

HISTORY OF A “SCHOOL REVOLUTION” INTRODUCING THE “NORMAL METHOD” IN THE KINGDOM OF SICILY

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Abstract

Il presente contributo vuole, attraverso l'uso di una documentazione d'archivio del tutto inedita, ricostruire le fasi che contraddistinsero l'istituzione in Sicilia nella second half of the XVIIIth century dei primi istituti scolastici basati sul metodo normale, individuare le problematiche che ostacolarono la diffusione di tali scuole nell'isola e fornire una possibile interpretazione dell'ambigua risposta che la società civile riservò a tale lodevole e “rivoluzionaria” iniziativa in campo scolastico.

By means of examining entirely unpublished documents, the present paper aims at reconstructing the phases of the introduction of the first schools adopting the normal teaching method in the Kingdom of Sicily during the second half of the XVIIIth century. Furthermore, the work aims at identifying the issues undermining the diffusion of such schools on the island, as well as at providing a possible interpretation of civil society's ambiguous acceptance of this admirable and “revolutionary” educational initiative.

Keywords: Kingdom of Sicily; primary schools; normal method; education systems; teaching profession.

This work is the partial result of an extensive yet *in itinere* study on the evolution of the process of schooling and of the diffusion of literacy in Southern Italy before the Unification of 1860¹. In particular, I will deal with the events referring to the Kingdom of Sicily between the XVIIIth and the XIXth century.

As for the research material, I have taken into account the documents kept in the State Archives of Palermo. Namely, these papers are kept in the

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¹ The results of the research have been abridged and gathered in three volumes called *Scuole, Maestri e Metodi della Sicilia borbonica*, published in 2012 in Lecce-Rovato by Pensa MultiMedia Editore.

archives of *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti* and of the *Ministero e Segreteria di Stato per gli Affari di Sicilia presso sua maestà in Napoli*².

Furthermore, I found some useful information inside 18th century foreign travellers' accounts of their visit to Sicily. The travel accounts, drawings and prints dating back to XVIIIth century evoke a heavenly image of Sicily. All the travellers and the artists report enthusiastically about *exotic landscapes* and a *great volcano*, which are peculiar to a country of utmost rich soil and of temperate climate that had been dominated and conquered by the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Normans, and the Spanish³.

² I am here referring to the documents kept in the State Archives of Palermo, which will be referred to as ASPA (*Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Rappresentanze, Val di Mazzara* (1798), busta n. 1191; *Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1789/93), busta n. 5247; *Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1790-93), busta n. 5248; *Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1792/98), busta n. 5249; *Scuole normali di mutuo insegnamento* (1796), busta n. 5499; *Scuole normali di mutuo insegnamento* (1809/17), busta n. 5573; *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione, Registro consulte* (1808), volume n. 13; *Registro consulte* (1810/13), volume n. 14; *Registro consulte* (1810), volume n. 15; *Registro consulte* (1816/18), volume n. 16; *Affari diversi* (1780/90), busta n. 92; *Affari diversi* (1780/1810), busta n. 93; *Affari Suppliche* (1800/15), busta n. 176; *Suppliche* (1800/13), busta n. 177; *Suppliche* (1810/13), busta n. 178; *Suppliche* (1810/17), busta n. 179).

³ For further information, see the following travel reports: P. ANOT (1802), *Les deux voyageurs, ou Lettres sur la Belgique, la Hollande, l'Allemagne, la Pologne, la Prusse, l'Italie, la Sicile et Malthe, contenant l'histoire, la description, les anecdotes les plus curieuses de ces différents pays avec des observations sur les mœurs, les usages, le gouvernement, la littérature et les art. Et un récit impartial des principaux événements qui se sont passés en Europe depuis 1791 jusqu'à la fin de 1802, écrites selon l'ordre des temps*, Brigot, Rheims; T. BARING (1815), *A Tour through Italy, Sicily, Istria, Carniola, the Tyrol and Austria in 1814*, London; J. H. BARTELS (1789-1792), *Briefe über Calabrien und Sizilien*, Johann Christian Dieterich, Göttingen; R. T. BINGHAM (1800), *Letters from Sicily written in the year 1798, by a Gentleman to his Friends in England, printed for the author by W. Stratford and R. Young*, London; E. BLAQUIERE (1813), *Letters from the Mediterranean; containing a civil and political account of Sicily, Tripoly, Tunis, and Malta*, printed for Henry Colburn, London; P. BRYDONE (1775), *Voyage en Sicile et Malthe*. Traduit de l'anglois de M. Brydone... par M. Demeunier. Tome premiere, chez Panckoncke, Amsterdam; G. COCKBURN (1815), *A Voyage to Cadiz and Gibraltar up the Mediterranean to Sicily and Malta, in 1810, & 11. Including a Description of Sicily and the Lipari Islands, and an Excursion in Portugal*, J. Harding, London; J. GALT (1812), *Voyages and travels in the years 1809, 1810 and 1811 containing statistical commercial and miscellaneous observations on Gibraltar, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Serigo, and Turkey*, printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, London; W. HANSON (1814), *Letters from Sicily in the Years 1810-11-12*, London; R. C. HOARE (1819), *A classical tour through Italy and Sicily; tending to illustrate some districts, which have not been described by mr. Eustace, in his classical Tour*, printed for J. Mawman, 39, London; J. HOUEL (1784), *Voyage pittoresque des isles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari, où l'on traite des antiquités qui s'y trouvent encore, del principaux phénomènes que la nature y offer, du costume des habitans, & de quelques usages*, de l'imprimerie de Monsieur, à Paris; W. IRVINE (1813), *Letters on Sicily*, printed for J. Mawman, London; W. LIGHT (1823), *Sicilian scenery. From drawings by P. De Wint; the original sketches by Major Light*, published by Rodwell & Martin, London; F. MÜNTER (1823), *Viaggio in Sicilia*. Tradotto dal tedesco dal... cav. D. Francesco Peranni, con note e aggiunte del medesimo, dalla Tipografia del fu Francesco Abbate q.m Domenico, Palermo; F. X. PAGES (1797), *Nouveau voyage autour du monde*,

