

*La riforma Gentile e la sua eredità*, edited by ANTONELLO MATTONE, MAURO MORETTI, ELISA SIGNORI, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, 440 pp., ISBN 978-88-15-38698-4.

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The volume *La riforma Gentile e la sua eredità* represents a significant contribution to the historiography of the school and university reform carried out in Italy by Giovanni Gentile, minister of education in the first Mussolini government, in 1923. The work, edited by Antonello Mattone, former curator of the *Dizionario biografico dei giuristi italiani*, Mauro Moretti, president of the *International Commission for the History of Universities*, and Elisa Signori, member of the steering committee of the *Annali di storia delle università italiane*, brings together the work of several scholars who analyze, while focusing in particular on the reform of university systems, the main aspects of the reform: from its evolution, to the problems inherent in its application, as well as to Gentile's relations (and his reform) with fascist ideology.

The Gentile reform, approved by Royal Decree No. 2102 of 30 September 1923, represents a fundamental measure in the history of education in twentieth-century Italy, constitutes a landmark in over forty years and such as to represent, for the fascist regime, one of the most qualifying acts, as well as essential to the

political line of the Mussolini government. Presented as *la più fascista delle riforme* (*the most fascist of reforms*), is a *unicum* in the panorama of twentieth-century school reforms; it is, in fact, a *corpus* that reorganizes the entire school system in a global way – from kindergartens to universities – on the basis of an underlying political, cultural and pedagogical ideology. However, although the reform was openly declared as an expression of the fascist regime, in its conceptual structure and basic objectives it showed greater affinities with the approach of the historical liberal right. It is no coincidence, in fact, that already shortly after its enactment, in the midst of the tragic fascist experience, some of its most innovative and distinctive elements – including the high qualification required of universities and university teaching methods – have been progressively downsized and partly modified with the *touch-up's* policy carried out by those who succeeded one another at the ministry of education, in particular by Cesare Maria Luigi De Vecchi.

The volume, consisting of several essays by different authors, offers detailed treatments on specific aspects of the reform and represents the result of an extensive research process that has also seen the involvement of Cisui, *Centro interuniversitario per la storia delle università italiane*. Specifically, the volume is divided into three parts: *Per un quadro generale della riforma Gentile* (*For*

a general overview of the Gentile reform); *La riforma Gentile e gli ambiti disciplinari* (*The Gentile reform and the disciplinary areas*); *Aspetti e problemi della riforma Gentile* (*Aspects and problems of the Gentile reform*), each of which presents treatments and analytical insights, which are fundamental for addressing and understanding the complexity of the individual aspects of the reform.

The first part, *Per un quadro generale della riforma Gentile* (*For a general overview of the Gentile reform*), deals with the historical and political context of the reform, investigating its link with the liberal right and deepening the historiographical debate on the (alleged) fascist nature; it also analyzes the genesis of the measure, the relations with the previous regulatory system (with particular regard to the Casati reform of 1859) as well as the links with the exponents of the fascist regime. Among the essays contained in the first part, it is worth mentioning in particular the contribution of Antonello Mattone, *Ultima riforma liberale o prima riforma fascista? Il dibattito storiografico sui nodi irrisolti della riforma Gentile* (*Last liberal reform or first fascist reform? The historiographical debate on the unresolved knots of the Gentile reform*), which – by thoroughly investigating the relationship between the principles underlying the reform and fascist ideology – highlights how the reform, despite having been implemented at the dawn of the fas-

cist regime “tra il dicembre 1922 e l’autunno del 1923 [...] pertanto in una fase ancora di transizione tra l’iniziale esperienza di un governo autoritario e la successiva affermazione di un regime dittatoriale” (“between December 1922 and the autumn of 1923 [...] therefore in a phase still of transition between the initial experience of an authoritarian government and the subsequent affirmation of a dictatorial regime”) was rooted in an idealistic and selective educational vision, more in continuity with the tradition of the historical liberal right and decidedly distant from more purely fascist ideologies. Also of particular interest is the essay by Elisa Signori, *La riforma Gentile, l’istruzione superiore femminile e le professioni negate* (*The Gentile reform, women’s higher education and denied professions*), which offers an interesting analysis of the negative aspects of the reform with reference to women’s education and, consequently, to the role of women within the family and society. The author outlines a *excursus* of *restoration* implemented by Gentile, understood as a necessary recovery of the values of the State, the school and the family, from which emerges the extremely limited and marginal role of women, as mothers and educators, and the absolute centrality of men; roles that according to Gentile, after the brief and fictitious emancipation of women induced by the “conflitto che aveva visto affermarsi un nuovo

protagonismo delle italiane sulla scena pubblica” (“conflict that had seen the emergence of a new protagonism of Italian women on the public scene”), had to be necessarily *restored*.

