"Lessons in Nationhood: Power, Gender, and Schooling in Post-Unification Southern Italy"

This paper expands on research presented at the 13th Annual International Conference on Humanities & Arts in a Global World, analyzing the relationship between state power, ideology, and public education in post-Unification Southern Italy. Focusing on the former province of Terra d'Otranto, it examines an area marked by illiteracy, economic backwardness, and clerical influence. Based on extensive bibliographic and archival sources—official correspondence, ministerial circulars, school regulations, and inspection reports—the study reconstructs both the legislative framework and its local implementation, revealing tensions between reform and reality. The paper investigates how the newly unified state sought to centralize, secularize, and standardize education through the Casati (1859) and Coppino (1877) laws, introducing compulsory schooling and reducing Church control. Yet, poor funding and municipal responsibility led to uneven application. A key focus is the rivalry between state schools and unauthorized religious institutions, especially those run by female congregations such as the Daughters of Charity. Promoting domestic and devotional education, these schools contrasted with the state's civic and national aims. Ultimately, the study shows that education in Terra d'Otranto became a contested arena where state authority, local culture, and gender norms intersected—anticipating dynamics later intensified under Fascism.

Introduction

The Italian unification of 1861 represented not only a political and territorial process but, above all, a complex cultural and identity-building enterprise. The newly founded national state, charged with the mission of "making Italians," identified the school as a privileged instrument for shaping a shared civic consciousness, transmitting the values of liberal patriotism, and consolidating the idea of belonging to a unified nation. However, this ambitious project of building national consensus clashed with a deeply unequal reality, marked by economic and cultural divides between North and South, as well as by a rigid patriarchal conception of social roles.

In Southern Italy, a territory long dominated by the Bourbon dynasty, the post-unification school system became a field of tension between modernity and tradition, between state secularism and clerical resistance, between egalitarian aspirations and the persistence of a social order grounded in female subordination. The Bourbon school system itself epitomized this inequality, while widespread poverty further delayed—or even prevented—the implementation of essential public literacy initiatives. The educational laws enacted during the first decades of unified Italy — from the Casati Law (1859) to the Coppino Law (1877) — introduced seemingly progressive principles such as free and compulsory elementary education, yet delegated their enforcement to municipalities, thereby exacerbating territorial disparities. In the agrarian and impoverished South,

lacking both adequate infrastructure and an educated middle class, mass literacy remained a distant and scarcely attainable goal.

Within this context, the question of female education acquired an emblematic significance. While new legislation formally acknowledged the right of girls to education, school curricula and ministerial directives continued to promote a subordinate educational model, aimed at forming "good mothers and housewives" rather than conscious citizens. The separation of sexes in schools, the introduction of *"lavori donneschi"* (needlework) as a compulsory subject, and the exclusion of female teachers from political responsibility all contributed to perpetuating a patriarchal educational order which, beneath the appearance of liberal modernity, reproduced ancient forms of domination—further reinforced in the South by deep-rooted superstition and traditionalism.

This article therefore examines the impact of educational reforms within the nascent post-unification state, focusing in particular on the difficulties surrounding their implementation in the South, and more specifically in the former province of Terra d'Otranto—a now-defunct historical region encompassing today's provinces of Taranto, Brindisi, and Lecce. Through the analysis of archival sources — ministerial circulars, examination records, inspection reports, and administrative correspondence — emerges the image of a school system which, despite presenting itself as a laboratory of citizenship, lacked both the strength and the will to dismantle entrenched moral and professional boundaries between men and women, between citizens and subjects, between North and South.

These disparities, exacerbated by weak legislation and reforms that were never consistently applied—since they failed to account for the endemic conditions inherited from the various pre-unification states—resulted in a severe delay in the literacy of both adults and children. Consequently, the formation of modern citizens was hindered, paving the way for the dictatorship that would later define Italy in the 1920s.

"At the Origins of the Italian School System: The Casati Law and the Question of Female Education"

The process of Italian unification — slow and arduous — culminated on March 17, 1861, when King Victor Emmanuel II proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy. With regard to the state of public education in the newly unified nation, a circular issued by Luigi Settembrini, Inspector General of Studies, on June 10, 1861, offers a picture that was anything but encouraging:

"I feel it my duty to say a few serious words to the newly formed municipalities concerning primary education. And first of all, here is the current condition of our country. Localities where, according to the former law, instruction was to be provided — that is, towns and villages taken together —

number 3,094; localities lacking any form of instruction number 1,084, of which 920 lack education for girls and 91 for boys". [1]

This stark report reveals the alarming state of illiteracy that characterized post-unification Italy and underscores the urgent need for a coherent national educational policy capable of addressing both geographic and gender disparities.

The authorities were fully aware of the gravity of this situation: "Each of us knows, and by simply looking around can see, the vile and miserable condition of popular education; each of us says and repeats that it is not a matter of reforming it, for it does not exist at all, but of creating it. Everyone desires it, awaits it, even demands it; and it seems an eternity before we see schools established with good teachers instructing hundreds of boys and girls, teaching them to read, write, count, and learn other necessary and useful notions. Everyone feels that popular schools are the foundation of liberty, and that wherever the people cannot read, whatever form of government may exist, they are always slaves, and freedom is always in danger." [2] This impassioned appeal — a lucid acknowledgment of the country's educational backwardness — captures the urgency that animated the first post-unification debates on schooling. Education was thus conceived not merely as a moral or intellectual duty, but as the indispensable foundation of civic freedom and national progress.

