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***History of youth work in Italy:  
pluralism as antidote to radicalism  
in a context of fragmentation***

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## **Introduction**

The history of youth work in Italy is mainly the history of association-based youth education outside the school. Following the Second World War, the State began to consider the Third Sector as the main provider of youth work. After the totalitarian systematic State intervention established by the Fascist regime, a pluralistic youth work offered by not-for-profit associations of political parties (mainly on the Left) as well as religious institutions (mostly Catholic) were developed thanks to limited direct public interventions alongside the increasing entrustment of public funded youth centres to the Third Sector. This constituted a policy of non-interference in youth-led spaces together with a tendency to isolate them when considered as excessively critical towards the *status quo*.

### **The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The *Corpo Nazionale dei Giovani Esploratori* (CNGEI) (National Body of Youth Scouts) became the leading secular scout organization supported by the State. It was founded in 1912 on the initiative of Carlo Colombo, a positivist physiologist and hygienist who reinterpreted the educational proposals of Baden-Powell in order to create a paramilitary youth organization, aligned to principles of the military before those of the school (Pisa, 2000).

The early twentieth century also experienced secular pacifist scouting, prior even to the CNGEI. Founded by Francis Vane in November 1910, however, the *Ragazzi Esploratori Italiani* (REI) (Italian Boy Scouts) dissolved after a few years, dismembered between a Catholic wing (merged into a new scout organization) and another that would feed into the nationalistic orientation of the CNGEI scouting movement.

Established in 1916, the *Associazione Scoutistica Cattolica Italiana* (ASCI) (Italian Catholic Scout Association) would take on the characteristic educational aims and methods as proposed by Baden-Powell (development of character, contact with nature, maturation of manual skills, taste for adventure, service to others) and place them in an explicitly *Christian vision* of life and society. Religious instruction (catechism) would therefore form the basis of the educational proposal of Catholic scouting (Trova, 1986).

Youth associations were also promoted by socialist and communist political movements to provide a new space for young people within the new mass parties. The *Federazione Giovanile Socialista* (FGS) (Socialist Youth Federation), for example, was founded in 1907, adhering to the International Socialist Youth, sharing the objectives of pacifist education alongside those of union protection for a growing class of young workers.

### **The Fascist Regime**

The Fascist movement placed youth at the heart of its political programme, with the goal to exploit young people's vitality for an expansionist and militarist national strategy. To this end, the Fascism established a mass youth education in the leisure time,

alongside a gradual suppression or marginalization of the traditional youth associations and the exploitation of school as a mean of ideological indoctrination.

In 1926, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) (National Balilla Action) was founded, the autonomous body with the task of educating young people aged between 8 and 18. On the basis of the rules regulating Fascist Party discipline, the task of the ONB was to pursue a ‘total’ training intervention which would provide “a) a sense of discipline and military education in the young; b) military education; c) gymnastic physical education; d) spiritual and cultural education; e) vocational and technical education” (quoted in Baris, 2011, p. 196).

The phasing out of competing youth organizations represented a specific strategic move that brought about a shifting of young people to the rising Fascist organizations. With the creation of the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL) (Littorio’s Italian Youth) in 1937, direct control by the PNF of all youth organizations was perfected.

A further success factor of the fascist mass youth education can be identified in the ability to create a new widespread network of local educational spaces. Despite their different forms (*Case dei Balilla*, *Case del Gil*, *Case della Giovane Italia*, *Case del Fascio*), these spaces followed a standard architectural pattern (gyms, showers, libraries, cinemas, sports facilities) with the ultimate intent of hosting activities of education, propaganda and political involvement carried forward by the Fascist youth organizations.

## **The post-war reconstruction and the Cold War**

The anti-fascist Resistance and the post-war reconstruction can be considered as a period of intense youth participation in Italy, with a gradual emergence of young people as a “social subject”. Considered by historians as a distinctly youthful choice (Dogliani, 2003; Astolfi, 2011), the Resistance struggle stands as a challenge to the weak active engagement in the public sphere of much of Italian society.

Notable examples of cooperation between young people and adults in reconstruction include the *Brigate Giovanili per la Ricostruzione* (Youth Brigades for the Reconstruction) promoted by the *Fronte della Gioventù per l’Indipendenza Nazionale* (FGD) (Youth Front for the National Independence), an anti-fascist youth organization born out of the Resistance open to both secular and Catholic associationism. Between 1945 and 1946 the Youth Brigades “were engaged in works of public utility and returning study and leisure spaces to their peers” (Dogliani, 2003, p. 181), following the “Republics” model promoted by the Allies such as communities self-managed by the young, designed to care for children orphaned by the war.

