Introduction

The Mediterranean: a Challenge for the Sociology of Education

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This special issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* is based on a conference on *"Challenges of Education in the Mediterranean area: Policies, Systems, Actors"* held in Bari in October 2011, and organised by the *Educational Section* of the *Italian Sociological Association* (AIS-EDU) and the Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Bari "A. Moro".

The aim of the conference was twofold. On the one hand, it was the occasion for discussing the challenges faced by education and the sociology of education when assuming a "Mediterranean" perspective. On the other hand, it aimed at considering the challenges for the sociological concept of Mediterranean in itself when paying attention to educational realities.

The structure of this special issue is as follows: the first two papers develop a theoretical and interdisciplinary perspective on the concept of the Mediterranean as well as on the challenges it faces and its usefulness for the study of educational processes[4]. Then the issue moves to the discussion

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[4] These aspects were developed during the first session of the conference, to which contributed also Franco Cassano (Univ. of Bari), presenting a vivid overview on the sociological concept of Mediterranean in contemporary social theory as well as providing

of a selection of educational experiences and practices, exploring *policies, systems and actors* through a Mediterranean lens from a sociological perspective and using different research methods.

1. The Mediterranean as a challenge

The concept of "Mediterranean" brings several challenges to social sciences, being at the same time a challenge itself. Since the analysis developed by Fernand Braudel (1985) the Mediterranean has been considered as a complex reality or as a «pluriverse», a mixture of languages, religions, customs, cultures and civilisations (Zolo, 2007). It has even been defined as a «matrix» in which reason and rationality, antagonism and conflict, unity and diversity, complementarities and antagonisms, dialogue and fanaticism, fundamentalism and tolerance coexist (Morin, 1998-99; 2003). As a result, the Mediterranean can be understood only if we consider that it is a sea in the middle of lands: in sociological terms it thus becomes «a great liquid boundary which divides and (…) unites the various lands», maintaining the differences and, at the same time, «avoiding closure and isolation by holding everything together» (Cassano, 2008: 27).

It follows that rather than simply referring either to a geographical, historical or political entity, considering the Mediterranean as a *challenge* implies a perspective based on the acknowledgment of its plurality, contradictions and paradoxes (Matvejević, 1999), thus going beyond the traditional dichotomies, toward a more ambitious project (Deriu, 2012). As suggested by Franco Cassano during the conference, the latter could be synthesised saying that «*to think the Mediterranean one needs to play both games: the one that acknowledges difference and the one that narrows inequalities; the one that opens to the other and the one that preserves communal relationships of solidarity*» (Cassano, 2012b: 148, *emphasis in the original*). Seen in this way, the Mediterranean becomes a *critical space*: the place for unexpected questions and maps of meaning (Chambers, 2008),

constructive insights for developing new perspectives (see: Cassano, 2012b: 142-153), Silvio Scanagatta (Univ. of Padua) and Alberto Merler (Univ. of Sassari), whose speech is available as "Oral publication" in this issue.

as well as a political, economic and cultural "alternative" to unilateralism and fundamentalism (Zolo, 2007) that come from both the West and the Middle-East (Cassano, 2004).

Following what happened in the wider Euro-Mediterranean context, in Italy the attention of social sciences, and particularly of sociology, to the "Mediterranean" has increased mainly since the early 90's, and particularly after the Barcelona Process, launched in 1995. It is not possible here to give a comprehensive picture of the analyses and researches carried out in Italy during the last two decades in this field[5]. However, we can acknowledge the increasing attention that has been paid not only to migration and religious conflicts, but also to the issues of the Mediterranean identity, local development, intercultural dialogue and pluralism (Horchani & Zolo, 2005; Barcellona & Ciaramelli, 2006; Rizzi, 2007; Canta & Pepe, 2007; Canta, 2010; Deriu, 2012). At the same time, especially after the publication of Cassano's *Il pensiero meridiano*[6], the role that could be played by Italy within the changing Mediterranean context also received a growing attention, even from different approaches (Amoroso, 2000; Goffredo, 2000; Cassano, 2009). Further, the importance of *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy) as a potential «laboratory of a Mediterranean identity» has been particularly underlined (Aymard & Barca, 2002).

Within this broad framework, it is worth considering that, as happened in other countries, during the last decades Italian sociology of education has not paid an explicit attention to the Mediterranean contexts. Yet, at an international level several experiences in this direction can be highlighted: the most important and recognized is, unquestionably, that one carried on at the University of Malta, under the direction of Ronald Sultana, by the *Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research* (EMCER) and the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* (*MJES*), an international review whose first number was issued in 1996.

