterise the following years, especially with the field of intercultural education (Gallo 1991). In 1992, Ziglio together with Marco Todeschini would publish a volume under the interesting title of *Comparazione educativa. Studiare l'educazione attraverso la comparazione: comparare per imparare*⁹ (Todeschini and Ziglio 1992).

This relative vitality found relevant support in the activities of SICESE, that for many years played the crucial role connecting Italian scholars of various disciplinary fields interested in topics pertaining particularly to comparison in education. Responding to the wealth of themes and approaches found in the comparative field, this society in fact became known for a real interdisciplinary opening by welcoming sociologists and scholars of educational policies, even into its Executive Committee, and organising study seminars. Among the latter was one whose proceedings were collected in a 1994 book edited by Izzo and Tassinari on the autonomy of schools in Europe (Izzo and Tassinari 1994).

At the same time, however, changed geopolitical balances, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the rapid, dramatic changes on the home front with the end of the First Republic, initiated a new season of uncertainty for Italy. The events of 1989 marked the end of the situation created after the Second World War when alternation between Right and Left was impossible. The Communist Party became the Democratic Party of the Left (1990), then Democrats of the Left¹⁰ losing in the process the faction

most closely connected to the previous Communist tradition which then set up the Rifondazione comunista party. Almost at the same time, those parties which more than others had wielded political power, the Christian Democrat (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI), were hard hit by legal cases in numerous investigations, most of which came under the so-called *Mani Pulite* ('Clean Hands') inquiry. This laid open the field for novel balances of power and saw the rise of a new party founded by Silvio Berlusconi, *Forza Italia* (FI), which unexpectedly won the 1994 elections and managed to govern for about two years. Thereafter, for the first time in Italy's republican history, power was won by the Left. In spite of difficulties and government shake-ups, the legislation lasted until 2001, a time of wide-ranging reforms; on the education front, the protagonist was Luigi Berlinguer, the Minister for Education.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the radical transformation of the Soviet Union therefore increased Italy's importance in the international balance of power, yet was accompanied by constant internal instability, in which Italian comparative education found no support to help it play a prominent role on the international scene.¹¹

It should also be remembered that a change in the organisation of the disciplines in the university system in Italy played a particularly complex role with regard to educational fields: on 19 November 1990, under Law n. 341, the Scientific-Disciplinary Sectors (SSD) were introduced, a disciplinary distinction used in Italy to organise higher education. This arrangement of higher education disciplines required Italian professors and researchers to opt for one single SSD. In the case of disciplines in the educational field, the possible options were: (1) General and Social Education (M-PED/01); (2) History of Education (M-PED/02); (3) General Pedagogy and Special Education (M-PED/03); (4) Experimental Education (M-PED/04).¹² While presenting difficulties for many of the academic approaches typical of Italian tradition, this fragmentation of the discipline was particularly troublesome for comparative education. As we have seen, in our comparative tradition theoretical and historical studies co-existed with the analysis of foreign educational contexts in order to reach a comparison in pedagogical methodologies, assessment techniques and experimentation. In spite of this, at that time comparative education was included in the SSD of History of Education, unquestionably in line with an important tradition of comparative studies of historical nature, but limiting the breadth of the subject by emphasising the study of foreign educational systems.

Political uncertainty and the search for a new balance in European and world geopolitical arenas, disciplinary fragmentation, and the difficulty of wide-reaching studies demand major investments. In the Nineties, such a complex picture favoured the continuation and diffusion of the comparative sensibility of many Italian scholars in educational sciences; nevertheless, this scenario did not create the conditions for a real development of research centres or for solid, long-lasting 'academic schools'.¹³ Listed among the university research and teaching areas in a volume edited by Franco Cambi, Paolo Orefice and Dario Ragazzini (Cambi, Orefice, and Ragazzini 1995, 297–314), during these years comparative sensibility seems to make itself felt even in those educational studies not directly devoted to the discipline (Chistolini 1994; de Anna 1999). This is a period of relative vitality for Italian comparative education: studded with unceasing research on the part of scholars already working in the field (Gallo 1995; Orizio 2000) and by the translation of important foreign works, notably that edited by Jürgen Schriewer and Brian Holmes, *Educazione comparata. Teorie e metodi*, with a preface by Vittorio Telmon (Schriewer and Holmes 1995). At

the same time, our scholars were internationally visible, particularly in Europe, and indeed in 2000 Donatella Palomba was elected President of CESE: for the first time an Italian academic had taken on that prestigious role.

