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## Introduction to the Special Section. Two Educational Systems, Two Societies, Two Social Philosophies

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## **Introduction to the Special Section. Two Educational Systems, Two Societies, Two Social Philosophies**

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Comparative studies between France and Italy are not uncommon. For example, Alessandro Cavalli, Vincenzo Cicchielli and Olivier Galland (2008) have conducted research on the distinctive features of Italian and French youth. Similarly, in 2009 we held a workshop on feminism in France and Italy (ENS, 2009). Blaya and Gatti (2010), for their part, were interested in comparing the phenomenon of youth gangs in both countries. More specific work has focused on the field of social policies (Panico, et al., 2017), or the consequences of international immigration (Bergamaschi, 2013a, 2014; Bacchini, Rossi, 1998). Despite a relatively rich body of literature, educational issues, such as the relationship with ethno-cultural diversity, have not yet been studied extensively. This is the subject of this thematic issue.

To understand the role of diversity within the Italian and French educational systems, it is necessary to understand their specific links with their respective societies. Without fear of being provocative, we can say that we are faced to two educational systems that play two different roles. To understand this assertion, a detour through history is required. We start with the French system, which, according to the complexity of its role, requires a longer explanation. Indeed, if the Italian school system exercises its role within and for a state — the Italian state — the French school system exercises its role within and for a nation — the French nation. If a state is only an organization whose purpose is simply instrumental, the nation, to the contrary, can be thought of as the expression of history and values collectively shared

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between the people and the elites. If the school represents an organization that must enable the homogeneity and perpetuation of the nation and/or of its state, it is clear that the tasks it faces are very different.

### **The French school: a passionate link with the République**

Regarding the French system, we can bluntly state that the school is the first institution for socialization and familiarization with the “republican credo”. When France was constituted as a modern nation, the main concern of the elites of the time was to find an actor that was able to perpetuate the values that were formed over the course of its contemporary struggles. It was on this occasion that the intellectual class, Emile Durkheim in the first instance, suggested that the educational system be entrusted with this responsibility, saying that if “society must be learned”, it is the school that must perform this task (Durkheim, 1902-3, 1925). The school subsequently began to play the role in driving a society that was strongly anchored in the national dimension, its function being to train the citizen in the republican spirit. Specifically, this was a mixture of values and principles that emphasized the uniqueness and autonomy of the individual: reason, freedom and equality, which were interpreted in a universalist way. From this moment, the school had the noble (and weighty) task of transmitting “moral education” (Durkheim, 1902-3, 1925), namely, an education that was free from the heritage of religion. In particular, it was the first actor in the service of a State that acted in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Nation, to create a homogeneous socio-political space that was devoid of any form of cultural and religious particularism. Moreover, it was at this time that the French colonial expansion policy was at its peak. The phrase “in the Republican Empire, the sun never sets” became a famous slogan that was included in elementary school history lessons (Lavissee, 1913). It is obvious that, in this conjuncture the idea of nation and, more especially, of a nation that fosters civilization and teaches the poorest countries the “rules of living properly”, values strong social legitimation.

In short, the French school must convey the idea that all peoples are equal, regardless of their particular characteristics. This is the quintessence of the republican identity. Conversely, it must fundamentally convey the idea that if one wishes to benefit from state protection, including a relatively flexible procedure for acquiring nationality that, still today, is inspired by *jus soli*, one must abandon one’s peculiarities upon crossing the threshold of its institutions, in this case the school. This seemingly perfect sociological architecture leaves no space for particularisms, especially if they are of a cultural nature because such attachments would deeply contradict the universal interpretation of egalitarianism. This recognition would be to the detriment of

a national community that sought to be highly integrated. For example, De Gaulle's cultural leveling policies (Narbonne, 1994) aimed to prohibit the use of dialects in institutional spaces and have been broadly applied, particularly in the educational system. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, a pupil who spoke his or her dialect during classes or recreation was subject to very severe penalties. In French society there is therefore no place for identity manifestations other than the republican identity and the school is the institution who has been tasked with inculcating this idea. It is a very special role that has led some education specialists such as Eric Débarbieux (2008) to suggest that the school and the republic "have a passionate relationship".