To worsen this already dire situation, one must not overlook the reactionary and patriarchal attitudes that underestimated both the importance and the urgency of establishing an adequate system of female education—one not confined merely to the learning of sewing and embroidery. The newly unified State inherited its framework for compulsory education for children of both sexes from a law already in force in the Kingdom of Sardinia, a law that proved far from effective in addressing the plague of illiteracy in the nascent Kingdom of Italy. This law was the Casati Law, enacted in 1859.

The law of November 13, 1859, No. 3725—bearing the name of Gabrio Casati, then Minister of Education of the Kingdom of Piedmont—constitutes the *de facto* birth certificate of the Italian educational system. Through this law, the government sought to address a series of urgent and immediate problems which would soon become, by extension, the very challenges of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy, namely: 1) to unify an extremely fragmented state school system; 2)to remove the Catholic Church's hegemony over education and instruction; 3) to create a middle class, almost entirely absent at the time, in order to establish a bureaucratic, administrative, military, and ideological elite[3].

With the Casati Law, a clear distinction was established between the various levels of education, both higher and elementary, which can be summarized in four main divisions: 1)Higher Education – This was provided in the universities and was organized into five faculties: Theology, Law, Medicine, Physical,

[1]Archivio di Stato di Brindisi ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 12, b. 1, fasc. 1. "Archivio di Brindisi" corresponds to: "Archives of the Municipality of Brindisi", and "Archivio Storico del Comune di Brindisi" corresponds to: "Historical Archives of the Municipality of Brindisi".
[2]*Ibidem*.
[3]Cf. G. Natale, *La Scuola in Italia, dal 1859 ai decreti delegati*, Mazzotta, Milano, 1975, pp.13-18.

Mathematical and Natural Sciences, and Philosophy and Letters. Its primary objective was to train the new ruling class of the Kingdom. 2)Secondary Education – This was divided into two branches: classical and technical. The classical branch comprised two levels: a five-year ginnasio (junior high school) followed by a three-year liceo (senior high school). The technical branch was also divided into two levels, each lasting three years: the technical school (free of charge) and the technical institute. 3)Normal School (Scuola Normale) – This institution was responsible for training male and female teachers and had a three-year curriculum. The first two years qualified graduates to teach in the lower elementary grades, while completion of the full three-year course granted qualification to teach in the upper elementary grades. 4)Elementary Education – This was free of charge and divided into two levels, lower and upper, each lasting two years. In the lower level, which was compulsory, students were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and religious instruction. The upper level introduced basic notions of geography, national history, and physical and natural sciences[4]. Essentially, as F. V. Lombardi observes, *"the fundamental principles of the law, insofar as elementary education was concerned, were essentially two:*

a. *elementary education is free of charge and is provided by the State through the municipalities;*
b. *attendance at this school is compulsory, but limited to the lower level.*"[5]

School Curricula

The Casati Law thus appeared, at least on paper, to be at the forefront of European educational reform, insofar as it established both the obligation and gratuitousness of attendance. However, it placed the burden of administration and maintenance entirely on the individual municipalities of the Kingdom, without verifying whether they possessed the means to fulfill such duties. This structural flaw led, in practice, to widespread non-compliance with the law.

A noteworthy aspect of the new educational system of the Kingdom of Italy was the persistence of gender-based distinctions within both school curricula and institutions—though to a considerably lesser extent than under the former Bourbon regime. In fact, only one formal distinction in curricula based on sex remained, as stated in Article 315 of the Casati Law: "To the subjects mentioned above shall be added, in the upper boys' schools, the elementary notions of geometry and linear drawing; in the girls' schools, needlework." [6]

To this programmatic distinction was added a possible physical separation between pupils based on sex, through the establishment of male and female schools, in which even the teachers were divided accordingly: men taught boys and women taught girls. The so-called "unified schools," that is, mixed schools,

[4]Ivi, pp.18-20.
[5]F.V. Lombardi, I Programmi per la Scuola Elementare dal 1860 al 1985, La Scuola, Brescia, 1987, cit. p. 8.
[6]Cf. G. Natale, *La Scuola in Italia*…, pp. 18-20.

were rare, reflecting a society that remained deeply sexualized and rigidly divided along gender lines.

In unified Italy, the realms of "knowing" and "doing" failed to intertwine and to provide a form of education capable of holding these two competencies together. This integration proved even more difficult in the female sphere: it was inconceivable to propose an education for the future women of Italy that would exclude the "specialization of a craft", confining them to simple workshops and thereby denying them access to both general and specialized cultural instruction[7]; Indeed, it was the ministerial directives themselves that stated as much: "For the greater number of women, intellectual culture must have as its almost sole purpose domestic life, and the acquisition of those forms of knowledge required for the proper management of the household, of which they are to be both the support and the ornament."[8]

With regard to the school curricula, these were outlined class by class and, within each class, subject by subject. In terms of content, the programs were divided into three main subjects: Religion, Italian Language, and Arithmetic. In the upper elementary sections, a fourth subject, Reading, was added, which encompassed all the other subjects listed in Article 315 of the Casati Law[9].

