

The Written School Memories of an Italian primary teacher between Fascism and democracy: an original case study

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Abstract: The following paper focuses on the original nature of Individual Written School Memories, shown by some commentaries published by the Italian primary teacher Marco Agosti in the Catholic teachers' magazine «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna» between 1933 and 1938, during the Fascist regime. They dealt with the main results of his educational experimentations in primary school, according to his idea of education as the full development of each human being. An analysis of Marco Agosti's interventions reveals how they represented an original interpretation of the *critica didattica*, a new way of documenting research on didactics introduced by the Italian scholar Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, a partner of Giovanni Gentile in the preparation of the Italian School reform during Benito Mussolini's first government. As recommended by Lombardo Radice to all Italian primary teachers, also Agosti produced day by day some personal notes, which helped him to reflect on his first achievements and to improve upon them on the basis of a pedagogical in-depth analysis. They became a particular form of Individual Written School Memories, «sedimented» during the time he taught at the State Primary School «Camillo Ugoni» in Brescia and conceived for «public use» with a double function – one academic and the other educational, thanks to their publication in a teachers' magazine.

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1. Marco Agosti: an «exceptional» Italian primary teacher

Marco Agosti was born in 1890 in Calcinato, a small town near Brescia (in Northern Italy). After having left primary school when he was eight years old, he performed different types of manual work. During that period, he went on studying by himself in order to become a primary teacher. After the First World War, he started

teaching in some state primary schools, first in the town of Bedizzole, then at the «Camillo Ugoni» School in Brescia¹.

Like many contemporary Italian teachers, he was influenced by the pedagogical perspective of Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, a scholar who for several years was a «disciple» of Giovanni Gentile, who in turn was one of the main Italian philosophers in the early 20th century, and was the author of an original reinterpretation of Idealism well-known as *Attualismo*. In particular, Lombardo Radice gave special attention to the promotion of popular culture and the improvement of primary teachers' training in order to develop new methods, that were more appropriate with regard to the real conditions of poverty and cultural deprivation experienced, every day, by the majority of Italian pupils (Picco, 1951; Catalfamo, 1958; Cives, 1983). This was a new way to achieve one of the most important aims of Italian school: «making the Italians» (Urbinati, 2015, pp. 595-597).

After a brief experience in the local group of the «Rivoluzione liberale», inspired by the political thought of the young antifascist intellectual Piero Gobetti, Marco Agosti followed a new course joining the pedagogical group founded by «Scuola Italiana Moderna», a Catholic teachers' quarterly magazine published by La Scuola publishing house in Brescia.

In 1931 Agosti started doing some educational experimentations in his school, according to his idea of education as the full development of each human being (*educazione integrale della persona umana*). Following Lombardo Radice's suggestions, he wrote some personal notes, which helped him to reflect on his first results and to improve upon them on the basis of a pedagogical in-depth analysis.

Those notes became part of nine commentaries published from 1933 to 1938 by the «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», a bimonthly insert of «Scuola Italiana Moderna», founded in 1933 in order to improve the pedagogical background of Italian primary teachers². Agosti's commentaries referred to some episodes from the *Cronaca scolastica quotidiana* («a daily report of the school activities written down by the teacher»)³, combined with some passages from the

¹ About Marco Agosti's biographical profile, see: Mencarelli, 1986, coll. 259-264; Falanga, 1990, pp. 63-77; Scurati, 1997, pp. 389-412; Scurati, 2004, pp. 113-116; Bertagna & Scaglia, 2013, p. 14; Scaglia, 2016, pp. 9-44.