The second part, *La riforma Gentile e gli ambiti disciplinari* (*The Gentile reform and the disciplinary areas*), analyzes and addresses the effects of the reform in the context of the various disciplines, starting from classical studies of a purely humanistic nature to studies in the scientific field. In particular, the contribution of Giovanni Chiodi, *La riforma Gentile e gli studi giuridici: una palingenesi mancata* (*The Gentile Reform and legal studies: a missed palingenesis*), presents interesting insights into the effects of the reform in the field of legal studies. The author examines and compares some aspects of the reform – including, the autonomy of the academic organization, the methods of recruiting teachers, the function of the faculty (within which it was discussed whether to privilege a cultural or professional training model), the value of qualifications, the teaching methods (between lectures, exercises and exams), the freedom of students in defining their own study plan, the relationship between degrees and state examinations and, more generally, the question of the mass university – examining both the interventions of some jurists close to the regime and the observations of some legal scholars; however, the author points out that, despite the

important innovations, the reform did not succeed at all in solving the basic problems – including excessive formalism, the detachment between theory and practice, the crisis of the teaching method and the uncertain relationship with the professions – that afflicted legal studies.

The third and final part, *Aspetti e problemi della riforma Gentile* (*Aspects and problems of the Gentile reform*), pays particular attention to different issues: from the minister’s collaborators to the repercussions of the reform on minor universities and higher teaching institutes, to post-graduate specialization and state exams. Among the contributions that make up this last section, it is worth mentioning the essay by Paola Carlucci, *Ernesto Codignola e la riforma del 1923: note per una ricerca* (*Ernesto Codignola and the 1923 reform: notes for research*) which focuses on the analysis of the pedagogical ideas of Codignola, founder of the Italian magazine *La Nuova Scuola Italiana* (*The New Italian School*) and on the ideological-intellectual exchanges that see the pedagogue and philosopher Codignola *consigliere personale* (*personal advisor*) by Gentile. The author examines Codignola’s biographical story and his bond with Gentile also through the “bellissimo carteggio che i due amici si scambiarono nel corso degli anni” (“remarkable correspondence that the two friends exchanged over the years”) which appears particularly useful for reconstructing

the human and professional relationship between the two, also useful to better define the historical and ideological context that contributed to determining the reform.

*La riforma Gentile e la sua eredità* it is therefore characterized not only by the high scientific rigor that characterizes its entire structure, but also by a multidisciplinary methodological approach. The volume, in fact, makes use of the contribution of scholars from different fields – including the history of education, philosophy, law, sociology and gender studies – who, each with their own skills and perspectives, contribute to building a rich, articulated and complex analysis of the Gentile reform. This plurality of voices makes it possible to fully grasp the multiple levels on which the reform has affected, from the structuring of school curricula to academic organization, from the relationship between education and political ideology to the historical, social and cultural implications. Thanks to this overall view, the volume does not provide a narrow or technical reading of the measure, but returns a systematic representation, attentive both to the immediate effects and to the long-term legacies, thus offering a valuable tool for reflection for historians, pedagogues, jurists and scholars of the social sciences.

The work, moreover, offers a lucid and articulated reading of the Gentile reform, distancing itself from both apologetic attitudes and easy ide-

ological prejudices. Rather than unequivocally exalting elements such as the enhancement of classical culture or methodological severity, or, on the contrary, insisting only on the controversial aspects of the reform – such as the selective and elitist approach or its connection with the fascist regime – the volume chooses to follow an analytical, critical and balanced path. The intent, in fact, is not only to evaluate a crucial passage in Italian school history, but also to offer useful keys to understanding the deep roots of some unresolved issues that still characterize the debate on schools and universities today.

In conclusion, *La riforma Gentile e la sua eredità*, represents a fundamental text for understanding one of the most important moments in the history of Italian education. The detailed analysis of disciplinary and institutional transformations provides a rich and well-documented framework, relevant not only to those who study the history of education, but more generally to all scholars interested in the cultural, political and social processes related to the educational system and is certainly configured as a valuable tool for those who wish to reflect critically on the connections between past and present in educational systems, particularly in the academic field.

Amedeo Volpi