When presenting, at first, a general overview of the elementary curriculum, particular importance was assigned to the Italian language. In the years immediately following the Casati Law, very few teachers were able to speak Italian correctly. For this reason — as Lombardi notes — "with regard to teaching methods, reference was made essentially to the models used for the teaching of Latin, that is, from grammar to language, rather than from language to grammar.""[10]. In short, for the Italian language, the didactic approach to be followed was that of imitation, whereas for Mathematics, in the first two grades, instruction was limited to oral and written calculations up to 100. In the second grade, pupils progressed to division with two-digit divisors; in the third, to complete mastery of division; and in the fourth, to the study of proportions and the rule of three[11].

Focusing on the teaching of Religion, instruction began with catechism lessons on the principal mysteries of the faith in the lower grades, progressing in the subsequent classes to the Diocesan Catechism and to narratives from the Old and New Testaments[12]. The teaching of Religion was provided by the teachers and was held in particular esteem by the clergy, as evidenced by a letter addressed to the Mayor of Brindisi on July 3, 1884:"Having completed the task entrusted to me by Your Honour to attend the religion examinations given by the pupils of these elementary schools, I am pleased to express my satisfaction with

[7]Cf. S. Soldani, *L'educazione delle donne; Scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell' Ottocento*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1989.

[8]This directive can be found in the guidelines concerning the implementation of the curricula, issued by Royal Decree of 15 September 1860, under the section titled "Female Schools" [Scuole femminili].

[9]Cf. F.V. Lombardi, *I Programmi per la Scuola Elementare dal 1860 al 1985*…, pp. 10-12.

[10]Ivi, cit. pp. 10-11.

[11]Ivi, p. 11.

[12]*Ibidem*.

the manner in which this most important subject of the educational programme was carried out during the past school year. […] In stating this, and knowing how deeply the moral and educational instruction of the youth of our homeland lies at your heart, I take the liberty of urging you to remain ever vigilant so that religious instruction may continue in the future to form part of that patrimony of conscience imparted in our schools"[13].

The curricula for the first-year elementary classes, both lower and upper sections, as stipulated in the Regulations of 15 September 1860, are reproduced below[14]:

First Grade – Lower Section	First Grade – Upper Section
Religion. Oral catechism lessons on the principal mysteries of the faith, delivered by the teacher.	*Religion.* Catechism lessons on the principal mysteries of the faith; very brief stories from Sacred History corresponding to the aforementioned catechism lessons.
Italian Language. Graded exercises in syllabication; explanation of the words read; formation of letters, syllables, and words through imitation; writing of dictated words composed of simple syllables.	*Italian Language*. Graded exercises in syllabication and fluent reading from the textbook; explanation of vocabulary and of the sentences contained therein; writing through imitation; progressive dictation exercises; practical rules of orthography.
Arithmetic. Numeration, mental addition and subtraction up to 20; recognition and formation of Arabic numerals.	*Arithmetic.* Mental calculation exercises involving the four basic operations; written exercises in numeration, addition, and subtraction up to 100; memory exercises.

Although the school curricula did not take the sex of the pupils into account — thereby eliminating the severe distinctions that had previously characterized children's education in the various states of the peninsula, including, as we have seen, the Bourbon Kingdom — a rigid differentiation of social roles between males and females nevertheless remained firmly in place, imposed by a patriarchal society with the approval of the State.

Technical and mathematical subjects, for instance, were always to be related to domestic roles: "Similarly, in arithmetic, instead of examples wholly unrelated to women's occupations, preference should be given to those referring to cases of domestic economy, to expenses, to ordinary tasks and matters pertaining to household life. For this reason, it is not advisable to dwell too much on notions of geometry, but rather to be content with clear and easily learned definitions and with the simplest applications of the principles of the science to familiar objects,

[13]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 4, b.1, fasc. 1. letter signed by Fr. Taliento and addressed to the Mayor of Brindisi, dated 3 July 1884.

[14]For the complete list of ministerial curricula, see F.V. Lombardi, *I Programmi delle Scuole elementari dal 1860 al 1985…* pp. 17-20.

and above all, to drawing."[15]; the subject standardized by the Casati Law for girls — "needlework" — effectively helped to shape a State-driven society of a patriarchal and sexualized character.

The Needle and the Pen: Female Education in Post-Unification Italy

As already noted, Article 315 of the Casati Law listed a series of sub-subjects to be taught to pupils, among which were "needlework". What kind of skills were expected from the future mothers of Italy? No official directives in this regard can be found either in the circulars related to the curricula to be taught or in the ministerial guidelines. However, by examining the minutes of elementary school final examinations dated 1904 and 1905, it is possible to gain an idea of what these activities entailed, since they include a description of the tests the female pupils had to perform in their needlework examination.