In short, the island is seen by foreigners as a “spectacular point where converge the rays of the history of the universe” and is compared even to Asia and Africa, as stated by Goethe in 1787.

This idea of Sicily is largely widespread, yet monolithic and stereotypical.

As it arises from the coeval documents, the condition of the island is in fact considerably more problematic. During the second half of the XVIIIth century and the beginning of the XIXth century, Sicily is still characterized by the obsolete structure of a feudal society and lacks, as Lord Collingwood writes, “the real strength of a kingdom”⁴.

Apart from the few opulent coastal cities of Palermo, Messina and Catania, which were the privileged destinations of foreign tourists, the island is divided into *latifundia*, vast expanses of barely inhabited barren territories infested by malaria.

Moreover, the region utterly lacks any sort of street, with the residential areas being connected by *trazzere*, dirt patches that were often impracticable. Sicily was also deficient in industries and in factories, given that the economy was based solely on an agriculture carried out by old-fashioned methods passed down from generation to generation.

This is the complex situation that Marquis Domenico Caracciolo had to face in 1781, when King Charles III of Borbon invested him with the title of Viceroy of the Kingdom of Sicily. Described as a cosmopolitan influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, Caracciolo did not know Sicily yet did not need long to realize what the major concerns of the region were. He writes that Sicily was populated by aristocrats and poor people, by *persecutors and persecuted*⁵.

en Asie, en Amérique et en Afrique, en 1788, 1789 et 1790; precede d'un voyage en Italie et en Sicile en 1787, chez h. J. Jansen imprimeur-libraire, Paris; J. M. ROLAND DE LA PLATIÈRE (1780), *Lettres écrites de Suisse, d'Italie, de Sicile et de Malte...*, Amsterdam; G. RUSSEL (1819), *A Tour through Sicily in the Year 1815*, London; W. H. THOMPSON (1813), *Sicily and its Inhabitants. Observations made during a Residence in that Country in the Years 1809 and 1810*, printed for Henry Colburn, London; E. Q. VISCONTI (1778), *Lettres sur la Sicile, par un voyageur italien, à un de ses amis*, B. Morin, à Amsterdam, et à Paris; T. WATKINS (1792), *Travels through Swisserland, Italy, Sicily, the Greek islands, to Constantinople; through part of Greece, Ragusa, and the Dalmatian isles. In a series of letters to Pennoyre Watkins, esq. from Thomas Watkins, a.m. in the years 1787, 1788, 1789*, printed for T. Cadell, London.

⁴ The statement from Lord Collingwood has been quoted by F. GUARDIONE in *La Sicilia nella rigenerazione politica, 1795/1860*, Libreria Reber, Palermo, 1912, p. 114.

⁵ Viceroy Caracciolo writes in a letter of 28 December 1773 to Bernardo Tanucci: “Io credo fermamente che la vera origine della povertà della Sicilia, dei suoi abitanti delle campagne, procede dalla tirannia dei gran proprietari, a motivo che, essendo tutto il suolo del Signore, costui obbliga il colono a travagliare per picciola mercede, il quale colono viene a contentarsi, a guisa di schiavo, della dura condizione, per potere mangiare, altrimenti resterebbe senza pane, non avendo modo di sottrarsi, spinto dalla fame, dai proprietari, uniti d'accordo a spremere fino all'ultima gocciola il sudore di quella povera gente”. This letter is kept in the State Archive of Naples (*Affari Esteri - Parigi*, fascio n. 399) and has been quoted by F. GUARDIONE (1912), Libreria Reber, Palermo, p. 14.

Hence, his strongest wish was that of reforming the political shape of the island by promoting everything that could empower the southern monarchy. In his opinion, they should eradicate the unlimited power and influence of the clergy and of the *baroni* to ensure the renewal of the Kingdom.

The motto of Caracciolo is “Deconstruct in order to reconstruct”, where *deconstruct* means limiting the secular privileges, relieving the suffering of the lower class, creating a land register, building roads, encouraging commerce and exchanges, abolishing idleness, superstition, and ignorance. This policy was thus aimed at fostering the education of the masses.

Caracciolo’s ideals will be implemented and carried out by Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi, the general superintendent of Sicilian normal schools⁶ since 1788.

1. Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi, apostle of popular schools

Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi (Casteltermini 1726 - Palermo 1810) is a leading figure of the culture of the Island during the second half of the XVIIIth century⁷. Besides being very charismatic, pragmatic and cultivated, De Cosmi knows and appreciates the work of Viceroy Caracciolo and wishes to apply his innovative ideals to school.

⁶ The definition “normal schools” refers to free public primary schools operating according to the “normal method”.

