BOOK REVIEW


A steady but fruitful flow of works on Maria Montessori has proliferated within the Italian editorial market, responding to a growing request for texts on the Italian educator. For a time her likeness was featured on the mille lire, the single most circulated Italian bill before the adoption of the euro. Notwithstanding her iconic status, it is only recently that Montessori has come to be known for her actual life and work. The saintly descriptions of her deeds, written by her own disciples, have at last given way to more scientifically rigorous accounts from scholars of different disciplines across the peninsula. These newer texts reveal the complexities of Montessori the woman and pedagogue, shedding light on the principles of her pedagogy as well as the lesser known aspects of her life, such as her collaboration with the fascist regime and her ties to the feminist movement.

As history of psychology Professor Valeria Paola Babini (Babini & Lama, 2000) has pointed out, for decades the only biography of Montessori was Rita Kramer’s (1976) Maria Montessori: A Biography, which provides a thorough contextualization of Montessori and her achievements. The fact that this seminal work has never been translated into Italian, however, indicates the lack of interest that Italian readers have previously had in a nuanced portrait of Montessori. Fortunately, several recent publications are responding to a newfound demand for such a biography. Renato Foschi’s Maria Montessori is undoubtedly part of this new historiographical trend, which claims scholars working from the Opera Nazionale Montessori in Rome, the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) in Amsterdam, and those that participated in the book series on Montessori compiled by Fefè Editore Publishing House (to which Foschi himself contributes).

Foschi’s Maria Montessori is divided into four chapters, three of which delve into her life by citing unpublished material; the fourth explores the principles of Montessori’s educational methodology. Despite this editorial division, the text is more accurately described as being divided into two main parts, which Foschi himself acknowledges in the introduction (p. 15). The first part, consisting of the first three chapters, reconstructs Montessori’s life by drawing from both previous biographies and newly discovered archival material. This biographical introduction serves as a historical background to the solid contextualization of her pedagogical methodology that follows, and which constitutes the text’s most innovative contribution to the field of Montessori studies. Within this second part (which is solely comprised of the much longer fourth chapter), Foschi explores the foundations of Montessori’s pedagogy and its relevance to the contemporary educational debate.

Foschi’s biography of Montessori does not cover every phase of her life equally. The author begins with the circumstances of Montessori’s educational path, an intricate journey that led her to formulate Il Metodo, the founding text of her pedagogy. Paying tribute to Valeria Paola Babini and Luisa Lama’s (2000) Una Donna Nuova, Foschi attributes great importance to Montessori’s academic and extra-academic formation in turn-of-the-century Rome. He also enriches his description of the years before the publication of her seminal text by highlighting her connections with the Theosophical society, the Freemasons, and more generally, the cultural milieu that surrounded her.
Throughout his depiction of Montessori’s life, Foschi relies on the notion of *histoire croisée*. This methodology aims to overcome purely comparative or transfer studies, instead highlighting strong interconnections between different disciplines. Foschi has previously pointed out the need for such an approach in the study of *fin-de-siècle* Italian psychology (Foschi, 2003). He now provides a similar investigation of Montessori that sees her as a “multiple scientist,” a role that can only be understood if contextualized within the various and often contradictory forces that shaped her historical period (Foschi, 2012, p. 13). In doing so, Foschi expands on the paradigm utilized by Babini and Lama. These two scholars called for a study of Montessori “in context,” particularly the context of turn-of-the-century Italian feminism, in an attempt to resist a long tradition of seeing her work as the “novel product of a single woman’s creative genius” (Holmes, 1912, p. xix). Foschi’s Montessori, by contrast, comes out as a figure at the crossroads of numerous forces, profoundly influenced by various disciplines, all of which contributed to the uniqueness of her pedagogical thinking.

The complexity of the pedagogue’s life has often forced authors to condense certain aspects and dwell heavily on others. While Foschi’s text presents an exhaustive depiction of Montessori’s life, one that draws on his significant previous work *Casa dei Bambini* (Foschi, 2008), he does linger on two main points: Montessori’s interest in Catholicism, and her departure from her collaboration with the fascist regime. Both sections are based upon archival material the author found respectively at the Generalate Archive of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM), and at the Archivio Centrale di Stato (ACS), both in Rome. The digression on Montessori’s collaboration with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary allows Foschi to explore the educator’s ties to Catholicism and the often-convoluted system of political alliances that Montessori created to privilege her own educational system. Building upon *La cura dell’anima in Maria Montessori* (Alatri & De Sanctis, 2011), Foschi assesses the reasons that Montessori modified her methodology to make it more compatible with the principles of Catholic education. The author justifies Montessori’s temporary involvement with the Church as a manifestation of the educator’s well-known pragmatism, or what Foschi describes as an instinct of self-preservation. This issue, which corresponds to my own area of research and which Foschi leaves unsolved, poses the problem of how her political alliances influenced her work, an area that remains ripe for investigation.

Foschi’s biography belongs to a series titled “Fondamenti,” a pun that combines the Italian word for “foundations” with *menti* (minds). In line with the nature of the series, Foschi’s book offers a glossary that defines keywords, many of which refer to pedagogical and historical movements. These terms appear most in the second part of the text, amid the description of the foundational principles of the Montessori method and its ramifications in contemporary pedagogy. It is precisely in this section that Foschi’s solid background in psychological sciences becomes clear, as he provides original perspectives on some topics within the critical history of education, such as the influence of *fissismo*, *teoria lombrosiana*, and *lamarckismo* on the Montessori method. Montessori’s conception of *Il Metodo* is skillfully connected to the complex historical backdrop established in the first half of the book; combined with the glossary, this offers general audiences an invaluable explanation of the Montessori method and its theoretical underpinnings. Foschi links the method to such unexplored currents as esotericism, the social hygiene movement, and most broadly, the “psy sciences.” Foschi’s text is an important reference for Montessori studies, especially for scholars interested in reconstructing the influences that shaped the thought of this seminal pedagogue. Above all, the text is a starting point for those who want to know the genesis and contemporary relevance of Maria Montessori’s work.
REFERENCES


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