Each young candidate was required to demonstrate mastery of the following sewing techniques: 1) basting stitch (*impuntura*); 2) running stitch (*punto filza*); 3) overcast stitch (*punto sopraggitto*); 4) hemstitch (*orlo a giorno*); 5) stem stitch (*punto ad erba*); 6) buttonhole stitch (*occhiello*)[16].

It is worth noting that, although the right and duty of women to be educated had by then been formally recognized by law, the prejudices and impositions typical of patriarchal society nevertheless persisted. In fact, in the section *"General Instructions"* concerning the implementation of the curricula approved by the Royal Decree of 1860, under the heading *"Female Schools,"* one reads: "Although the Law has made no distinction between the curricula of female and male schools, and therefore the quality and distribution of the subjects to be taught are the same, particular attention should nevertheless be paid to the special direction that girls require, so that instruction may be entirely suited to their condition."

There thus emerged a decidedly paradoxical reality, in which the Italian State, despite its modern and secular inspiration, formally committed itself to lifting women out of ignorance while at the same time reserving for them a predetermined destiny.

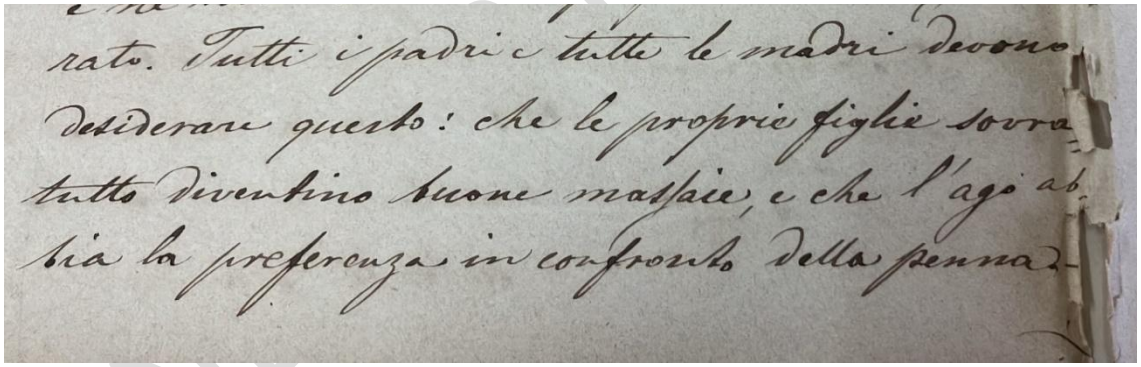
A demonstration of the foresight and modern spirit of the newly founded Italian State can be found in a circular issued by the Delegate for Public Education in Apulia, a certain Rachelli, who, in the months immediately following the creation of the Kingdom of Italy, emphasized the State's new commitment to education: "Italy will be neither powerful nor at peace if the people do not come to know themselves and do not exercise their rights with full awareness. Therefore, to spread Elementary Schools throughout these provinces shall be our foremost concern (…) Nor, in this pursuit of the public good, should

[15]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 4, b.1, fasc. 1

[16]Archivio Storico di Lecce (ASL), *Orfanotrofio San Francesco (poi Istituto Margherita di Savoia)*, Busta 112, Fascicolo 872. "Esami di licenza". Archivio Storico di Lecce" corresponds to: "Archives of the Municipality of Lecce".

we forget about women. Let schools for them also be opened, everywhere; and let those foolish prejudices, born of servitude, finally fall—those which condemn the angel of the family to ignorance and exclude her from the true benefits of civil life"[17].

Nevertheless, a male-dominated and patriarchal policy continued to persist in Italy over time, as evidenced by a report written by De Leo, Director of the *Ginnasio* of Brindisi, to the city's mayor, Filomeno Consiglio, dated 31 March 1878. In it, he wrote: "In transmitting to Your Most Illustrious Honour the summary tables of the semi-annual examinations, I feel it my duty to add only a few considerations, rather than dwell on a detailed and minute account of the progress of the male and female elementary schools which I have the honour to oversee (…) As for the girls' schools (…) Although these institutions deserve praise for their literary instruction, it seems to me that they leave something to be desired with regard to needlework. Yet even this deficiency could be easily remedied if the lady teachers, at the beginning of the school year, were to meet, discuss their curricula, and divide proportionally, for each grade, the instruction to be provided, and if, at the final examinations, a rigorous evaluation were carried out. In this way, this branch of instruction would proceed in perfect order, and I am certain that progress would be assured. Every father and every mother should desire above all that their daughters become good housewives, and that the needle take precedence over the pen"[18].


rato. Tutti i padri e tutte le madri devono
desiderare questo: che le proprie figlie sovra-
tutto diventino buone massaie, e che l'ago ab-
bia la preferenza in confronto della penna.

Source: ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 6, b.1, fasc. 1.