⁷ For a complete biography of Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi, refer to the autograph manuscripts kept in the Biblioteca universitaria of Catania, that is to the *Memorie* and to the work by Gaetano DI GIOVANNI called *La vita e le opere di Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi, memorie e ricordi con notizie storiche sull'insegnamento e sulla cultura in Sicilia nei secoli XVIII e XIX*, Carlo Clausen, Palermo, 1888. Among the six volumes of such manuscripts, not only we find educational material but also a variety of texts about literature, linguistics, law, politics, economics and theology. Special mention goes to the following scripts: *Epistole di Cicerone*; the *Orazione funebre di D. Leandro Rossi*; *Pel Capitolo della Cattedrale di Catania in Sicilia*; *Biblioteca degli Scrittori italiani che anno scritto o in volgare o in latino dall'anno 1170 i cui libri si trovano presso il canonico de Cosmi al 1808*; *Istruzioni sopra le virtù teologali ossia sopra i doveri principali dell'uomo*; *Istruzioni sopra il carattere di cristiano*; *La Scienza dell'anima fondata sopra l'esperienza, secondo il disegno del signor Volffio*; *Institutiones philosophiae ad usum studiosae juventutis Castrinovi adernatae a Joanne Augustino De Cosmis, Matheseos el Philosophiae professore*; *Ad regulam cartesianam. De veritatis criterio*; *Considerazioni sopra l'eloquenza de' Padri e della scrittura esposte per formare il gusto de' giovani predicatori*; *Riflessioni sopra l'arte del parlare*; *Memoria sull'Istituto Normale di Sicilia e sulla pubblica Istruzione*. The *Memoria*, written in 1792, includes a concise plan of public instruction and was first published in 1817 by a pupil of De Cosmi, Vincenzo Natale. Afterwards, it has been published in its entirety inside the work by G. ACONE, C. PISCOPO and D. DENTE, *Educazione e società nel '700 napoletano* (La Nuova Società, Roma, 1976, pp. 326-340) followed by a publication from Salvatore AGRESTA called *L'istruzione in Sicilia (1815-1860)*, Samperi, Messina, 1995, pp. 206-215.

According to De Cosmi, only a school which is also designed for the lower class will be able to concretely redeem Sicily from a cultural, moral, social, political and economic point of view. Therefore, governors have to take care of poorer people and must do what is necessary to prevent the effects of *prejudice* and *ignorance*. Furthermore, they have to promote the foundation of schools which will improve the reading, writing and counting abilities of the masses. Hence, from this point of view, popular schools are seen as the “main instrument of national culture”⁸.

Sustained formerly by Viceroy Caracciolo, and latterly by his successor, Francesco D’Aquino, Prince of Caramanico, De Cosmi was the promoter of an unprecedented educational progress between 1786 and 1810. He develops an educational scheme centered on some crucial points, among which we can remember:

1. the introduction of a clear, simple, stable *teaching method* aimed at a permanent and unalterable system of mass education. It is also called *metodo normale* (*normal method*);

2. *education* and *literacy* conceived as *essential* and *strategic* instrument of resolutions of the issues concerning the island’s political and economic development;

3. a special attention given to the *teaching profession*;

4. a full understanding of the obstacles to a progressive and widespread diffusion of free public schools for kids of both sexes.

De Cosmi was particularly devoted to the normal method, that he learned of in Napoli in 1786. The normal method, widely known as relating to simultaneous teaching, was elaborated by the inspector of Hecher Realschule Johann Friedrich Hähn and theorized by Johann Ignaz von Felbiger on behalf of Frederick II⁹.

⁸ G. A. DE COSMI (1786), *Alle riflessioni su’ l’economia ed estrazione de’ frumenti della Sicilia. Commentario*, F. Pastore, Catania, pp. 57-58. What we have left of De Cosmi are several educational valuable works, such as: *Al valoroso giuriconsulto D. Felice Ferraloro attual giudice del Concistoro della S.R.C.* (1786), Catania; *Principii generali del discorso e dell’ortografia italiana ad uso delle regie Scuole Normali di Sicilia* (1790), Eredi Bentivegna, Catania; *Metodo de’ principj generali del discorso proposto dal Can. De Cosmi direttore dell’Istituto normale di Sicilia* (1792), D. Rosario Abbate, Palermo; the three volumes of *Elementi di Filologia italiana e latina*, each of which have been published in Palermo in a different year (1796, 1803 and 1805).

⁹ For more information about the “normal method”, see: V. BOSNA (2001), *Ludovico Vuoli e la diffusione del “metodo normale” nel Regno di Napoli*, Cacucci, Bari; J. VAN HORN MELTON (1988), *Absolutism and the eighteen-century origins of compulsory schooling in Prussia and Austria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; S. POLENGHI (2001), *La pedagogia di Felbiger e il metodo normale*, in “Annali di storia dell’educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche”, 8, La Scuola, Brescia, pp. 245-268; Id. (2000), *Militia christiana. La pedagogia militare di Ignaz Felbiger nell’Austria Teresiana*, in “Pedagogia e Vita”, 5, pp. 122-156; Id. (2002), *La pedagogia austriaca tra Sette e Ottocento*, in “Pedagogia e Vita”, 3, pp. 65-84; C. SINDONI (2012), *Metodi didattici ed istruzione*, in S. AGRESTA and C. SINDONI, *Scuole, Maestri e Metodi nella Sicilia borbonica (1817-1860)*, Pensa MultiMedia, Lecce-Rovato, pp. 57-78.

At first adopted by Borbon in the school of Naples in 1785, the normal method was imported in Sicily by G. A. De Cosmi in 1788.