Therefore, with the main aim of stimulating a debate linking the sociological analysis of educational processes with a Mediterranean

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[5] For a detailed bibliography on the issues that have characterised the debate developed in Italy (and in the wider Euro-Mediterranean context) during the last decades, cf. Giolo (2005) and Sorbera (2007) (also accessible from: http://www.juragentium.org/topics/med/fr/guided.htm).

[6] Originally published in 1996, the book has been recently translated in English (Cassano, 2012b) together with other essays (from Cassano, 1998; 2012a; Cassano & Consolo, 2000).

perspective, in mid-2010 the AIS-EDU Scientific Board launched the proposal for the above-mentioned conference. As acknowledged in his speech by Silvio Scanagatta, the conference testified the willingness and the will of AIS-EDU, as the most important organization bringing together Italian sociologists of education, to take into serious account a Mediterranean perspective in its activities, as well as to establish new "South-South connections" and to define new forms of dialogue and cooperation with universities, research institutes and scholars associations working in the Mediterranean area[7]. What happened few months later with the so-called "Arab Spring" confirmed the importance of the chosen topic and renewed the need for discussing about the *Challenges of education in the Mediterranean area* too.

Echoing the above-mentioned debate, the proposal launched with the conference may be synthesised by saying that the adoption of a «'Mediterranean perspective' can open up new opportunities for the generation of more context-specific and context-responsive frameworks that help us make sense of educational dynamics». (Sultana, 2008: 18). Moreover, as recognised by participants, acknowledging the Mediterranean as a challenge for the sociology of education means in particular to take into consideration the key-themes of the discipline, namely the roots of education and its role in the processes of social, political and cultural change, as well as the link between education and economic development.

In this respect, the plan of the conference and this special issue of *IJSE* tried to consider both educational systems and policies, assuming also a comparative perspective (Sultana, 1998). But, as pointed out by Ronald Sultana (2008: 17), the latter «is not so much as the search for epistemological and positivist purity in comparing 'like with like', as much as finding a new standpoint (…) from where to gaze at phenomena and to apprehend it in new ways, by refracting it through a different lens». In other words, it is fundamental to avoid the risk of losing the specific features of each element by looking for a whole of which we cannot recognize the facets (Breviglieri & Cicchelli, 2007). In addition, the lived realities of educational dynamics embody another set of key issues (or

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[7] In this respect, it is worth noting that the conference was organised and held at the University of Bari, a city projected into the Mediterranean, thus also emphasising the relevance attributed to Southern Italian universities in the process we are describing.

challenges). This means that we also need to explore the values, maps of meanings, beliefs, and attitudes of people (particularly of young people) living on the shores of the Mediterranean, which are also plural, complex and often contradictory. As a result, it is essential to look at these challenges paying attention, among others, to a gender perspective[8], to youth and (inter)generational relationships and differences[9], as well as to local contexts (Barcellona & Ciaramelli, 2006; Deriu, 2012).

2. Intercultural Dialogue and Education in the Mediterranean Area

Moving from this schematic description of the dimensions involved when considering the Mediterranean as a challenge for sociological analysis, and before presenting the contents of this special issue, the next section of the present paper focuses on intercultural dialogue, provided that it seems to be one of the outstanding and most urgent and important aspects in contemporary debate. At the same time, we will try to take into account the challenges and the problems that arise when recognizing education and educational systems, policies and actors as key agents for bridging divergent civilisations, promoting mutual understanding and offering a common ground for encouraging the dialogue between different cultures (De Vita, Berti & Nasi, 2004; Canta, 2010).

Many scholars tended to highlight how the Mediterranean identity is chiefly based on contradictions due to the need of creating a dialogue between diversities (Davis, 1977; Gilmore 1982; Braudel, 1998). The coexistence of different political, cultural, economic and religious universes makes this dialogue extremely complex[10]. Thus, the Mediterranean is often considered as the place where different civilizations, languages and

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[8] In this respect, it should be given particular attention to «the intellectual and civil movement of scholars that goes by the name of 'Islamic Feminism'» (Cassano, 2012b, 150; see also: Pepicelli, 2010).

[9] It is worth mentioning the "Rencontres Jeunes & Sociétés en Europe et autour de la Méditerranée**"** organised since 2003 (http://www.jeunes-et-societes.com/).