Moreover, as Professor Simonelli reports in her book *"L'educazione delle donne"* (*"The Education of Women"*), an inspector from the Ministry of Public Education, writing toward the end of the nineteenth century after inspecting no fewer than 291 female institutions in central Italy — including charitable schools (*Opere pie*) — stated that: "The working-class woman understands by 'school' nothing other than the place where work and religious practices are taught with the greatest attention, caring little for study, which she so mistakenly considers

[17]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 6, b.1, fasc. 1.
[18]*Ibidem*.

superfluous and almost a waste of time"[19]. In short: "the needle had by then established itself as the privileged medium and the almost obligatory counterpart of the alphabet in all its possible forms. Elementary, teacher training, and normal schools; technical and vocational institutes; conservatories and colleges, boarding schools and seminaries, shelters and orphanages, almshouses and charitable institutions of every kind — all presented themselves in the eyes of the public as united in a <<*bundle of lace, white embroidery, silk and gold needlework pressed behind glass display cases*>>"[20].

From Servitude to Education: The School as a Laboratory of Citizenship

With the Casati Law, the Italian State launched a battle against illiteracy. The determination to combat this scourge was not merely a moral imperative but rather an authentic effort to promote the development of productive capitalism throughout the country. The South, being almost exclusively agricultural in nature, failed to grasp the importance and urgency of this transformation; consequently, economic development there progressed much more slowly than in the North.

As Massimo d'Azeglio famously declared, *"Having made Italy, we must now make the Italians."* For this reason, the State pursued policies aimed at forming a middle class, with the specific goal of creating future administrative and managerial figures for the productive sectors and the circulation of goods, relying on the newly established and innovative State school system to achieve this end[21].

The Inspector of Public Education in Terra d'Otranto, Giambattista Macerella, wrote on 18 December 1862 words that were both new and significant for a former Bourbon subject: "The son of the people is, above all, our son. The virtues that strengthen the family must live in our schools; religious sentiments, and the ideas of national independence, liberty, order, respect for persons and for property, and all the other virtues that make a citizen worthy of living in a free country, must find their foundation and their beginning in our schools"[22]; It will not go unnoticed that, for the first time, a layman had been appointed to a role which for centuries had belonged exclusively to the religious sphere.

What, then, were the conditions that the Italian Government faced in the aftermath of unification with regard to the illiteracy of its subjects? The table below summarizes the illiteracy rates in Italy in the year of unification and during the following ten years.

[19]S. Soldani, Il Libro e la Matassa, scuole per "Lavori Donneschi" nell'Italia da Costruire, in S. Soldani, *L'educazione delle donne; Scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1989, cit. p. 88.
[20]Ivi, p. 110.
[21]Cf. G. Natale, *La scuola in Italia*..., pp 28-29.
[22]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 8, b.1, fasc. 3.

ILLITERATES PER 100 INHABITANTS AGED SIX YEARS AND OVER

YEARS	1861	1871
North	67,0	61,9
South	87,1	84,2
Italy	74,7	68,8

Source: SVIMEZ, Un secolo di statistiche italiane: Nord e Sud, Roma, in G.Natale, La scuola in Italia dal 1859 ai decreti delegati, 1975, p.29.

In particular, in the province of Terra d'Otranto, illiteracy affected nearly 92% of women and 85% of men[23].

As for the qualifications required of teachers, under the Bourbon Kingdom the education and instruction of children were an exclusive prerogative of the clergy, since popular education was considered part of their pastoral duties. Moreover, it goes without saying that instruction was reserved almost entirely for boys. The Kingdom of Italy, by contrast, brought a genuine wave of modernity to the educational sector, introducing a series of entirely new requirements and procedures into the stagnant political landscape of the South.

The first changes concerning the qualifications required of teachers were announced by the Prefect and President of the School Council, Murgia, who, through the posting of public notices, referred to Articles 29 and 30 of the Law-Decree of January 7, 1861, according to which: "Private elementary teachers are required to possess the same qualifications demanded of public school teachers, namely, the certificate of professional competence and the certificate of good moral and political conduct"[24]; it is worth noting not only the opening of the teaching profession to the secular world, but also the requirement of a formal qualification for teaching, regardless of one's personal condition. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that good religious conduct, once an indispensable criterion for teachers under the Bourbon regime, had now become entirely irrelevant for the new instructors. However, in the unified State, teachers were required to present a certificate of good political conduct, whereas female teachers were exempt from this obligation, since women were excluded from the right to vote—a condition that would persist throughout the duration of the monarchy[25].

Schools Without Walls: The Crisis of School Infrastructure in Post-Unification Southern Italy

"It is now up to the Municipality to do its part — and it is the principal part — for primary education belongs entirely to the Municipality. […] You will say to me: *And the funds? How can we pay even the minimum — five hundred francs a year for each teacher?* And I reply: *You must find the funds yourselves.* When you are firmly convinced that education is the true guarantee of liberty and of

[23]AA. VV, *Figlie, spose, madri, Testimonianze di vita quotidiana. Brindisi, 1860-1915*, Soroptimist International Club, Brindisi, 1990, cit. p. 53.
[24]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 10, b.1, fasc. 1.
[25]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 6, b.1, fasc. 1.

Italy's future; when you truly desire this sacred and necessary goal, you will also find the means to achieve it. If it is impossible to impose a new municipal tax (which, in such a grave case, would nonetheless be justified), one can at least save and cut expenses from less necessary items.