² The following titles refer to Marco Agosti's original commentaries: Magister, *Una scuola I. Ritmo della giornata scolastica*, in «Supplemento Pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIII, suppl. al n. 1 (1933), pp. 18-19; Id., *Una scuola II. Dal ritmo giornaliero al ciclo settimanale del lavoro scolastico*, in «Supplemento Pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIII, suppl. al n. 19 (1934), pp. 73-77; Id., *Una scuola III. Dagli incarichi al lavoro libero*, in «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIII, suppl. al n. 26 (1934), pp. 111-114; Id., *Una scuola IV. Insegnamenti artistici*, in «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIII, suppl. al n. 34 (1934), pp. 137-142; Id., *Una scuola V. Insegnamento della storia ed educazione nazionale*, in «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIV, suppl. al n. 12 (1934), pp. 12-16; Id., *Una scuola VI. Insegnamento della storia e formazione della coscienza nazionale*, in «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLIV, suppl. al n. 35 (1935), pp. 89-90; Id., *La geografia locale*, in «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», XLVII, suppl. al n. 3 (1938), pp. 343-358; Id., *Il "metodo genetico" nell'insegnamento geografico*, in *ibi*, pp. 370-380; Id., *L'insegnamento della geografia nei vigenti programmi delle scuole elementari*, in *ibi*, pp. 381-384.

³ In accordance with the Ministry Ordinance of January 10th 1924, art. 27 (*Norme regolamentari*

Cronaca della giornata scolastica scritta dai ragazzi («a report of the school day written down by pupils»)⁴ and some pedagogical reflections expressed in retrospect by himself.

The individual writings published by Marco Agosti revealed the self-portrait of a forty-year-old primary teacher, in the middle of the Fascist regime. In spite of the restrictions due to Fascism, such as the compulsory use of a single State approved text, he behaved as an «exceptional» teacher⁵, interested in promoting some of the most important innovations introduced by the active school movement in Italy, according to its wider process of popularization achieved by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice in the early Twenties.

Starting with an original interpretation of the Italian primary school programmes of 1923, Marco Agosti entrusted the entire organizational and didactic management of the class to his pupils, who experienced a form of self-government called *Sistema dei reggenti* (*Regents' System*) (Scaglia, 2015, p. 369). According to a system of daily shifts, each pupil was called upon to become a “regent”, with the task of «governing» the class activities during the school day instead of the teacher, who remained in the background of the classroom⁶. The «regent» managed a group work in the form of research activities, aimed at discovering the «genetic» processes at the origin of school disciplines and, widely, of historical, linguistic and physical phenomena.

The *Regents' System* was conceived of by Agosti for a «popular» primary school, inspired by a Catholic perspective that recognized the educational values of popular culture for the full development of each human being. In this sense, it was important to teach starting with the everyday experiences of schoolchildren, who belonged mostly to the working class.

This kind of school was similar to the model of an «active school according to Christian order», theorized by the Swiss Monsignor Eugène Dévaud in his book *Pour une école active selon l'ordre chrétien* (1934), but it went beyond that, because it realized a new idea of school according to the recent development of the Italian Catholic Pedagogy. This perspective was promoted by the «scientific circle» of La Scuola publishing house in collaboration with the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan, directed by father Agostino Gemelli, one of the most important

per l'applicazione del Regio Decreto 1° ottobre 1923, n. 2185), each Italian primary teacher was required to write a *Cronaca della scuola* (“a daily report of school activities”), in a specific section of the school register.

⁴ The *Cronaca della scuola compilata dai ragazzi* was an original interpretation – made by Agosti – of the *Diario di vita di scuola* («a school life diary»), required by the Italian Primary School Programme in 1923 (RD October 1st 1923, n. 2185, *Programmi di studio e prescrizioni didattiche per le scuole elementari. Ordinamento dei gradi scolastici e dei programmi didattici dell'istruzione elementare*). About the *Diario di vita di scuola* and its educational implications, see: Montino, 2008, pp. 373-377.

⁵ Marco Agosti didn't behave in the same manner when he was called by La Scuola publishing house to write some primary teachers' handbooks, full of references to Fascist regime and its promotion of a racial policy (see Gabusi, 2015, pp. 212-218).