It goes without saying that French society and its school system have always had a controversial relationship with questions of "ethnicity", namely the result of an identity dialectic between groups endowed with unequal economic and cultural resources and whose consequences are variable in contexts (Poutignat, Streiff-Fenart, 2008; Bertheleu, 2007). However, since the foundation of the modern nation, French society has experienced a major migration influx, which has led to an exponential growth of cultural diversity. France's problem is, on the one hand, that it has adopted a political philosophy that leaves no space for multiculturalism and, on the other hand, that it is one of the main European destinations for waves of international migration. Indeed, France was the first country in Europe to use foreign labor, mainly from its (ex) colonies, to meet economic and even military requirements (Noiriel, 1988). How can one expect the millions of foreigners who have settled on French soil, and their descendants, to so easily forget their cultural roots? How can one believe that French society is really "indifferent to differences" (Bourdieu, 1966), such as those that are generated by such migratory flows? How can all its members flourish in the education system, the labor market and in the urban space? The latest PISA data (2015) are very stark: among industrialized countries, France is the country where social origin has the greatest influence on the educational careers of its students. It is obvious that social origin and migratory origin are two variables that are often closely linked. Despite growing social tensions, where the principles of the Republic are confronted by integration deficits, growing social inequalities and urban segregations that lead sociologists to talk about "urban ghettos" (Lapeyronnie, 2009), yet French institutions continue to respond in accordance with the republican philosophy. Instead of opening up to minimal forms of recognition of cultural diversity and its social implications, we are faced with measures such as the prohibition of wearing religious symbols in the primary and secondary levels of the school system (Law of 15 March 2004). These measures were reaffirmed a few years later by the prohibition of facial concealment in public spaces (Law of 11 October

2010) and the debate on alternatives to pork in canteen meals for Muslim children.

However, the school system oscillates between taking diversity into account and attempts to neutralize any difference. Some actions of intercultural pedagogy aimed at enhancing student diversity have been implemented since the beginning of the 1980s. There has been a movement that was sporadically diffused under the impetus of teams of very active teachers who strongly believe in the value of diversity. However, this logic of valorization is not without ambiguities, since from the 1980s we have also been faced with recruitment of non-teaching staff (supervisors, educators, leadership personnel, etc.) according to ethnic criteria (Rinaudo, 1998; Rayou, van Zanten, 2004). Thus, an institution that has a high concentration of Maghreb or Black African students would recruit staff who belong to the same groups. The basic idea is that similarity should help manage these difficult audiences. But the problem is that often we have often observed results to the contrary (Zefir, 2010).

This question of ethnic diversity is one of the problems that grips the republican education system, which, like the society that it serves, prefers to adopt the “politics of the ostrich” (De Rudder, Poiret, Vourc’h, 2000) rather than rethink its fundamental principles in light of the social changes. However, since the 2000s we have been witnessing a timid dialogue, starting with the inclusion of secular issues in the training of teachers and principals, and particularly the approach of the inclusive school with the establishment of a *Charte de la Laïcité* in 2012, followed by mobilization around the values of the Republic following the terrorist attacks in January 2015 and July 2016. The problem is that not everyone interprets this famous secularism in the same way, with the implementation oscillating between social hypercontrol of any form of religious expression in the school, or a position of dialogue and tolerance. As emphasized by Dubet (2016), secularism is not a disembodied concept that is inculcated. If we speak of shared values, these values must be put into practice by those who speak and therefore be part of their convictions. To think that this is a value shared by all the representatives of the education system remains a utopia and the children of the school of the Republic are not socio-cultural idiots.

### **The Italian system: tensions between religious values and multicultural ambitions**

The reality of the Italian education system is very different. First of all because Italy does not have a national past like France and its school does not fulfill the function of socialization to a national credo as is seen in France. Once the unification of the Peninsula was completed (1861), the Italian

school was invested with the mission to socialize the Italians to the idea of a nation that was the sum of many regional identities. This is the concept of nation that continues to float in the collective imaginary today. Although the Italian state has always been involved in the formation of the nation, it has been forced to deal with local forces, which are significantly influenced by the power of the Church of Rome, and with a family culture that has always represented a centrifugal force relative to state decisions. The works of Banfield (1958) and Putnam (1993) testify to the difficulties of building a national civic culture in Italy, precisely because of very strong local ties, which for the citizen is the only higher authority: the cities with their notables and dioceses with their parishes. If the Italian school has the task of training Italians, it must deal with a reality that emphasizes the local rather than the central. The history of Italian society is not the story of a nation that is the result of experiences that brought together both the people and the elites. At the same time, it should be pointed out that when Italy initiated national unification, migratory flows abroad began to intensify and to massively personalize its demography and identity until the 1970s. Italy is one of Europe's leading emigration countries and its institutions have always sought to maintain a privileged connection with expatriates through a law associated with the acquisition of nationality inspired by *ius sanguinis*. If this makes it possible to maintain a symbolic link with the native land, the flip side of the coin is an unfavorable nationality acquisition procedure for foreigners.