The Law states that if a municipality is truly poor, the Province, and even the State, will contribute to the expenses for primary instruction; but if you rely on the funds that the Province or the State may provide, you will have popular education only very late, and very little of it. […] You who are well-off citizens and who love your homeland — if your municipality is poor, join together, collect a few ducats each month, enough to pay at least a schoolmaster and a schoolmistress, who will educate not only the children of the poor, but your own children as well. Instead of spending money on festivals, fireworks, illuminations, and other village vanities, perform a deed more pleasing to God and more blessed by men: spend that money on education, found a school. Let one of you provide a couple of rooms, another supply some wood, and the blacksmith will make the benches on which his own children will sit; whoever can, let him give some money, or grain, or legumes — whatever he can. Every stone is useful for the building; every offering is welcome. When there is love of country, great things can indeed be achieved with small means. […] Poor municipalities must not believe that, because they lack money, they are exempt from obligation: their duty is all the greater, and it is a moral obligation. They must therefore strive, as best and as soon as they can, to bring to the people this blessing of schools"[26] ; This circular by the Inspector General of Studies, Luigi Settembrini, issued only a few months after Italian unification, shows how the State, in practice, placed the urgent responsibility for children's literacy entirely on the municipalities of the Kingdom — municipalities that, especially in the South, relied on an agricultural economy for their survival.

The Casati Law, in fact, established that elementary schools were to be managed by the municipalities, thereby imposing on them considerable responsibilities and financial burdens. To give this imposition a more acceptable appearance, it was presented by the authorities as a natural consequence of the newly acquired municipal freedom. Indeed, in a circular issued by Governor Torre on October 30, 1861, addressed to all the mayors of the Province of Terra d'Otranto, he declared: "Now that the Municipality has fortunately become free and autonomous, it must, with its own means and willingly in cooperation with the wise ordinances of the government, respond to the demands of the civilization of the present age by putting popular education into effect"[27].

In reality, this proved to be a heavy burden for Italian municipalities, especially for those that were small and predominantly rural, as they were unable to find the necessary funds to maintain a public school. In this regard, the Historical Archive of the Municipality of Brindisi contains numerous, almost desperate letters from local administrators to higher state authorities, requesting aid and subsidies.

[26]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 12, b. 1, fasc. 1.
[27]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 6, b.1, fasc. 1.

One such example is a letter from Engelberto Dionisi, then Mayor of Brindisi, to the Minister of Public Education, dated 9 July 1891, which clearly highlights the dire state of the municipal finances: "This Administration, always respectful of the provisions of the Higher Authority, did not oppose the new school classification based on the 1881 census (…) As a result, since it became necessary to establish additional classes due to the considerable number of pupils attending the schools, the Municipality (…) was urged to provide for them (…) The annual expenditure borne by the Municipality for primary education amounts to a total of £33,000.00, without taking into account the expenses required for the maintenance of the Kindergarten, which weighs on the budget for an annual sum of £2,500.00. These sums represent only the expenses for the teaching staff, while for the purchase of school furniture, the Municipality has spent, in just two years, the not insignificant amount of £2,000.00 (…) In the light of this situation (…) the undersigned respectfully appeals to Your Excellency to grant an annual subsidy, not only to enable regular compliance with the obligation of compulsory education — to which this Administration devotes its utmost care — but also to help cover the additional expenses incurred by the Municipality due to the increase in the salaries of elementary teachers"[28].

Southern Italy lacked adequate facilities to accommodate schoolchildren, and this did not appear to be regarded as a national problem requiring urgent attention. In fact, in the two most important public works laws enacted during the first forty years of the Kingdom of Italy — the Law of 20 March 1865 (the *Comprehensive Plan for Public Works*) and the Law of 25 June 1882 (concerning *hydraulic and road works*) — no provisions whatsoever were made for school construction.[29]

For this category of expenditure, it was necessary to wait until the Law of 18 July 1878 to see the first government intervention. Under this measure, the State granted low-interest loans to municipalities for the construction of school buildings. However, over the following ten years, only 23 million lire were utilized, and only by the wealthier municipalities[30].

In order to understand whether and to what extent the State considered the construction of school buildings a matter of urgency, the following table presents the public expenditure on education — expressed in lire — for the period from 1862 to 1914, broken down by State, Municipalities, and Provinces.

State			Municipality			Province		
Expenditure on Education	Total Expenditure	% Education Expenditure as a Share of Total	Expenditure on Education	Total Expenditure	% Education Expenditure as a Share of Total	Expenditure on Education	Total Expenditure	% Education Expenditure as a Share of Total

[28]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 11, b.1, fasc. 2.
[29]Cf. G. Natale, *La Scuola in Italia…,* cit. pp. 31-32.
[30]*Ibidem.*

		Expend iture			Expend iture			Expend iture
1862: 11,5	906	1,27	1863: 15,9	144,1	11,03	1866: 3	47,3	6,34
1900-01: 54,0	1552	3,48	1899: 80,1	467,8	17,12	1899: 5,8	97,1	5,97
1913-14: 152	2501	6,07	1912: 220,9	959,8	23,02	1913: 8,2	164,5	4,98

Source: G. Natale, La Scuola in Italia…, cit. p. 33.