Over the last ten years, both the strengthened link between the Italian scientific community and the European context through the CESE presidency and a set of diverse academic and cultural factors have provided fertile ground for the development of comparative studies. On the one hand, the four years of Italian presidency have reinforced a connection that has always been present between the Italian and the international contexts, resulting in a new energy for the activities of the Italian scientific society. On the other hand, a number of situations not directly linked to comparison incentivized its diffusion, initially at the sensibility level, in continuation with an approach that proved typically Italian, thereafter directly influencing the comparative education field. Among these factors we should mention: the implementation of the Bologna Process, brought about in Italy under the then Minister Berlinguer, starting from the laws of 1998 and 1999; the growing importance of intercultural education; the ever greater relevance of international assessment for universities and, although to a lesser degree, for the overall education system. Such factors have drawn the attention of the Italian academic world towards foreign education systems, producing new impetus, not without risks, for comparative education. We may in fact say that the necessary opening towards foreign contexts has meant new reconsideration of the discipline with a novel centrality in our Universities, yet at the same time it is easy to see that the intersection with other research fields, in particular intercultural education, together with a tendency to see comparison as a mere information databank on foreign educational systems has meant – and still means – the risk of comparative education losing specificity and its critical stance. Ever since these years, the internationalisation processes find themselves interlaced with decontextualised notions of comparative education (Cuconato 2000) and the careful distinction between comparison and the transformation processes coming from supra-national agencies is weakened (Bandini 2009).

In spite of this, the last fifteen years have seen an important evolution in comparative education, an evolution driven mainly by the activities of SICESE initially, and of the SIPED (Società Italiana di Pedagogia) later. Within the framework of SICESE, traditional relations between Italy and the European context have strengthened; among other things, this has enabled outstanding intellectuals to come to our country and discuss important developments. In the eight years between 2006 and 2014, SICESE has made a notable comeback, promoting and organising numerous seminars, often held within the University of Rome 'Tor Vergata', as well as favouring the development of important research projects through its members and its international network (Niceforo 2017).

Over the last ten years, the interchange between CESE and SICESE has in fact been a constant in the improvement of Italian comparative education: during the presidencies of Robert Cowen (2004–2008), Miguel A. Pereyra (2008–2012) and Hans-Georg Kotthoff (2012–2016), these scholars and many members of the various Executive Committees have been involved in researches and seminars in Italy thanks to SICESE. Furthermore, from 2012 to 2016, Anselmo R. Paolone was on the CESE Executive Committee while at the same time holding the position of Treasurer of SICESE. Among these activities, I would like to recall the publications coming from conferences, seminars or research projects, in 2007 (Palomba and Paolone 2007), 2008 (Palomba 2008), 2010 (Aa. Vv. 2010), 2012

(Palomba and Cappa 2012a) and 2014 (Roverselli 2014). These publications reflect research interests at the international level while still being rooted in the Italian context, i.e. the Bologna Process and the changes of Doctoral Studies in Europe. A number of them were published in the Comparative Education Studies series by the publisher Aracne of Rome, under the direction of Donatella Palomba and a scientific committee of the highest level: Luciano Benadusi, Antonio Bolívar, Robert Cowen, Hans-Georg Kotthoff, Miguel A. Pereyra, Ignazio Volpicelli. This editorial initiative also comes within a policy for promoting the comparative field, both for its enhancement within the Italian context, and for the diffusion of Italian views abroad, an aim which governed the choice of English as the main language in publishing.

A further important research project in those years was that coordinated by Donatella Palomba and Carlo Cappa (Palomba and Cappa 2012b, 2012c, 2013) for the production of three monograph issues of the journal *I Problemi della Pedagogia*, now edited by Ignazio Volpicelli. Coordinating many scholars from different countries, this project further investigated the educational systems of eleven different nations, with the specific aim of continuing Italy's traditional research approach, refreshing an interest that the journal had previously shown, as we saw, while grafting it into a different cultural context. This research project has been an occasion for considering the most recent developments in comparative education in Italy, some transformations realised without forsaking its critical and conceptual stance (Cappa 2013). Also in this period there were other notable publications, both on the profile and history of the discipline (Orizio 2000; Gallo 2001; Bovi 2007; Crivellari 2012; Barbieri 2013), and on comparative education and its specific aspects (Paolone 2008). The renewed interest by the prestigious journal *Scuola democratica* in the field of comparative education should be mentioned: dealing with sociology and education, this journal is traditionally attentive to the international scenario and also to comparison among countries. Recently, however, it has published several articles favouring the Italian debate on comparative education as being specifically devoted to the nature of comparative studies, with contributions from foreign authors (Cowen 2012; Duru-Bellat 2013; Kotthoff 2013) and Italian scholars (Palomba 2014).