Apart from some internal changes meant for simplification, De Cosmi claims that a normal school should not only be open to the lower class, but also to children from every social class. His primary goal is to elevate the cultural level of the masses while educating the unconcerned middle class, that ought to reunite the poor people, the *infima classe*, and the aristocrats, the *sommo della popolazione*¹⁰.

De Cosmi's idea was put into effect.

In fact, several documents written by teachers (*reports, school accounts, etc.*) prove that popular school students belonged to different social classes and contexts. For instance, as for the normal school of Mazzarino in 1793, the pupils' parents all had different "professions", such as: *gentleman* (9 people); *butcher* (3); *bourgeois* (4); *barber* (1); *baker* (1); *jurist* (5); *farmer* (5); *teacher* (2); *doctor* (2); *tinker* (1); *carpenter* (1)¹¹.

De Cosmi struggles with the professional qualification of "normal teachers". Since 1788, he felt the necessity of an education intended specifically for teachers¹², thus predicting future measures in the same field such as the ones adopted by the *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione* in 1818¹³; in fact, the *Commissione* founded in each Sicilian

¹⁰ G. A. DE COSMI (1796), *Prospetto delle scuole normali di Sicilia*, in *Elementi di Filologia italiana e latina*, I, Reale Stamperia, Palermo, p. 168.

¹¹ ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1790-93), volume n. 5248.

¹² For further information on the issues about the professional education of teachers, see: *Aux sources de la compétence professionnelle. Critères scolaires et classements sociaux dans les carrières intellectuelle en Europe, XVII^e - XIX^e siècle* (edited by D. JULIA), in "Paedagogica Historica", XXX, 1 (1994); M. ROGGERO (1999), *L'alfabeto conquistato. Apprendere e insegnare nell'Italia tra Sette e Ottocento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 197-297; A. SANTONI RUGIU (2006), *Maestre e maestri. La difficile storia degli insegnanti elementari*, Carocci, Roma; P. SORCINELLI (2002), *I maestri all'avvio dell'alfabetizzazione*, in *Storia delle professioni in Italia tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 139-149; A. TANTURRI (2010), *Modalità di abilitazione dei maestri nel Mezzogiorno preunitario*, in "Annali di Storia dell'educazione", 17, pp. 265-279; G. VIGO (1977), *Il maestro elementare italiano nell'Ottocento. Condizioni economiche e status sociale*, in "Nuova Rivista Storica", LXI, 1-2, pp. 43-84.

¹³ The *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione* was established on 31 January 1817 with the task of extending to Sicily all the existing regulation in Naples. All the educational institutes, both for boys and girls, depended on this Commission, which, between 1817 and 1859, issued several directives so as to regulate Sicilian public instruction. Among them, we find: the *Regolamento per le scuole primarie* (27 Nov. 1818); the *Regolamenti per le scuole comunali e per le scuole private* (24 Jun. 1821); the *Piano di Riforma per le Accademie e i Collegi dell'isola* (16 Oct. 1825); the *Metodo e corso scolastico da osservarsi in tutte le scuole primarie, secondarie, pubbliche e private di Sicilia* (26 Jun. 1828); the *Regolamenti* concerning the attainment of academic titles (22 Jan. 1817) and the organization of the University (Aug. and Dec. 1839, 31 May 1840 e 27 Mar. 1858). Together with some other measures about public instruction during the Borbonic nomination, such regulations have been recollected by S. AGRESTA and published in a volume called *Istruzione e scolarità nella Sicilia del primo Ottocento. Fonti documentarie*, Società Messinese di Storia Patria, Messina, 2004.

district a “central school for teachers’ training” (*Scuola centrale provinciale di modello*)¹⁴.

De Cosmi arranged a special four month training for teachers to be done in Palermo at the Regie Scuole Normali; he also provided teaching materials the training, such as the volumes kept in the *Biblioteca italiana de’ Maestri*, and put into print special textbooks¹⁵.

In January 1790, De Cosmi charged the bookseller of Palermo Francesco Abbate with the task of printing the books which were meant to be used in the normal schools¹⁶. Thus, Abate published: the *Elementi d’aritmetica* (1791); the *Piccolo catechismo per la prima classe* (1791); the *Fiore di virtù ridotto alla sua vera lezione* (1803, later revised and published in 1811 and 1814).

Finally, he published in 1790 a pamphlet called *Principi generali del discorso* - which De Cosmi recollected in a booklet, later printed in Palermo by Francesco Abate in 1790 - a guide destined not only to learners but especially to teachers¹⁷.

On the whole, these innovations enhance the figure of the teacher whereas others didn’t give this profession a special treatment.

2. The diffusion of “normal schools” on the island

The normal schools started arising in Sicily from 1788, beginning with the cities of Palermo, Messina, Catania and the most important state-

¹⁴ For further information on the *central schools for teachers’ training* founded by the Commission starting from 1818, see State Archive of Caltanissetta, *Istruzione Pubblica, Complessivi e disposizioni generali* (1818/23), busta n. 2797.