From this table it is clear that State expenditure on education was decidedly limited, although it tended to increase steadily over time. It should not be forgotten that local authorities bore the most immediate costs of public education up to the early twentieth century, when there was a constant rise in State investment. For example, while in 1925 public expenditure on education accounted for 63.7% of total investments, ten years later, in 1935, the State's share of education spending had reached 74.6%[31].

The first to suffer from the lack of funding for public educational facilities were women. In fact, the Royal Inspector for Primary Education in the Province of Terra d'Otranto wrote to the Mayor of the city of Brindisi: "With great surprise, the undersigned has learned that in this Municipality the public girls' schools have not yet reopened. If this is indeed the case, Your Most Illustrious Honour is kindly requested to (…) indicate the reason"[32]. The Mayor's reply was terse: "In response to Your Honour's note referenced in the margin, I have the honour to inform you that the public girls' primary schools in this Municipality have not yet been able to open, due to the lack of suitable premises"[33]. A definitive accommodation for the girls in the former convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli would not be achieved until the end of the First World War. In the meantime, the pupils were repeatedly relocated and had to change premises several times: first to the former convent of Santa Chiara, then to Palazzo Roncella, Casa De Marzo, and finally to the former Scuole Pie.[34] Numerous rental contracts were drawn up for the various premises to be used as elementary schools[35].

The Coppino Law and Compulsory Schooling: Between Citizenship and Discipline

The Casati Law remained unchanged for nearly two decades, until the fall of the Historical Right on 18 March 1876. With the Historical Left coming to

[31] *Ibidem*.
[32] ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 6, b.1, fasc. 1.
[33] *Ibidem.*
[34] AA. VV, *Figlie, spose, madri …,* cit. p. 53.
[35] ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 5, cl. 13, b. 1, fasc. 3, 13, 16, 17, 18, 24. There are numerous private contracts between the Municipality of Brindisi and various citizens for the rental of premises to be used as elementary schools.

power, the process of industrialisation in the country — particularly in Northern Italy — intensified. Industrialisation required a productive and autonomous workforce, capable of reading, writing, and doing arithmetic. This led to a desire to reform the existing law on children's education, prompting the liberal Left to approve a new law on education on 15 July 1877, which took the name of the then Minister of Public Education, Michele Coppino[36].

There were many innovations compared to the previous law. First of all, the new measure reinforced the principle of free elementary education, extending the school cycle to five years, of which three were compulsory, and introducing in Article 4 a monetary fine for heads of families who failed to send their children to school. The law stated: "The fine shall be 50 *centesimi*, but after having been applied unsuccessfully twice, it may be increased to 3 lire, and from 3 to 6 lire, up to a maximum of 10 lire, depending on continued noncompliance."

It was the Mayor's duty to ascertain any such violation. There was no shortage of paradoxes, among which perhaps the most interesting was the creation of an assistance fund for the most diligent pupils, into which were to flow the sums collected from parents who failed to comply with their obligations. Thus, the monetary penalties effectively turned into a kind of tax on the poorest families, used to finance the studies of the children of wealthier families, who were, of course, the most regular and diligent students.

An interesting innovation introduced by the Coppino Law was the addition of two new subjects: gymnastics and civic education. However, schools often lacked suitable facilities, and gymnastics lessons were conducted inside the classrooms, which were frequently in deplorable condition. Confirming this is an end-of-year report by a teacher, Mr Ruggiero, who, under the heading *"Educational Gymnastics,"* wrote: "Instruction in this subject, made compulsory by the law of 7 July 1878, was never neglected during the school year; each teacher instructed, as best as he could, his pupils in educational gymnastics exercises between the desks, and also in other bodyweight exercises in accordance with the curriculum. However, since the school premises were too cramped and the desks unsuitable for such exercises — which in boys' schools are also intended to begin preparing young pupils for military service — the boys were taken, every Wednesday, to the parade ground […] In the girls' schools, very little gymnastics could be done, due to the poor condition of the premises and desks, which, as Your Most Illustrious Honour knows, are in even worse condition than those in the boys' schools; and during the afternoon hours, while engaging in needlework exercises, the older girls also practised choral singing, performing short and devout poems, while the younger ones practiced mental arithmetic"[37].

From Mr Ruggiero's words, it is clear that the gymnastics lessons of the time had little in common with modern Physical Education. They were, in fact, military exercises taught to pupils beginning in secondary schools, as established by Law No. 4442 of 7 July 1878, Article 2: "The teaching of gymnastics in male

[36]Cfr. G. Natale, *La Scuola in Italia…,* cit. pp. 43-44.
[37]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 4, b.1, fasc. 1, annual report written by the Director of the elementary schools, teacher Ruggiero, dated 28 July 1884.

secondary, ordinary, and teacher-training schools shall also have the aim of preparing young men for military service. The Minister of Public Education and the Minister of War shall jointly determine the exercises and successive levels of gymnastic instruction, in accordance with the age and physical development of the youths."

Even girls were to receive gymnastics lessons, but with significant differences: "In female schools of every order and grade," gymnastics "shall have an exclusively educational character and shall be regulated by special provisions."