Recent trends in Italian comparative education

Driven mainly by SICESE and the University of Rome 'Tor Vergata', this period of intense activity has unquestionably enriched the academic debate on comparative education, contributing to all the various approaches found at the national level. In a 2010 essay, Palomba and Paolone (2010) proposed a division of these approaches into four areas: historical / institutional approach; anthropological / culturalist approach; institutional / methodological approach; intercultural approach. Their final consideration clearly shows the issues of comparative education in Italy at that time:

The question however remains: Which Comparative Education? This question arises not only because of the diversity of approaches to Comparative Education co-existing in the Italian setting. The question about the nature and identity of the discipline continues to be a matter of lively debate also at the international level. The new developments in the Italian context will certainly profit from this debate and, hopefully can also bring to it their own contribution. (Palomba and Paolone 2010, 97)

Confirming the growing relevance of this field of study, in 2014 a working group on 'Comparative Studies in Education' was set up inside the SIPED, coordinated by Donatella Palomba and Ignazio Volpicelli. That same year, the latter also became President of SICESE. The first international initiative co-organised by SICESE and SIPED working group was a meeting involving Italian and foreign scholars. Among the foreign scholars taking part were Robert Cowen, Miguel A. Pereyra, Antonio Luzón, Nathalie Bulle and Hans-Georg Kotthoff, President of the CESE.¹⁴ As well as a number of international seminars, the working group organised a round table within the last national SIPED meeting held in Florence on 26-28 October 2017. Italy's relations with CESE also continued: already a member of the SICESE Executive Committee, the author of this article was elected to the CESE Executive Committee. This made it possible to organise an international meeting, held on 2 December 2016 in Rome, entitled *Geographies of Education in new Landscapes. Political and Cultural Issues*, in which all the members of the CESE Executive Committee elected the previous June took part – Stephen Carney (President), Paul Morris, Michele Schweisfurth, Eleni Prokou, Carlo Cappa – together with Ignazio Volpicelli as President of SICESE.¹⁵

Since 2016, a further important editorial initiative has been the creation of a section on *Studi comparativi in educazione* in each issue of the journal *I problemi della pedagogia*. In Italy at present no journal exists on this specific disciplinary ambit, therefore this section of a prestigious journal¹⁶ fulfils a double requirement: (a) furnishing a permanent place for the publication of top-level research developed by Italian scholars in comparative education; and (b) propagating foreign researchers' work in the field, publishing their contributions both in translation and in the original language. Since 2017, Marcella Milana has been part of the coordination of the SIPED working group; she is an Italian scholar now at the University of Verona after spending many years working in Denmark and having been President of the Nordic Comparative and International Education Society (NOCIES).

It is not easy to give an account of these recent years of Italian activity in the field of comparative education. In spite of the still relatively low number of posts of this discipline in our universities (Paolone 2016a), the wealth of research and initiatives devoted to comparative education aligns the Italian offer with the complex international developments. Multiple approaches and an interdisciplinary character are features of the field (Epstein 2008; Larsen 2010; Manzon 2011; Cowen 2014a, 2014b; Schriewer 2014). The Italian context responds to current challenges brought about by rapid changes in international-level research interests both by following the traditions characterising the 'Italian way' to comparative education, and by developing new fields for reflection. Thus, besides historical-comparative interests (Callegari and Callegari 2016b; Callegari 2017) and reflections on the theoretical approach (Cappa 2014, 2017; Palomba 2010), we see the rise of approaches that place comparative education in relation with epistemologies of other disciplines near to this field of study (Roverselli 2014; Paolone 2016b). For its traits, Italy can today make a valuable contribution to comparative education, especially for having an outlook on European educational reflection which has historically given a founding role to critical interchange with situations other than its own. If there is a peculiarly 'Southern' outlook on the elaboration of this field, it must be sought not only in the ability to make good use of the approaches offered from abroad and especially from those centres of academic 'excellence' so influential in the discipline, but also in its suggestion of unprecedented ways for thinking comparative education.