⁶ Mario Casotti, full professor of Pedagogy at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan, had studied the *Regents' System* since 1938. He considered it as an example of a unitary modern educational system, based on an idea of activism of «intellectual kind», not only «disciplinary» (see Casotti, 1938, p. 39).

Italian scholars of Neo-Thomism (Chiosso, 2001, pp. 114-165). Consequently, the active school experienced by Agosti represented the main result of a well-chosen connection between the main issues of Christian Humanism and the most interesting methodological and didactic innovations suggested by the international movement of active schools, as wished by pope Pio XI in the encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929).

Although in his teachings Marco Agosti had to follow the values and restrictions imposed by Fascism, the *Regents' System* couldn't be identified with a school model aimed at the fascist indoctrination of the Italian students, as provided by several "adjustments" at Gentile's School Reform introduced since 1925 (Ostenc, 1981, pp. 60-100; Charnitzky, 1996, pp. 138-155). In fact, its main purpose was to promote the full education of each pupil through the (democratic) practice of self-government and the central role of Christian Religion, considered as «the fundament and successful completion of education» (Agosti, 1933, p. 8).

2. An original re-interpretation of Lombardo Radice's *critica didattica*

As we try to explain in the following passages, Agosti's interventions weren't part of an autobiography, not even of a diary, but were rather the *individual writings* of a teacher aimed at giving readers an example of *best practices* to improve their own teaching activities. After all, the «exemplar» function of Agosti's writings was stressed by the fact they were signed with a pseudonym (*Magister*) and they were collected in a specific section of the magazine, entitled «A school» (*Una scuola*). Moreover, they were presented as some accounts of an «exceptional» teacher – *Magister* was written with a capital letter – involved in an «ordinary» state primary school, as many readers of the «Supplemento pedagogico».

Thanks to their particular features, Agosti's commentaries represented an interesting case study in the context of the *Individual Written School Memories* (Yanes & Meda, 2015, pp. 3-4, 5). First of all, they didn't fit into the category of *Teachers' Egodocuments*, recently analysed by Antonio Viñao (2011, pp. 141-157), on the basis of an expression "coined" by the Dutch historian Jacques Presser in 1958. In his writings, Agosti didn't give testimony in the first person of his teaching experience using a form of self-referential text, because he preferred a more «scientific» formulation, such as the *critica didattica*, a model of documenting research on didactics, written down by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice during his visits to Italian and Ticino active schools (*scuole serene*) during the Twenties (Lombardo Radice, 1926, pp. 1-6).

Lombardo Radice conceived of the *critica didattica* as a tool to facilitate the study of the processes of teaching and learning in primary schools by an external person, such as a scholar or a young student at the *Istituto magistrale*, the Italian high school for training primary teachers. The *critica didattica* offered a documentation of the methods and didactic aids produced daily by the teachers of the classrooms he had visited. Lombardo Radice considered primary teachers as «explorers» and «investigators», ready to reveal and recognize scientific traces in their experiences,

thanks to a process of self-reflection raised by writing their «critical-didactic» remembrances (Lombardo Radice, 1926, p. 6)⁷.

Agosti especially appreciated the main purpose of the *critica didattica*: the promotion of a «scientific study of an educational experience, as it is actually realized in school» (Agosti, 1934, p. 70). He gave a new interpretation of Lombardo Radice's «formula», because he transformed it into a narration written down directly by the teacher protagonist of the school activities, with the insertion of some expressions from the «living» voices of his pupils and the combination with other passages concerning pedagogical reflections. In this sense, the *Magister* Agosti was the protagonist of his *critiche didattiche* in two ways, both as the main actor of the «teaching» narrated in the text and as the author of the narration, in which he allowed readers to «hear» the voices of his pupils and «breathe» the «school climate» (Dams & Depaepe & Simon, 1999, pp. 15-46).