However, the spirit of social cohesion promoted by the FGD crushed under the influence of the Cold War, thus entering into competition with the Catholic youth education organisations. An emblematic example of such political and cultural conflicts is represented by the establishment of the *Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana* (ARCI) (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association), an organization that would involve an increasing number of young people, particularly from the late 1960s. Such involvement would develop in the face of an attitude of hostility from the Catholic party DC over the influence of the left in local workers’ clubs of the *Ente Nazionale Assistenza ai Lavoratori* (ENAL) (National Body for the Assistance to Workers), the

organisation that had inherited the assets and functioning of the *Opera Nazionale Lavoro* (ONL) (National Action for Work) programme from the Fascist regime (Degl'Innocenti, 2012).

## **From the 1960s to the early 21st Century**

Avoiding any possible sources of inter-generational conflict seemed to be one of the main concerns of the new democratic order. Historians describe the 1950s as a period of “darkness, conformist and hierarchical in relations between the sexes, between classes, between generations; young people were repressed in their customs, sexuality and divided in culture” (Dogliani, 2003, p. 182).

In this climate, young people began to claim the right to be recognized as an active “social subject”. Inspired by new cultural stimuli from over the Alps (American youth lifestyle, English writers depicted as *Angry Young Men*), an emerging “youth culture” contributed to the process of secularization of the Italian culture.

The student protest during the late 1960s was an expression of the generational divide arisen during the previous decade, while political parties, governments, the family, the school and economic powers showed little sign of willingness to change still dominant norms or traditional values. Anti-authoritarianism became the watchword of this new culture, where institutions (above all schools) came to be seen as agents of the reproduction “of bourgeois values such as authority, order, meritocracy, respectability” (Dal Toso, 1995, p. 85).

The climate of violence that would follow during the 1970s as well as the sense of failure of the ideals pursued by the youth movement of 1968 also pushed youth associations towards a cultural shift from the “transcendent” (political or religious) to the “secularity”. However, sociological studies have highlighted how the value of identity based on a specific ideology continued to act as a factor of selectivity and enclosure during the 1980s (Dal Toso, 1995).

## **The beginnings of a public policy in the youth sector**

Following the attempt of Fascism to create a system of mass youth education, during the Second World War educational activities conducted outside of school returned mainly to the sphere of associations. Direct intervention of the State would resume between the 1970s and 1980s in the social policies of local authorities, focusing on preventive or reparative areas of youth issues (Bazzanella 2010). This occurred, for example, with the *Progetti Giovani* (Youth Projects) and, soon after, with the *Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile* (CAG) (Youth Aggregation Centers) funded by Law 285/1997 (*Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence*).

Educational work in these new public youth centres appears predominantly focused towards objectives of prevention and control of youth problems, according to the notion that young people should primarily be supported during their transition to adulthood.

A phase of youth policy more oriented toward objectives of youth empowerment and emancipation was launched in Italy in 2006 with the establishment of the first Ministry of Youth and the creation of a national fund for youth policies. Increased powers

granted to the Regions in the field of youth policy also stimulated new programming directed towards overcoming the fragmentation and localism of educational work in youth centres or in the voluntary sector at a municipal level.

This new season has led to financing the development of new public youth spaces under Third Sector management such as the *Laboratori Urbani Giovanili* (Youth Urban Labs) in Puglia (Morciano et al., 2013; Morciano 2015a), *Visioni Urbane* (Urban Vision) in Basilicata and the *Officine dell'arte* (Art Lab) in Lazio. These new experiences of *centre-based youth work*, however, are currently faced with the drastic cuts to the public funding dedicated to youth policies. Indeed, following the allocation of €130 million during the first two years (2006-2007), the National Fund for Youth Policy budget has steadily decreased reaching €13 million in 2014. Furthermore, the Ministry of Youth was abolished in 2011 thus ushering in the present situation of a weak focus on youth policies.

The ongoing challenge for these new youth centres, therefore, is that of breaking away from a dependence on public funding through the diversification of finance sources (the sale of products or services, identifying donors and sponsors, public commissioning, crowdfunding etc.), while avoiding management geared towards the market thus putting at risk their social mission.