[10] This situation becomes more complex if we consider what media are used to evoke about the Mediterranean. For example, the Arab world is mainly represented as a cradle of international terrorism, although the Arab culture(s) could be considered also for its/theirs values of coexistence between different ethnic groups.

religious faiths live together without a real integration, while they seem to talk to each other without being able to establish a real dialogue and a cultural exchange (Besozzi, Colombo & Santagati, 2009).

In this respect, continental Europe could learn a lot from those educational practices that pay special attention to the person and to the coexistence of a plurality of cultures (Sultana, 2002; 2008). This appears particularly true considering the risks that nowadays lie behind the return towards new forms of assimilation in the process of citizenship building (Esser 2010; Goodman, 2010).

Moreover, as suggested during the conference, analyses based upon the theory of the "clash of civilizations" harm the scientific debate, as well as the planning of educational and cultural policies that may put the Mediterranean at the heart of the dialectic between cultures. This perspective raises several questions as, for example, whether it is possible to think to a "Mediterranean education" as to a space of intercultural dialogue or whether it is possible an education for citizenship able to promote pluralism[11] in the Mediterranean space. Finally, it should be analysed whether it is possible to go beyond the "deculturation perspective", for which the dialogue between different Mediterranean cultures is unachievable because of their own limits as well as due to an unexplained supremacy of some of them (Canta & Pepe, 2007; Horchani & Zolo, 2005; Cassano, 2012b).

Recent juvenile riots in many Mediterranean countries gave further complexity to these questions, raising additional political[12], cultural and educational challenges to those engaged in the study of the Mediterranean. Pushed by the social networks (Lotan et al*.,* 2011), the "Arab Spring" can be seen as the validation of hopes for a possible pluralism and for an

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[11] As suggested by Diana Eck, director of the "Pluralism project" at Harvard, «"pluralism" is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality. […] The diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is not a given, but must be created. Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to life and energies of one another» (Eck, 2002, 12).

[12] In this respect, it is worth considering that, right after being nominated as new Italian Prime Minister, Monti declared that the Mediterranean emergency is "a complex problem about which the government will take soon a position", thus revealing that, as maybe the European Union, the Italian government is yet unprepared to deal effectively with the main challenges that go across the Mediterranean area.

intercultural dialogue. However, even if a change started, we must recognise that, rather than on youth activism, political choices and educational policies are often focused on "emergencies", and particularly (from the European side) to that shaped by migration flows. Nevertheless, we should also consider that, though mainly driven by European countries and with a weaker initiative of the Southern Mediterranean ones, the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue has been a priority for the EU since the Barcelona process.

On the whole, it is unquestionable that the "Arab Spring" triggered a complex turning point in the relationships (within and) between different cultures and then in the chance of enhancing the intercultural dialogue. At the same time, the cultural and emotional factors involved in the protest of the "invisible generation"[13] are challenging the supremacy of the European educational model and, more generally, the educational programs based on *top-down* processes. Thus, education (and the sociology of education) is nowadays facing a complex challenge: reconsidering the educational processes by taking into account the dreams and the hopes of these (young) people, to which is no longer possible to answer with policies of selective immigration (El Kenz, 2007) or differential exclusion (Ambrosini, 2005).

The process described above needs to take into consideration another issue: the challenge of a narrative construction of a Euro-Mediterranean identity that should be able to give importance not only to the principle of stability, but also to the challenging principle of *alterity*, thus leading people towards their identity *recomposition* (Cesareo, 2005). This challenge is based on a request of rights and chances consistent with a concept of education that gives priority to individuals, their cultural heritage and their dreams of freedom. After all, intercultural exchange and dialogue are based on the relational nature of identity construction, and the only possible alternatives to the cohabitation between ethnic groups are "social distance" (Zanfrini,

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[13] As highlighted by the speakers during the first session of the conference, concerning this problem it would be essential to pay attention to the different forms of participation embodied in recent Arab protest movement and those that can be identified in other European regions (Walther et al., 2002; Spannring, Ogris & Gaiser, 2008; Feixa, Pereira & Juris, 2011), as well as to the values and *Weltanschauung* shared by young people living in the whole Mediterranean region.

2004; Bichi 2008) or an even more unbalanced distribution of social opportunities.