It is undoubtedly true that the path traced out over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has led to a progressive emancipation of educational sciences from the philosophical matrix defining their nature for over two thousand years. However, especially in the case of comparative education, should such emancipation in the Italian tradition become a clean break, there would be a risk of weakening its critical character. Fixed within western philosophical tradition and still very much alive in many of the Italian approaches, the complex tracery typical of Italian educational thought made up of history and philosophy yet anchored to changeable reality (Esposito 2010) enables us to see a specific interpretation of the discipline, both towards its most classical fields and offering approaches fuelled by that very 'peripheral centrality' we have seen to be one of Italy's distinctive features. Italian philosophy, in a number of today's interpreters such as Massimo Cacciari, Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben, has kept certain typical features of the continental tradition, which include: linguistic and historic analysis as access to the study of concepts, the centrality of ontological reflection, and a particular emphasis on the political dimension. Even a cursory glance at these authors' most recent publications, therefore, clearly shows that certain of their central themes, bear immediate educational implications. Whether it be Europe and its identity (Cacciari 2014; Esposito 2016), the concept of *cura sui* (Agamben 2014) or a re-elaboration of the legacy of the French Philosophy of Difference (Agamben 2016), Italian philosophic thought is full of possibilities with regard to education and particularly on comparative education. It is precisely in addressing the political dimension of human existence, in fact, that our philosophy offers numerous prospects for a field such as that of comparative studies in education, which has made this aspect such an essential point of reference.

In conclusion, since they are of direct interest to the author, I wish to mention two approaches in which the Italian 'voice' may be heard, two approaches connected to particular attention on *language*. The first is at present promoted above all by Donatella Palomba: concentrating on the use of languages and on the work of translating concepts, she attempts to show the implications for reflection on the theoretical approach as well as for education and higher education policies, investigating the language in which one 'says' comparative education. The second approach is the one I have been using for some years, in order to make the legacy of Italian philosophy a critical key¹⁷ for the investigation of the concepts in which we 'think' comparative education (Palomba 2015).

Due to an ever deeper disciplinary divide, in fact, most Italian philosophers do not address their conceptual elaboration towards the educational field while no great attention is given to their works by education and comparative education scholars. And yet by endorsing the *longue durée* of certain key terms in our philosophical tradition, I am convinced that it is possible to forge new approaches to a critical review of comparative education concepts.

With regard to the European area and its tensions, for example, the elaboration of the concept of *stasis*, central both for Cacciari (Cacciari 2008) and for Agamben (Agamben 2015), clearly outlines a situation in which the *multiversum* of our continent, if it wishes to be free of looming disaggregation, must prove itself a 'political space endowed with sense',¹⁸ in order to select those of its roots still capable of supplying it with the 'water of life' (Esposito 2016, 206–238).¹⁹ But in order for that to be possible, what else but comparative education should *think out* those roots and their conversation? With regard to the individual dimension of education in the open space of a globalised world, on the other

hand, I believe that the concept of *esigenza*, spelt out by Agamben with close reference to Gilles Deleuze's 'possible' and 'virtual', would prove a precious resource. In trying to elaborate an idea that may account for the role of thought confronted with the possibilities – or the closures – of the real, Agamben identifies in philosophy itself that activity that should take on the task of allowing what wishes to exist differently to be given the conditions necessary to do so (Agamben 2016, 47–58). The activity of thinking is presented as an immersion in the *extant*, considered as sum of different and heterogeneous elements, in order to be able to grasp what there is of generative and of *contemporary* in our times (Agamben 2008). In this manner, the Author depicts a careful hermeneutics of the secular and immanent present: a disenchanting analysis without hierarchy, a critical consideration about our times. This conceptual approach also demands an education 'policy' rooted in a careful listening of possible, being aware of the fatuity of any forced categorisation.²⁰

To be clear: there is no intention of making comparative education subordinate to philosophy; rather, I believe it possible to reconnect a *sodalitas* among fields of study capable of criticism towards our reality, each with its own specificity and with its on-going issues, continuing a conversation which, with all its ups and downs, has made the Italian voice recognisable in the international context.