¹⁵ In his work *Biblioteca italiana de’ Maestri* published in the first volume of *Elementi di filologia italiana e latina* (*op. cit.*, 92-142), De Cosmi lists a series of literary works which could result appealing to teachers, such as: the *Cronichette antiche di varj scrittori del buon secolo della lingua Toscana* (1755), Domenico Manni, Firenze; the *Prediche* by Giordano da Rivalto (1759), Viviani, Firenze; the *Volgarizzamento delle Vite de’ Santi Padri* (1735), Domenico Maria Manni, Firenze; the *Vite di alcuni Santi scritte nel buon secolo della lingua toscana* (1734), Domenico Manni, Firenze; the *Etica* by Aristotele, the *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ne’ tempi suoi* by Dino Compagni (1726), Milano; the *Prose* by Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio (1723), Tartini e Franchi, Firenze; the *Commento sopra la Commedia di Giovanni Boccacci colle annotazioni di Anton Maria Salvini* (1724), Napoli; the *Novelle* by Franco Sacchetti (1725), Napoli; the *Istorie pistolesi, dall’anno 1300, al 1348* - later published as *Storie delle cose avvenute in Toscana* - (1578), Giunti, Firenze; the *Croniche* by Giovanni Villani (Ludovico Fasolo, Venezia, 1537); the *Trattato contro all’avversità della fortuna* by Arrigo da Settimello (1730), Manni, Firenze; the *Volgarizzamento dei sermoni* by S. Agostino (1731), Manni, Firenze.

¹⁶ ASPA, *Real Segreteria, Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1790/93), busta n. 5248.

¹⁷ According to De Cosmi biographer G. Di Giovanni, only the first part (*Principi del Discorso*) had been composed by De Cosmi; the second half (*Principi della Ortografia*) could have been written by Francesco Soave. G. DI GIOVANNI, *La vita e le opere di Giovanni Agostino De Cosmi, memorie e ricordi...*, *cit.*, p. 166.

owned cities¹⁸. On the contrary, several objections were raised regarding the creation of such schools in small rural areas and in the cities controlled by the aristocrats.

A thorough examination of various documents concerning normal schools between 1788 and 1817 brings out an uneven distribution of the normal schools in Sicily. I chose to structure such fluctuating tendency in three phases, aiming at a clearer reasoning and at an easier examination of some of the multiple influences on the educational process.

The first phase (the *fervor phase*) goes from 1789 to 1794 and represents the educational process at its peak. De Cosmi had just learned the normal method in Naples and was in charge of applying it in Sicily. He managed to institute a relevant number of normal schools, among which we find the *Scuola del Ponticello* of Palermo, where teachers had to do a special training in order to learn the normal method. This school was the “point of reference” for all the other normal schools¹⁹.

De Cosmi achieved his goal also thanks to the support of the King, of the Viceroy, and of influential people such as Salvatore Ventimiglia, Bishop of Catania, monsignor Alfonso Airoidi²⁰, and Giacinto Dragonetti²¹, “pupil” of Antonio Genovesi and consultant of the government as well as the promoter of educational reforms in the Kingdom of Naples. During this five years De Cosmi founded 33 schools of which 19 in the Val di Mazzara²², 6 in the Val Demone²³ and 8 in the Val di Noto²⁴.

¹⁸ ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di mutuo insegnamento* (1809/17), busta n. 5573.

¹⁹ G. E. DI BLASI, *Storia cronologica dei Vicerè Luogotenenti e Presidenti del Regno di Sicilia* (1842), dalla Stamperia Oreste, Palermo, p. 740.

²⁰ The archbishop of Eraclea Alfonso Airoidi (1727-1817) was a judge for the *Regia Monarchia ed Apostolica Legazione*, as well as *Cappellano maggiore del Re* in Sicily. Also, he was a representative of the first “Commissione di pubblica istruzione ed educazione”, officiated by the prince of Malvagna.

²¹ Giacinto Dragonetti (1738-1818), who was a pupil of Antonio Genovesi, was first elected “Conservatore generale di Azienda” in Sicily and then “Consultore ordinario della monarchia” in 1792.

²² Besides the four schools operating in Palermo only (population: 201.741), the remaining institutes of Val di Mazzara (pop. 791.787) were located in Caltanissetta (pop. 15.627), Cammarata (pop. 8.134), Castelvetro (pop. 14.782), Chiusa (pop. 6.002), Giuliana (pop. 3.230), Menfi (pop. 6.136), Monreale (pop. 12.776), Monte S. Giuliano (pop. 8.172), Mussomeli (pop. 9.276), Palazzo Adriano (pop. 4.832), Prizzi (pop. 7.435), S. Stefano la Quisquina (pop. 5.486), Sciacca (pop. 11.514), Termini (pop. 14.150) and on the island of Pantelleria (pop. 6.000). All the data related to the population are taken from *Statuti dell'amministrazione civile in Sicilia* (Stamperia Reale, Palermo, 1821) and refer to the census taken in 1798; further information about the census can be found also in the work by F. MAGGIORE-PERNI (1897), *La popolazione di Sicilia e di Palermo nel secolo XIX*, Stabilimento tipografico Virzi, Palermo, pp. 6-11.

²³ The six schools of *Val Demone* (pop. 471.937) were located in Messina (pop. 44.053), Gangi (pop. 9.352), Mistretta (pop. 8.050), Randazzo (pop. 4.487), Santa Lucia (pop. 4.633), S. Angelo di Brolo (pop. 3.641) and on the island of Lipari (pop. 12.483).