Thus, in the everyday experience, rather than insisting only on extensive and often fruitless economic and political initiatives, nurturing the dialogue between Mediterranean people and cultures involves the need to pay an increasing attention to both formal and informal education, as a possible space where diversities and the desire of freedom are recognised. Indeed, education could be seen as the most pragmatic form of the dream and self-fulfilment that every individual expresses during his or her life. In this respect, as indicated in some papers published in this issue, it seems to be urgent a new (cultural) "Mediterranean project", which should be able to educate (young) people to mutual understanding and hope. Our expectation is that sociology, and particularly the sociology of education, could contribute to this endeavour voicing a (new) Mediterranean perspective[14] from which local educational realities can look to large-scale dynamics.

3. Contents of the special issue

The endogenous complexity of the geographical, semantic and sociological definition(s) of the Mediterranean is the background on which the composite array of educational challenges that can be recovered "in and between" the Mediterranean countries may be settled. Needless to say, we cannot and will not engage, in this introduction, in a (probably unproductive) inventory of the issues and questions that could be raised in this respect. Rather, through a concise description of the contents presented in the papers published in this special issue, we can briefly explore several of them.

The issue begins with two papers by Ronald G. Sultana and Angela Mongelli, who investigate the concept of the Mediterranean and its challenges for the study of educational processes.

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[14] In this respect, it is important to mention the contribution of networks and research centres such as the above mentioned EMCER, the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI), the Euromed Forum for Young Researchers, and the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED).

In the first paper, *Learning from the Mediterranean: the return of the political and an education in hope*, Ronald G. Sultana offers a fascinating narrative of his own journey throughout the complexities of educational realities in the Mediterranean, underlining how the latter has been «an education in politics and in hope» for him too. After recalling the main steps of his own scholarly engagement – with specific reference to the foundation of the *Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education* (MESCE) and the above-mentioned EMCER and *MJES* – he outlines his most recent researches in Southern Mediterranean countries. In particular, referring to the educators' narratives he collected during one of his latest works, Sultana raises several vital questions concerning education in the Mediterranean area. On the other hand, reconsidering his own researches, Sultana analyses what kind of consequences have been produced on himself (and potentially on educational scholars) by the encounters with the "Other", that is an always challenging experience. Indeed, this is particularly relevant as far as the experience takes place in a «polyphonic» region such as the Mediterranean. More in general, Sultana argues that listening to the Mediterranean, as one amongst others metaphorical South, we can think to «new forms of 'emancipatory knowledge'» and construct a «new critical theory, rooted in alternative knowledge, histories and experiences».

Consistent with these last aspects, in her *Education and the Mediterranean*, Angela Mongelli discusses the possibility of a new educational model, rooted in the acknowledgment of the outstanding features of Mediterranean culture(s). She starts by recovering the limits of the approaches through which the Mediterranean has been analysed up to now, and claiming a perspective able to understand its complex and dynamic realities. Mongelli then explores the works of some of the authors who mainly contributed to shape the debate (such as F. Braudel, P. Matvejević, S. Latouche and F. Cassano), thus recognizing questions and insights useful in identifying the contribution that a Mediterranean perspective can offer in order to rethink both education and the Western «model of man». According to Mongelli, considered from the perspective of the sociology of education the project of a «Mediterranean man», as well as the resulting challenges for education, should be based on the ability to engage in and with multiple identities, to valorise differences and experiences, to focus on the 'person', to recognise

the relevance of intercultural dialogue. As a result, it contributes to «a dynamic revaluation of the relationship between individual and society».

The following five papers assume a Mediterranean lens to explore different educational experiences and practices, analysed by adopting various research methods. So, they contribute to deepen the understanding of those experiences and identify further challenges of education.

The third and the fourth papers deal mainly with students' mobility. Based on a rich analysis of international and national official documents and on in-depth interviews, Stefano Chessa's *Higher Education and Internationalization: students' mobility and participatory university for the Euro-Mediterranean Area* analyses – within the broad framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership launched in 1995 – the meanings and the effects of the growing mobility of students and of the strategies implemented for defining an Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area. On this basis, the paper emphasises the plurality of meanings underlying the experiences of students' mobility and the resulting restructuring of the role of borders and boundaries in shaping identities and people's everyday life. On the other hand, it sheds light on the main challenges faced by European and Mediterranean Universities, paying special attention to the so-called *third mission* of the university, i.e. its contribution to social progress.