Far from being marginal, therefore, comparative education studies developed in Italy can offer a significant contribution to this field, supplying a critical, insightful outlook capable of offering original and constructive ideas.

Notes

1. As underlined today by many scholars and as grievously experienced over the course of our history, since the time of intellectuals such as Petrarch and Machiavelli, Italian identity was being shaped well before conditions for political unity were ripe. Italy's identity was thus initially founded on the sharing of culture and language, whereas only in the second half of the nineteenth century was the Kingdom of Italy achieved.
2. The Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed in 1861, but complete territorial unification was achieved later with the annexation of Veneto (1866) and later with the fundamental step of the conquest of Lazio and Rome (1870), up to that point still governed by the Pope.
3. Francesco Vettori was a Florentine politician and intellectual (Florence, 1474–1539), author of a complex travelogue, *Viaggio in Alamagna*, published long afterwards in 1837 (Vettori and Machiavelli 2003); Vettori, furthermore, was close to Machiavelli, a friendship recorded in their many letters, among which we find the famous letter in which *De Principatibus* is announced. Francesco Guicciardini (Florence 1483–Arcetri 1540) was one of the foremost figures in cultural and political life in sixteenth-century Florence and the disenchanting narrator of the historical events involving the Italian peninsula. His were the *Storie fiorentine*, 1509, on the 1378–1509 period and the *Storia d'Italia*, in twenty books, 1537–1540.
4. 'È grande errore parlare delle cose del mondo indistintamente e assolutamente e, per così dire, per regola; perché quasi tutte hanno distinzione e eccezione per la varietà delle circostanze, le quali non si possono fermare con una medesima misura: e queste distinzione e eccezione non trovano scritte in su' libri, ma bisogna che le insegni la discrezione' (Guicciardini 2013, 51).
5. It should be remembered that in 1982 there was an attempt on the part of certain scholars, Giuliana Limiti among them, to constitute an Italian Society of Comparative Education. Due to several contingencies, the Society never undertook any important activity, but its name was registered; therefore it became advisable to choose a different one for later SICESE.
6. Rome – La Sapienza, Rome – Tor Vergata, Parma, Florence, Salerno and Bari.
7. Trieste, Padua and Milan – Cattolica.

8. 'In realtà le istanze comparatiste debbono dirsi recenti, in quanto investono non singoli studiosi, bensì una situazione internazionale quale è quella dell'ultimo dopoguerra, che constata la crisi che investe la scuola in tutti i paesi del mondo e insieme l'assoluta insufficienza di alcuni paesi (anzi di molti: quelli che appartengono alle zone del cosiddetto terzo mondo) a provvedere a una istruzione anche a livello elementare' (Flores d'Arcais 1982, 240).
9. *Educational comparison. Studying education through comparison: comparing for learning.*
10. At present the party carrying on this legacy is the *Partito Democratico* (PD), although with a very different profile.
11. And that in spite of opening towards the international scene that came about with the Bologna Process, wherein, thanks to Minister Berlinguer, Italy is one of the first four promoters.
12. The SSD were slightly modified by later dispositions of law, especially the Ministerial Decree of 18 March 2005 (published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on 5 April 2005, n. 17), although without altering the four educational sectors.
13. In Italy, the expression 'academic school' is used for describing an approach established by one or more scholars in an university and which is adopted by other scholars in the following years as an intellectual legacy.
14. The proceedings of the meeting were published a year later (Volpicelli, Cappa, and Sellari 2016).
15. Stephen Carney and Carlo Cappa's contributions were published in *I problemi della pedagogia* (Cappa 2017; Carney 2017).
16. In the Italian ranking of academic journals, *I problemi della pedagogia* is among those placed in the highest position ('fascia A').
17. Critical outlooks on comparative education are numerous and frequently also show attention to language. In this regard, see the contributions of António Nóvoa (Nóvoa 2001, 2005).
18. 'uno spazio dotato di senso' (Galli 2001, 170).
19. The bond between post-modern philosophies and political thought on education is widespread also at international level with many important interpreters, among which for example, Young (1997), Larsen (2009), Paulston (2009) and Carney (2016, 2017).
20. The complexity of present Italian philosophy is well-known, but it is really important to accept a full discussion of its concepts, especially for an educational tradition rooted in this field of study and which wants to develop a critical approach towards our times.

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