²⁴ The eight schools of *Val di Noto* (pop. 396.543) were located in Catania (pop. 45.081), Caltagirone (pop. 19.609) and Siracusa (pop. 16.264); the rest of the institutes was located in

The second phase (the *inertial phase*) is characterized by a moment of stagnation. In fact, the number of schools will not increase and the local government loses interest in founding new institutions due to the concerns regarding the French Revolution. Also, the educational apparatus loses some of its protectors, due to the death of Salvatore Ventimiglia and Viceroy Caramanico in 1795. The new president of the Kingdom of Sicily, Filippo Lopez y Royo, is rather conservative and openly shows his hostility towards De Cosmi and his normal schools. Lopez pursues him legally launching an inquiry on how he managed to finance the schools²⁵.

During this five years, however, the number of schools will remain stable and will not decrease. The records show a slight drop (from 33 to 30) which may be due to a lack of precise data rather than to a specific educational policy²⁶.

The third phase (the *twilight phase*) describes a significant reduction in the number of schools provoked by a series of different causes. To begin with, the decease of De Cosmi lead to the election of a new general superintendent, Antonino Maddalena, who was not as interested in the matter as his predecessor. Furthermore, the *Deputazione degli Studi*, in force as to manage the normal schools from 1814, did not take significant action.

Last but not least, schools financed by local administrations and not by the government suffered from a measure concerning the line-up of a local reserve fund, according to which the spending on education was now elective²⁷; lots of documents shows that this problem damaged seriously the survival of a large number of schools, even if it is difficult to quantify the exact number of the suppressed schools. In 1817, the total number of schools will drop from 33 to 16²⁸.

Aidone (pop. 3.869), Buccheri (pop. 4.198), Pietraperzia (pop. 8.292), Mazzarino (pop. 10.686) and Vizzini (pop. 9.181).

²⁵ Along with conducting an inquiry on normal schools (1795) Lopez y Royo (1728-1811) promoted the issuing of a dispatch from the King (7 May 1795) in order to entrust the management of the schools to a *Deputazione*. ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di mutuo insegnamento* (1796), busta n. 5499. However, such dispatch had no actual effect, also because Lopez y Royo was called back to Naples in 1798. For further information on the rather conflicting outcome of the inquiry, whose truthfulness I doubt, see: ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di mutuo insegnamento* (1796), busta n. 5499.

²⁶ Some small changes happened in *Val di Noto*: the school of Mussomele was shut down and new institutes were founded in Torrenova (pop. 9.234) and Agosta (pop. 9.423). As far as those years are concerned, I was not able to find any information on the schools of Aidone, Pietraperzia, Prizzi and Santa Lucia.

²⁷ The law concerning the “formazione delle congrue” was published in the *Raccolta de' Bills e Decreti de' Parlamenti di Sicilia 1813, 1814, e 1815 per servire di continuazione alla costituzione politica di questo Regno formata l'anno 1812* (1815) per le Stampe di Solli, Palermo, pp. 53-60.

²⁸ Ten schools were located in *Val di Mazzara*, two in *Val Demone* (Messina and Sant'Angelo di Brolo) and four in *Val di Noto* (Catania, Caltagirone, Mazzarino and Vizzini).

All things considered, these three phases highlight a progressive weakening of De Cosmi's original vigorous project.

Unfortunately, the sketchiness of the available data did not permit a systematic verification of the facts concerning, for example, the schools' admission rules²⁹, the regularity and quality of teaching, the qualification and conduct of teachers, the number of enrolments per years, the lessons attendance, the teaching aids, and the conditions of classrooms³⁰.

In addition, I could not find any trace of the *agriculture schools*³¹ and of the *schools for girls* that De Cosmi wanted to establish. In any case, *the documents state that* in 1788 De Cosmi was working at the development of girls' education³² and that the normal method was used in the *Educandario Carolino* of Palermo³³ (the most important institute in Sicily

²⁹ We know, for instance, that such rules were largely ignored in the normal schools of Palermo, dominated by a serious lack of control: "[...] in order to enrol young children of four and five years old", the *Deputazione degli Studi* writes in a letter of 6 August 1814 to the King that the children, "[...] besides being incapable of learning whatsoever, bring confusion and distract older children, and the confusion they create is such [...] that a woman [...] must be present in order to assist them when going to the bathroom, as well as redress them". ASPA, *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione, Registro di consulte* (1808), volume n. 13.

³⁰ The *irregularities* pointed out by anonymous letters and by petitions are numerous and of any kind. The complains mostly concern unauthorized teaching, the occasional presence or the total absence of the teacher from school, and the students' requests for non-authorized boarding costs. It is worth pointing out that there are also extreme situations, such as the case of the island of Pantelleria. In 1802, several detainees worked there illegally as teachers. ASPA, *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione, Registro di consulte* (1795/1814), volume n. 4.

³¹ Besides De Cosmi, several authors such as, especially, Paolo Balsamo urgently demanded for the launch of activities promoting country education. Nonetheless, this plan was never put into effect, to the point that the Intendente of Messina still writes in 1851: "It is of the utmost importance to farm our fruitful fields [...], by means of studying and adopting the most up-to-date methods in order to have better and more economic results: our agriculture must be illuminated, clever [...]. I called your attention to this proposal as an action not to overlook [...]". *Apertura dei Consigli Provinciali dell'anno 1851* (1851), Stab. Tip. Dell'Armonia, Palermo, pp. 96-97.

³² ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1789-93), busta n. 5247.