Here is an interesting example of Agosti's contribution:

But if it is easy to lead pupils (we are out of the exceptional cases, which can occur in any school) to identify a fact that was protagonist, it isn't so easy to have them express the particular effects school facts had had on their feelings, first of all the lessons. But the *cronaca della giornata scolastica scritta dai ragazzi*, removing what is a mere external fact, can help children's introspection.

On the day established for the revision of their diaries, the teacher asks some pupils to read some passages from the *cronaca della giornata scolastica scritta dai ragazzi* and some passages from their personal diaries, in order to show them the difference between report and diary.

«Report about 19th February 1931. Today, as the pupil who was in charge of being regent was late, I decided to substitute him. The daily preliminary operations were delayed, because a schoolmate's mother entered the class. After that, I asked my friend to read a tearful novel about a young girl who sold matches along the street».

«In order to explain the difference between report and diary, here there is an example of notes written down by a pupil in his diary, concerning the main facts occurring on the same school day».

19th February, Monday. Today, at 9 o'clock, U.'s mum entered the class to ask the teacher about her son. The teacher, with regret, told her that her son was an intelligent boy, but he didn't study with goodwill and he was lacking in Italian. The woman was very sad and she tried not to cry.

⁷ Giuseppe Lombardo Radice collected some examples of *critiche didattiche* in one of his most successful works, *Athena fanciulla. Scienza e poesia della scuola serena*, published in 1925. At that time, he had already ended his friendship with Giovanni Gentile and he had distanced himself from the Fascist regime, starting a process of popularization of Italian active school experiences (well-known as *scuole serene*). In *Athena fanciulla*, he presented several examples of *critica didattica*, concerning some Italian *scuole serene* such as *Montesca School*, opened in Umbria in 1902 by barons Alice and Leopoldo Franchetti, and *Rinnovata School*, opened in Milan's suburbs of Ghisolfia in 1911 by the teacher Giuseppina Pizzigoni. Lombardo Radice also paid attention to some experiences of *scuole serene* in the nearby area of Ticino, such as the *Muzzano School* innovated by the local teacher Maria Boschetti Alberti, considered the «mother» of *scuola serena*.

The particular about the mum's mood wasn't underlined by the writer of the *cronaca della giornata scolastica scritta dai ragazzi*. The plain and optimistic objectivity of the report contrasts with the subjective evaluation of the school day, made by a pupil in his personal diary⁸.

Thanks to the publication of his individual writings, Agosti made a personal contribution to the scientific programme of the «Supplemento pedagogico», aimed at launching a new pedagogical perspective in Italy, characterized by the research of a meeting point between Catholic thought and the main didactic and methodological innovations introduced by active schools at the international level (Chiosso, 1997, pp. 627-628; Chiosso, 2003, pp. 308-312; Pazzaglia, 2004, pp. 50-51; Orizio, 2009, pp. 101-155).

Under the direction of Monsignor Angelo Zammarchi and the editorial support of the young primary teacher Vittorino Chizzolini, the «Supplemento pedagogico» became a sort of «scientific circle», in which many scholars and teachers discussed the best innovations realized in the Italian primary schools in that period. They dealt with an idea of primary school as a small «laboratory», where each teacher – as the *Magister* Agosti – was called upon to investigate and solve the most delicate educational and psychological issues that occurred every day in his/her classroom (Agosti & Chizzolini, 1933, p. 1).

According to this programme, it becomes clearer why Agosti offered the readers of the «Supplemento pedagogico» a series of commentaries in the form of *Individual Written School Memories*. He wrote them with an «immediate» language and he equipped them with a rich iconography and explicative captions, in order to lead the readers in the «living» of his teaching. The images displayed in the captions reproduced some episodes of the school day, or some examples of didactic tools made up by the pupils during lessons or group work (such as textbooks, card indexes with moving leaves, collections etc.), or some «snap-shots» about the particular setting of the classroom. They allowed the readers to focus on the «culture of the classroom» (Viñao, 2011, p. 156), produced by moving manners, thoughts, practices, attitudes, routines and «sedimented» knowledge present in the classroom. They also allowed the readers to understand the «material culture of the school» (Meda, 2013, pp. 170-171), shown for example by the card indexes and the didactic collections illustrated during their construction and daily use. Finally, they conveyed some «snap-shots» about the «intangible historical-educational heritage» (Meda, 2013, p. 196), in particular the images concerning some school rituals, such as the *Operazioni preparatorie alla giornata scolastica* («preliminary operations at the beginning of the school day»)⁹, required by Italian primary school programmes of 1923, drawn up by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice.