In *The Mediterranean vocation of the University of Bari. Foreign female students*, Letizia Carrera considers a different side of the same issue, presenting an analysis of the historical and recent trends of the presence of female foreign students from Mediterranean countries at the University of Bari. In fact, the University of Bari has distinctly declared its willingness to host foreign students since its foundation. The study is carried on considering variables such as gender and country of origin, and comparing the students' presence in Bari with others Southern Italian universities. The analysis reveals that the increasing *feminization* that characterises contemporary migration flows can be considered also as a specific feature of students' mobility, thus showing another side of the *new female protagonism* that has taken place in the Mediterranean countries over the past decades.

The following two papers focus on another key-issue, i.e. the role of non-formal and informal education policies and practices. The first one is

Daniele Morciano's *Youth-work and young people's agency in a Mediterranean context: an evaluation research in the South of Italy*. After having contextualised the role of youth-work in European youth policies and within the Euro-Mediterranean debate, the paper presents a research whose main aim is to evaluate a regional youth policy (promoted by the Apulia region, in Italy), by adopting a quasi-experimental design (multiple-single case study). The research results confirm the importance of an autonomy-supportive learning climate to sustain the non-formal educational experiences that occur in centre-based youth work, especially in order to increase young people's agency. This causal relation is valid also for young people coming from a lower family background in terms of social status and cultural resources.

The paper *The relational integration of immigrant teens: the role of informal education* (by Paola Bonizzoni and Sonia Pozzi) is focused on the role that informal education plays in achieving, managing and enacting intercultural integration between native and immigrant young people. The paper offers an interesting comparison between different informal educational agencies in North Italy, namely an Oratorio and a Juvenile Aggregation Centre (CAG). This qualitative research draws the attention on how it is possible to generate new spaces and opportunities for intercultural dialogue, even when the ascribed personal resources (i.e. family cultural status) affect the interaction between native and immigrant teens.

Emanuela Rinaldi and Lorenzo Todesco deal with one more issue, falling within the broad subject area of financial education, which seems to be particularly important with reference to its potential consequences on social (in)equalities in the Mediterranean area. In *Financial Literacy and Money Attitudes: Do Boys and Girls Really Differ?* they offer a detailed study on gender differences in financial literacy and money attitudes, based on the administration of a questionnaire to a sample of preadolescents attending lower secondary schools in Northern Italy. On the whole, the research reveals that, while financial literacy is similar for boys and girls, money attitudes differ amongst genders. Though being based on a regional dimension, the study highlights the important role of financial education programs in preventing or reducing gender inequalities, as well as in ensuring that both boys and girls could be better equipped to face social challenges in their later adult life.

The special issue ends with the "Oral publication" of the speech given by Alberto Merler during the conference. Coming back to its two main focuses, on the one hand Merler addresses the manifold meanings of "Mediterranean", emphasising that they depend also on the perspective that is assumed. Indeed, the author reflects upon the consequences of considering power, resistance and autonomy as key-dimensions for understanding the spirit of the "Mediterranean-ness" and the likelihood of building relationships based on dialogue, cooperation and respect for diversity. On the other hand, educational processes are analysed focusing on their potential multiple roles and functions, and paying attention both to the interaction between the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of education and to the exchanges between school and other institutions. Subsequently Merler takes into consideration the relevance of educational processes as one of the outstanding factors of social cohesion and co-development in the Mediterranean area.

These elements lead us to the last point, i.e. the link between the contents of this special issue and the prospects of its subject matter. It is clear that this introduction and the following papers do not investigate all the potential challenges of education in the Mediterranean, while some of them have been just pointed out and some others have not even been mentioned. Moreover, in some paper the Mediterranean has been taken basically as a reference for contextualising in a more general framework a fieldwork carried out in a specific milieu. We have been aware of these limits since we organized the conference. Despite these shortcomings in our opinion this issue underlines once again the significance of the choice made, with particular reference to the attempt of encouraging the sociological reflection on the chosen subject matter. In conclusion, rather than endeavouring to offer a systematic approach to the issues or to give reliable answers to the questions involved, the conference and the papers presented in this special issue aim at addressing the prospect of considering the Mediterranean as a challenge for the sociology of education.

Let us close this introduction by quoting the spur offered at the end of his paper by Ronald Sultana (in this issue, *emphasis added*): «*May our encounter with the Mediterranean […] be one such crossing, stimulating our research imagination, and opening up new spaces of dialogue around 'other educations' and 'education otherwise'*». We are conscious that the

road ahead is still long. This was only a first cautious step in a debate that we hope could continue in the future, involving not only the members of AIS-EDU, but also other international and Italian scholars and colleagues working in the fields of sociology and of educational sciences.

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