How, then, were these "gymnastics" lessons actually conducted? This can be inferred from a letter dated 8 April 1882, in which Mr Bonavincini, a headteacher, wrote: "The pupils of the 3rd and 4th grades, as well as several from the 2nd, on Wednesdays and Fridays of each week, had, have, and shall continue to have two gymnastics lessons, each one hour long and held outside the classroom; in addition, they took part in military marches together with the students of the Secondary Schools; they were provided, like the latter, with gaiters and military caps, so as to adopt that bearing so befitting the ancient and present-day pride of the Italians"[38].

Many cities lacked a sufficient number of teachers to fulfil the obligation of elementary education reaffirmed by the new Coppino Law. Indeed, in a circular of the Provincial School Council, dated 7 October 1878, several details are reported, including the number of missing teachers for each municipality in the former Province of Terra d'Otranto:"The Law of 15 July 1877 on compulsory education was immediately implemented in 76 of the 130 municipalities of the Province during the school year 1877–78. These 76 municipalities, since October 1877, have already met the conditions required by Article 9 regarding the number of elementary teachers necessary for implementation. Of the remaining 54, some took steps to appoint new teachers from the very first months of the aforementioned school year, and the government promptly assisted them with special subsidies; others made new teacher appointments during the course of the year, effective from the beginning of the upcoming school year; finally, there are about 25 municipalities which, despite repeated solicitations from the school office, have not yet made any new appointments. At present, the municipalities still lacking the required number of elementary teachers for the enforcement of compulsory education are only 34, and they are listed below, together with the number of teachers missing in each municipality to reach the total required by law, as recorded in the new classification":[39]

1. Brindisi	4	10. Veglie	2	19. Specchia	2	28. Grottaglie	2
2. Carovigno	1	11. Alezio	1	20. Calimera	1	29. Laterza	1
3. Ceglie	4	12. Casarano	1	21. Campi	1	30. Martina	9
4. Erchie	1	13. Nardò	2	22. Corigliano	1	31. Massafra	3
5. Francavilla	6	14. Parabita	1	23. Leverano	1	32. Pulsano	1
6. Mesagne	3	15. Poggiardo	1	24. S. Cesareo	1	33. Sava	1

[38]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 4, b.1, fasc. 3.
[39]ASBR, *ASCBR*, sez. VI, cat. 9, cl. 2, b.1, fasc. 1.

7. Ostuni	8	16. Presicce	1	25. Surbo	1	34. Taranto	5
8. Salice	1	17. Racale	1	26. Uggiano	1		
9. Torre S. Susanna	1	18. Ruffano	1	27. Fragagnano	1		

In fact, a circular issued a year earlier had already classified the various municipalities of the district according to the number of schools to be opened in proportion to their population, the number of teachers appointed in male and female schools, and those still to be appointed. The 1878 circular added: "In view of these factual data, the Provincial School Council, in its session of 18 September, in accordance with the provisions contained in Articles 5 and 6 of the Regulation of 19 October 1877, resolved to invite the 34 municipalities concerned to take the necessary measures so that, by the year 1879, all lower-grade schools mandated by the aforementioned Law of 15 July 1877 would be established, so that the same law might be considered implemented in all the municipalities of the Province no later than the beginning of the 1879–80 school year"[40].

This is yet another clear demonstration of how the State was completely indifferent to the severe financial difficulties faced by the municipal administrations of Southern Italy and imposed on them burdens they were unable to meet.

Conclusion

The analysis of education in post-unification Southern Italy reveals how the project of constructing the Italian nation was grounded in a twofold dimension: a political one, aimed at consolidating the authority of the new State, and a cultural one, directed toward shaping citizens who were obedient, morally disciplined, and conscious of their role within the social order. In this process, education became a crucial instrument for legitimising central power, entrusted with the task of "making Italians" through the dissemination of a common language, ethic, and national imagination.

However, the path toward literacy and modernisation proved uneven and contradictory. The implementation of the Casati and Coppino Laws, though asserting the principles of free and compulsory education, placed a heavy burden on Southern municipalities, which lacked the necessary resources. The result was a fragile school system — often devoid of adequate buildings, qualified teachers, and teaching materials. The South thus remained on the margins of Italy's civic and cultural formation, marked by extremely high rates of illiteracy and by a continuing economic and political dependency.

From a gender perspective, female education strikingly exemplified the gap between emancipatory ideals and normative reality. The school for girls, conceived as a place of domestic virtue and Christian morality within a secular State, in fact became the main mechanism through which liberal Italy reproduced

[40] *Ibidem*.

patriarchal hierarchies, turning the female figure into a symbol of purity and submission. The needle and the pen—a recurring metaphor of female education—embodied the tension between culture and labour, between literacy and subordination, between the right to know and the duty to serve.

To revisit that period today is to recognise that the construction of Italian citizenship also passed through the management of knowledge and the body, of authority and dependence. The *"lessons in nationhood"* taught in the classrooms of the South were both lessons in identity and exclusion, revealing the complexity of an Italy which, even as it sought unity, continued to reproduce its own inequalities.

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