⁸ Magister, *Una scuola II. Dal ritmo giornaliero al ciclo settimanale del lavoro scolastico*, in «Supplemento Pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna», cit., pp. 76-77 [my translation].

⁹ The preliminary operations at the beginning of the school day consisted in: assembly; cleanliness inspection; entrance and preparation of writing materials; communications; self-roll call with some considerations about absentees and school mates coming late, using a dedicated card file; meditation and prayer; weather observations; annotations on the *quaderno per le comunicazioni scuola-famiglia* («a notebook for the school-to-family communications»); homework control (see:

3. The *Individual Written School Memories* as useful tools for pedagogical research and educational experimentation

The *Regents' System* experimentation ran out in 1942, because Marco Agosti had left primary school to become director of the *Centro didattico provinciale* (a Provincial Centre for the Promotion of Didactic Research) in Brescia and lecturer in Pedagogy at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan.

He started considering his commentaries about the *Regents' System* as possible subjects for scientific research, thanks to the opening of the *Paedagogium*, a High Research Centre for the Study of the Christian Education, founded in 1942 by a ten-year collaboration between the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan and La Scuola publishing house (Gemelli, 1942, pp. 207-214; Caimi, 1995, pp. 237-271).

According to that plan, Agosti's *Individual Written School Memories* could be studied firstly as some scientific texts concerning a new way of teaching. Secondly, they could be analysed to formulate research protocols to lead teachers interested in carrying out educational experimentations in their classrooms; thirdly, they could be proposed as «good» readings for the in-service training of the Italian primary school teachers¹⁰.

In the period between the fall of the Fascist regime and the end of the Second World War, Agosti's writings and his theory of a primary school for the full development of each human being offered some suggestions about the building of the new Italian democratic school system (Chiosso, 1988; Pazzaglia, 1988, pp. 495-544; Bertagna, 2008, pp. 123-146). This process was facilitated by the fact the school narrated in Agosti's individual memories had had some «universal» features, suitable for any social, political and economic context, because they had been aimed at educating every person in his/her substantial, individual, rational and supernatural dimensions (Agosti, 1948, p. 110).

The following re-launch of the *Paedagogium* and the new initiatives promoted by La Scuola publishing house rediscovered the original nature of Marco Agosti's *critiche didattiche*, as narrations of *best practices* for the implementation of primary school teachers' professionalization. In particular, Agosti dealt with his individual memories as a sort of «textbook» for the initial training of some young teachers, who had attended the first «annual teachers experimenters' meeting» in the alpine sanctuary of Pietralba in 1948 (Chizzolini, 1948, pp. 109-112; Chizzolini *et al.*, 1960; Pasotti, 1994, pp. 64-65; Pasinetti, 2004, pp. 765-766).

Thanks to the collaboration of his colleague Vittorino Chizzolini, Agosti invited the participants to experiment in their classes an experience similar to the *Regents' System*, starting with his *critiche didattiche* published fifteen years earlier by the «Supplemento pedagogico a Scuola Italiana Moderna». Moreover, he suggested them that they could render their innovative teachings «memories», writing down

Agosti, 1933, p. 19; Scaglia, 2015, pp. 372-373).