³³ The admission to the *Educandario*, founded on 2 October 1779, was only restricted to young ladies coming from families which had become noble from at least one hundred years. These girls were educated according to the most severe strict rules, and were trained in the disciplines required to become a perfect wife for an aristocratic consort (*reading; writing; handwriting; Arithmetic; Italian, Latin and French; Geography; History; Music; embroidery*). For further information on the admission rules and on the internal organization of *Educandario Carolino*, which became in 1861 *Educandato Maria Adelaide*, see: the *Avviso ai Signori Nobili che vorranno collocare le loro Figliuole nel Reale Educandario Carolino* (1783), Reale Stamperia, Palermo; *Nuovi statuti dello Educandato Carolino di Palermo* (1840), Stamperia F. Lao, Palermo; *Saggi che le nobili alunne del R. Educandato Carolino sotto la vigilanza del soprintendente sig. marchese Rudini del deputato ecclesiastico mons. Vicario gen. Calcara e della dama ispettrice signora baronessa S. Giuliano in presenza di S. E. il Principe di Satriano Luogotenente generale in Sicilia davano il settembre del 1852* (1852), Stamperia vedova Solli e C.,

that aimed at the education of aristocratic young ladies) in 1811, thanks to Salvatore Graziano, a pupil of De Cosmi³⁴.

Despite being a strongly suggested change, the normal method did not find a proper diffusion among the educational institutions aimed at instructing young girls. In fact, the education for young ladies still remained a prerogative of religious communities (within monasteries, conservatories and St. Mary's Colleges according to Pietro Marcellino Corradini's Rules³⁵), of the *pinzocchere*, also known as *bizzoche* (secular nuns)³⁶ or of private female teachers with a poor education.

Furthermore, it is almost impossible to record the exact number of teachers that founded small private normal schools on approval of De Cosmi. The scant information is not sufficient to establish a clear picture of the situation. However, we know that a large number of teachers were interested in training at the Scuola del Ponticello in Palermo, in order to start their own career.

De Cosmi was in favour of *private teaching*.

He writes in a letter of 23 January 1790 to the Viceroy: "The extension of normal schools demands this particular freedom; in fact, if they would only take into consideration public teachers, there would be fewer than required schools [...]"³⁷.

Palermo; E. BORDIGA (1899), *Cenni storici sul Reale educatorio Maria Adelaide*, Tip. del Giornale di Sicilia, Palermo.

³⁴ ASPA, *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione, Suppliche* (1810/17), busta n. 179.

³⁵ Starting from the first half of the XVIIIth century, the diffusion of *St. Mary's Colleges* in Sicily results from the application to already existing or to-be-founded religious institutions of the *Rules* dictated by Cardinal Corradini for the *Holy Family's College* of Sezze, in the Papal States. For further informations, see: S. AGRESTA (1995), *L'istruzione in Sicilia (1815-1860)*, Samperi, Messina, pp. 145-158; G. BONETTA (1981), *Istruzione e società nella Sicilia dell'Ottocento*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1981, pp. 216-245; L. CAMINITI (2005), *Educare per amor di Dio. I Collegi di Maria tra Chiesa e Stato*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli; S. GUERCIO (1895), *I Collegi di Maria in Sicilia e il Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione*, Tip. Bondi e C., Palermo; M. T. FALZONE (2002), *Le congregazioni religiose femminili nella Sicilia dell'Ottocento*, Caltanissetta, Salvatore Sciascia Editore, Roma, pp. 48-55 e 239-243; C. NARO (1994), *I Collegi di Maria in Sicilia* in AA.VV., *Chiesa e prospettive educative in Italia tra Restaurazione e Unificazione* (a cura di L. Pazzaglia), La Scuola, Brescia, pp. 891-904; C. SINDONI (2012), *La formazione delle maestre* in, S. AGRESTA - C. SINDONI, *Scuole, Maestri e Metodi nella Sicilia borbonica (1817-1860)*, *cit.*, pp. 41-50.

³⁶ As for the role of the *bizzoche* in Southern Italy, see: L. BINNI and M. CAMPANELLI (1979), *Monasteri femminili*, in "L'Archivio Storico Diocesano di Napoli", II, Guida, Napoli; G. BOCCADAMO (1991), *Le bizzoche a Napoli fra '600 e '700*, in "Campania Sacra", 22; L. PALUMBO (1989), *Il massaro, zio prete e la bizzoca: comunità rurali del Salento a metà Settecento*, Congedo, Galatina; G. ROCCA (1992), *Donne religiose. Contributo a una storia della condizione femminile in Italia nei secoli XIX-XX*, Città Nuova, Roma.

³⁷ ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia (1789/93)*, busta n. 5247.

3. The “troubles” in the foundation of “normal schools”

I find necessary to remember that the foundation of normal schools was difficult to put into action, besides the difficulties that I have discussed until now. At the end of XVIIIth century, Sicily was entirely “out of time”. As he reported on the *static* nature of the island, Pontieri wrote: “Now, whomever [...] arrived in Sicily and ascertained its conditions would feel like entering a long abandoned house, its rooms obstructed by broken old furniture, with an overall displeasing appearance”³⁸.

The Sicilian society was rather obsolete and refused changes, hence it is hardly surprising that this kind of education gave rise to serious concern among the *élite* which soon turned against it.

From the point of view of the *baroni*, the new schools were utterly useless. Their opinion was owing to their poor knowledge of the worth of mass instruction, as well as to the desire of guaranteeing their own interests. In fact, they saw normal schools as an unwarranted excuse for taking away the free child labor from their fields.

An anonymous letter to the King states: “Barons did not condescend to build (normal schools) in [...] their territory, because they wanted to keep their subjects ignorant so that they could occasionally exploit this situation [...]”³⁹. This is why the aristocrats strongly opposed the institution of new schools, despite the government’s protection⁴⁰.