The lack of national support goes alongside a general framework of a legislative *vacuum* in national youth policy, including any public regulation of the specific professional figure of the youth educator. The creation of a professional youth worker whose youth training and certification is regulated by the State on the basis of specific accreditation systems seems a challenge that the various associations and youth centres in Italy are still struggling to grasp (Bazzanella 2010; Dunne et al. 2014).

## **From history to nowadays**

In the religious sphere, the most widely disseminated educational spaces in Italy are currently Catholic parish oratories, where religious education is combined with recreational activities and initiatives in social volunteering. Specific areas dedicated to the education of adolescents and young people are found within *Azione Cattolica* (AC) (Catholic Action), the oldest catholic association in Italy (founded in 1867), present in almost every diocese (219 of 226), with 360,000 members. The largest scout association in Italy AGESCI is also of explicit Catholic orientation, with more than 180,000 members. Conversely, the CNGEI is explicitly anchored to the principles of secularism and now numbers 12,000 members<sup>2</sup>.

While scout organizations and catholic youth associations are traditionally oriented by personal development or character building objectives, the ARCI is one of the largest national secular networks of reformist cultural spaces engaged on a political and social level. In 2011, it counted 4,987 local branches, of which 21% were youth associations (1,020) (Monticelli, Pincella and Bassoli, 2011). Explicitly educational associations involving teenagers and young people also include *Arciragazzi*, founded in 1983 and federated with ARCI. *Arciragazzi* has around 80 affiliated clubs in almost all Italian

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<sup>2</sup> [www.cngei.it](http://www.cngei.it)

regions, in addition to ten social cooperatives for the management of foster homes for children and adolescents, educational services and training<sup>3</sup>.

The youth culture of opposition towards institutions and criticism of the dominant models of economic development from the 1970s to today has found one of its main areas of continuity in self-managed social centres. Peculiar features of these spaces include self-management, autonomy from institutions, employment and re-use of public spaces for activities ranging from cultural production to social commitment.

## Conclusion

Except for the unique youth education system created by the Fascism, youth work in Italy has never been part of an organic public policy at national level. Resistance would seem nourished by two key events apparently not yet metabolised: from one hand, the totalitarian projects of the Fascist Regime and its experiment of State mass youth education; on the other hand, the student protest of the 1968 and the inability of the State to mediate its claim for change.

The tendency to support a pluralistic private offer of association-based youth work appeared, therefore, to provide a way to prevent the risk of exposing public institutions to new totalitarian youth education political programmes such as that created by Fascism. On the other hand, the public funding of youth work spaces or projects managed by private associations from the early 1980s seems also as a strategy to contain those forces of youth protest inherited from the youth movements of 1960s, having repressed their violent expression during the so-called *Years of Lead* (the 1970s).

After the youth education system developed by the Fascism, the only direct State intervention in the youth work field in Italy has been mainly established within the local welfare policies, thus focusing on the prevention of youth problems.

Neither the public intervention, nor the incentives of European Commission and the Council of Europe seem to have yet generated a thrust strong enough to identify a possible convergence for the profession of the youth worker in terms of skills, an ethical-value base, specific outcomes and working process, professional and educational standards (Morciano and Scardigno, 2014).

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### ***Appendix: acronyms in text***

- API:** Associazione Pionieri d'Italia (Pioneers Association of Italy)
- ARCI:** Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association),
- ASCI:** Associazione Scoutistica Cattolica Italiana (Italian Catholic Scout Association)
- CAG:** Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile (Youth Aggregation Centers)
- CNGEI:** Corpo Nazionale dei Giovani Esploratori (National Body of Youth Scout)
- DC:** Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy)
- ENAL:** Ente Nazionale Assistenza ai Lavoratori (National Body for the Assistance too Workers)
- FDG:** Fronte della Gioventù per l'Indipendenza Nazionale (Youth Front for the National Independence)
- FGC:** Federazione Giovanile Comunista (Comunist Youth Federation)
- FGS:** Federazione Giovanile Socialista (Socialist Youth Federation),
- FOI:** Forum Nazionale Oratori (Oratories National Forum)
- GIAC:** Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (Italian Youth for Catholic Action)
- GIL:** Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (Littorio's Italian Youth)
- GUF:** Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (Fascist University Groups)
- ONB:** Opera Nazionale Balilla (National Balilla Action)
- ONL:** Opera Nazionale Lavoro (National Action for Work)
- REI:** Ragazzi Esploratori Italiani (Italian Boy Scout)
- UISP:** Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti (Italian Union Sport for All)