In addition, a second essential element highlights the difference between the two educational systems: the relationship to religion and secularism. As we have just seen, France has made secularism one of the hallmarks of its society, and the school has the mission to inculcate this principle from an early age, however this is not the case of Italy. In France, the staunch core of republican values draws on contemporary national and state experiences, while the issue is more complex for Italy. Indeed, Italy lacks a real core of values that are representative of its contemporary social history. The values that characterize Italian society are largely rooted in the thoughts and discourse of the Catholic Church. It is the doctrine of the Catholic Church that weaves social links in Italy (Rusconi, 1999).

After secular orientation was initiated in 1870 and the teaching of religion became optional, the Concordat between the Mussolini government and the Catholic Church became obligatory at all levels. From this moment on, Catholicism was the state religion and its teaching became optional again since 1985. Having said that, the Catholic Church continues to hold significant influence in the organization of the teaching of religion, and it nominates religious teachers (Barone, 2005).

This strong influence of religion on the education system has an impact on cultural diversity. Indeed, the Catholic Church plays an important role

in the reception and integration of immigrant populations in Italy. On the one hand, the weakness of the Italian welfare system brings its institutions to rely on the associative organizations, most of which are of a religious nature, and also the parishes and the dioceses, for the management of immigration on the local scale (Ambrosini, 2010). This is consistent with the ecumenical vision of Catholicism, which has its roots in the monogenistic thesis of the origin of humanity (Taguieff, 1997). In this sense, the Catholic Church has played a leading role in defining immigrant integration policies, even in terms of cultural diversity within the education system. Indeed, the school system has adopted an intercultural model of integration for non-Italian students and Italy is an example of a country where intercultural pedagogy has received the most recognition (Santagati, 2016). While schools are recognized for their dynamism in designing projects for the integration of immigrant pupils into school and the enhancement of their cultural heritage, they must nevertheless contend with weak public support for such actions. Thus, this is an additional element that testifies to the difficult links between the local and the central.

However, this influence is far from unambiguous and the status of ethnicity within the school is also a source of contradictions. For example, there has been controversy surrounding religious symbols such as the crucifix in schools, which became apparent in the early 2000s when Italy began to become aware of the change of its status from a net emigration country to a country of immigration (Bergamaschi, 2013b). For this purpose, although the controversy was short-lived, the vast majority of politicians, from the right to the center-left, sided in favor of the crucifix, arguing that it is not only the emblem Christian religion, but that it also represents a key element of Italian identity based on the values of Catholicism. The school has had the function of conveying this message.

## **Two educational systems and their immigrant students**

The contrasts that characterize these two educational systems are important. The French school ensures the continuity of the national ideology and trains the republican citizen. The scope for issues of ethnicity is minimal. The Italian school, for its part, is characterized by a more nuanced mission, because its objective is to shape the formation of a citizen without requiring a system of national values to be at the heart of the project. As far as the questions of ethno-cultural diversity are concerned, the Italian school system is more ambivalent. On the one hand, like its neighbor, it assumes the mission of transmitting a mono-cultural identity that is strongly impregnated with messages of a single religion and, on the other hand, it seeks to facilitate the emergence of a multicultural society. In view of these contrasts,

it is quite relevant to ask whether these different contexts have repercussions on the educational pathways of “immigrant students” – being aware of the polysemic and constructed nature of this expression. If the interaction between identities carrying cultural specificities and different interests is one of the conditions for the constitution of ethnic boundaries, the challenge is to understand the extent of these contextual effects, which can be at the macro level (the state philosophy with respect to cultural particularities), at the meso level (strategies for managing cultural differences by schools), or at the micro level (the many interactions within the school area). One of the objectives of this issue is to understand if these specificities are translated into attitudes towards the school, ambitions and differentiated school paths. Do the two education systems enable culturally diverse students to successfully complete a training pathway that is useful for successful social integration? How does diversity make sense within these two education systems? In particular, if there are differences in educational backgrounds, at what level (macro-meso-micro) do they originate? The following essays contribute to open a discussion on these points. A post-commentary by M. Colombo will end the special issue with a try-out of the main findings and some recommendations for the future.

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