¹⁰ See: *Paedagogium*. Istituto per gli studi sulla educazione cristiana costituito presso l'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, *Ricerche ed esperienze educative e didattiche*, s.e., s.d. Milano, archived at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan, Archivio storico dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, fondo Miscellanea, b. 57, f. 5, «Paedagogium: programmi 1953; Lettere di amicizia».

some individual commentaries on the basis of his model, in order to increase their own expertise and discuss their *critiche didattiche* with the other attendees during the next annual meeting in Pietralba. Accordingly, the *Individual Written School Memories* of each participant could become part of a «cultural heritage», shared by the Pietralba's entire scientific community, ready to supply new ways of educational research. They dealt with some topics such as the Pedagogy of the human being, the experimentations of active lessons, the practice of a «natural» method of teaching-learning (the *metodo naturale*, produced by an original interpretation of Jean-Ovide Decroly's global method), the self-government and the importance of the Italian language teaching for the Italian democratic development (Chizzolini *et al.*, 1960; Scaglia, 2016).

The positive results obtained during the first meetings in Pietralba persuaded Agosti to rewrite his original individual memories and to collect them in a volume that became very successful, entitled *Verso la scuola integrale. Il sistema italiano dei reggenti* («Towards a full education school. The Italian Regents' System»). Published by La Scuola in 1950, it would go on to have other four consecutive editions until 1970¹¹. Its success persuaded Agosti that his *Individual Written School Memories* had offered young teachers some additional theoretical and practical suggestions, aimed at increasing their professional expertise and, at the same time, outlining the scientific profile of the Pedagogy of the human being.

According to this perspective, Agosti and Chizzolini began a new book series at La Scuola publishing house, entitled the *Quaderni di Pietralba* (the «Notebooks of Pietralba»), in order to publish the best *critiche didattiche* written down by some of the Pietralba's meetings participants. Their main purpose was to disseminate them as *Individual Written School Memories* for public use (both academic and educational), on the basis of Agosti's model. In particular, the five *Quaderni di Pietralba*¹², published from 1952 to 1957, were conceived of to promote a full primary teachers' «maturity», according to three lines of professional development experienced by Agosti firsthand: ethic-religious, humanistic-professional and political-social (Agosti & Chizzolini, 1959, pp. 11-13, 22-26).

¹¹ See: Magister, *Verso la scuola integrale. (Il sistema italiano dei reggenti)*, La Scuola, Brescia 1950 (following editions: 1953, signed as Magister; 1961, 1966, 1970, signed as Marco Agosti).

¹² AA.VV., *Pedagogia della persona*, note di Marco Agosti, Aldo Agazzi, Mauro Laeng, Piero Viotto, Gaetano Santomauro, Matteo Perrini, La Scuola, Brescia 1952; AA.VV., *Il globalismo nella didattica d'oggi*, note di Marco Agosti, Giuseppe Catafamo, Gabriele Calvi, Gaetano Santomauro, Mario Comassi, Franco Nardini, Sergio Salucci, Italo Zaina, Giuseppe Amoroso, Ugo Scardovi, La Scuola, Brescia 1952; AA.VV., *Collaborazione e autogoverno*, note di Marco Agosti, Gaetano Santomauro, Luigi Calonghi, Mario Comassi, Gian Carlo Sottili, Renzo Ammannati, Sergio Salucci, Zeno Paganelli, Mauro Laeng, Emanuele Bormida, Egidio Lucchini, Ugo Scardovi, Franco Nardini, La Scuola, Brescia 1954; AA.VV., *Dal metodo globale al metodo naturale*, note di Marco Agosti, Sergio Salucci, Zeno Paganelli, Mauro Laeng, Matteo Perrini, Marcello Peretti, La Scuola, Brescia 1956; AA.VV., *L'espressione: l'insegnamento linguistico*, note di Marco Agosti, Mauro Laeng, Fortunato Pasqualino, Massimo Pittau, Gaetano Santomauro, Vittorio Brunelli e Carlo Piantoni, La Scuola, Brescia 1957.

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