Nevertheless, certain members of nobility were culturally conscious and encouraged the study of scientific and humanistic subjects throughout the XVIIIth century. Unfortunately, a small number of them was truly interested in education, while the rest sought after an ideology or flaunted their means. As a matter of fact, buying a “villa” was comparable to promoting culture, since they both increased the *baroni*’s value and influence on the population.

Local governments thwarted the foundation of normal schools as well. Densely populated areas were more interested to an education designed for everyone and, thus, promoted the diffusion of normal schools. This is the case of cities such as Caltanissetta, Termini, Mazzarino and Monreale.

On the contrary, less-populated towns often supported popular education in order to hire their friends and relatives, regardless of their moral and intellectual skills. In some cases, local governments did not

³⁸ E. PONTIERI, *Il tramonto del baronaggio siciliano* (1943), Sansoni, Firenze, p. 229.

³⁹ The letter signed by *Popoli del Regno di Sicilia*, is also addressed to the Viceroy and is kept in ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1790/93), busta n. 5248.

⁴⁰ This attitude clearly arises from what the marquise of Villabianca wrote in his *Diario*. In fact, after visiting the normal schools of Palermo (Sep. 1789), he comments: “[...] it seemed to me [...] such a ridiculous and boasted method [...], the cult of such schools called *normal* that very little or nothing can give to children, whose teachers’ salaries, paid by the King, are entirely misspended [...]”. *Diario palermitano per gli anni 1789 e 1790*, XIV, pp. 64-65. The manuscript is kept in the Biblioteca comunale of Palermo.

hamper the diffusion of normal schools but remained uninterested and unhelpful.

Yet, De Cosmi's major concern was financial support needed to continue the project. Several municipalities did not have enough money to invest in public education or considered school funds as a *luxury tax*. Certain cities even advanced improbable suggestions to raise money. The city of Vittoria, for example, dismissed the coastguards whose task was protecting the water sources from pirates⁴¹, while Petralia Soprana asked brotherhoods for economic supports⁴². As for towns such as Aderò and Lipari, they preferred applying new taxes, respectively to the slaughtering of oxen and to the extraction of pumice-stone⁴³.

The smaller communities populated by humble peasants and shepherds were left out from important decisions and from the opportunity of receiving an education. Neither De Cosmi nor the new regulations enacted by the *Commissione di Pubblica Istruzione* managed to change the destiny of the lower class.

Apart from the financial means of local governments, the dulled and ignorant people disregarded education even if it was their only hope of redemption.

The words *school*, *education* and *literacy* had no meaning to them. Since it was deeply bound to its folklore, its traditional celebrations, its familiar and municipal habits, the people was not entitled to any political authority. In addition, it had the most elementary vision of life; in fact, for common people, as stated by Tomeucci, "everything had to be endured with inevitable resignation"⁴⁴.

De Cosmi was well aware of this situation: "Among the most urgent changes to undergo - he writes in the *Prospetto delle Scuole Normali di Sicilia* - we should intervene on Sicily's poverty, which does not allow the institution of free popular schools for all individuals, both males and females, either in big cities and in small villages". It is necessary, he concludes, that *bread* and the other *vital foodstuff* are not the only reward of people's daily grind⁴⁵.

⁴¹ Letter of De Cosmi of 6 August 1790 to the Viceroy. ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1790-93), busta n. 5248.

⁴² Letter of De Cosmi of 3 October 1790 to the Viceroy. *Ibidem*.

⁴³ ASPA, *Real Segreteria - Incartamenti, Scuole normali di Sicilia* (1792-98), busta n. 5249.

⁴⁴ L. TOMEUCCI (1964), *Genesi del conflitto tra la Sicilia e i Borboni (1734-1816)*, Casa Editrice Riccardo Patron, Bologna, p. 64.

⁴⁵ "Lo squallore, la nudità, la fame, il bisogno generale di tutto - De Cosmi writes - serve a rendere gl'uomini avviliti ed incapaci a tutt'altro che a provvedere all'urgente, e quotidiana miseria. La condizione estremamente povera è un ostacolo invincibile alla formazione sociale della mente e de' sentimenti; toglie il coraggio, impicciolisce lo spirito e lo rende insensibile al dolce senso de' doveri di uomo, di Padre, e di Cittadino, e piuttosto lo porta ad essere violento, rapace, invidioso, [...], solo intento al delitto o alla mendicizia [...]. L'educazione pubblica [...] è un affezione e formazione interiore dello spirito e del costume che si acquista poco a poco, e suppone per base, [...], nelle persone che debbono acquistarla un grado di prosperità che li tenga lontani dalla miseria". G. A. DE COSMI

We must bear in mind that De Cosmi's ideas of education and literacy had not yet become real instruments of emancipation, because he doesn't intend to call into question the *status quo* of the ruling social class. In any case, De Cosmi shows a clear pragmatic didactic purpose in his ambition of empowering the middle and lower classes so as to determine a drastic political and economic change in the Kingdom of Sicily.

However, none of the changes mentioned above were applied in Sicily. As pointed out by Arturo Graf, it is easy to conjecture what fate would have awaited normal schools in Sicily: "school can neither flourish nor bear its best fruits inside a society that shows such little respect and love for it"⁴⁶.

Apart from the results of the research, it stands to reason that, already at the end of the XVIIIth century, the "concept" of school was diffused on the island and that, despite frequent issues, the educational process of literacy had already started.

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