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## The right to outdoor education at the beginning of the Twentieth century: reflections and practices from the pages of a Milanese journal (1911-1923)<sup>1</sup>

### Il diritto all'educazione all'aperto all'inizio del XX secolo: riflessioni ed esperienze nelle pagine di una rivista pedagogica milanese (1911-1923)

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**Abstract.** In the early Twentieth century in Europe there was a very lively debate about the need for an outdoor education for boys and girls, linked to the more general sensitivity to the issue of the protection of children's rights: many associations, movements, thinkers underlined, in fact, how boys and girls should have enjoyed the right to health, education and dignified growth. Among these, the *Società Umanitaria* (Humanitarian Society) in Milan stood out: it took an active part in the debate on teacher training and the reform of children's institutions, playing a fundamental role in the propagation of the Montessori method; this institution also disseminated original reflections on the right to outdoor education and initiated innovative experiences centred on contact with the natural environment, both because this theme was a fundamental part of the Montessori proposal, and because more generally it responded to the ideals based on healthy life, on education in nature, and on the recovery of juvenile discomfort through contact with the natural environment. This contribution, therefore, aims to investigate the role played by the *Società Umanitaria* in promoting the right to outdoor education, analysing the issues of the magazine "La Coltura Popolare", with a particular focus on the activities carried out to promote holiday camps and recreational facilities: this is a still unexplored research path, which brings to the attention of scholars a magazine that offered important spaces of exchange for the most innovative pedagogical experiments and the most stimulating reflections of the time.

**Keywords:** outdoor education, education in nature, Società Umanitaria, Montessori, holiday camps.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of the authors' joint research and writing activities. For purely formal purposes, Gabriella Seveso may be viewed as the author of Sections "Social changes and children's rights in Milano" and "Initiatives of charitable and philanthropic" and Luca Comerio as the author of Sections "The 'permanent holiday center' of Villa Verga", "The experience of 'La Gioiosa'" and "Conclusions".

**Riassunto.** All'inizio del XX secolo in Europa si verificò un dibattito molto vivace sulla necessità di un'educazione all'aria aperta per ragazzi e ragazze, legata alla sensibilità più generale alla questione della tutela dei diritti dei bambini: molte associazioni, movimenti, pensatori sottolineavano, infatti, come ragazzi e ragazze avrebbero dovuto godere del diritto alla salute, all'istruzione e a una crescita dignitosa. Tra queste associazioni, si distinse la Società Umanitaria di Milano, che partecipò attivamente al dibattito sulla formazione degli insegnanti e sulla riforma delle istituzioni per l'infanzia, svolgendo un ruolo fondamentale nella propagazione del metodo Montessori. La Società contribuì anche alla diffusione di riflessioni originali sul diritto all'educazione all'aria aperta e attuò esperienze innovative incentrate sul contatto con l'ambiente naturale, sia perché questo tema era una parte fondamentale della proposta Montessori, sia perché più in generale essa propugnava ideali basati sulla vita sana, sull'educazione nella natura e sul recupero del disagio giovanile attraverso il contatto con l'ambiente naturale. Il presente contributo mira a indagare il ruolo svolto dalla Società Umanitaria nella promozione del diritto all'educazione all'aria aperta, analizzando i temi della rivista "La Coltura Popolare", con particolare attenzione alle attività svolte per promuovere i campi di vacanza e le strutture ricreative: si tratta di un percorso di ricerca ancora inesplorato, che porta all'attenzione degli studiosi una rivista che offriva importanti spazi di scambio per le più innovative sperimentazioni pedagogiche e le più stimolanti riflessioni del tempo.

**Parole chiave:** outdoor education, educazione nella natura, Società Umanitaria, Montessori, colonie di vacanza.

#### SOCIAL CHANGES AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN MILAN

At the end of the Nineteenth century and the beginning of the Twentieth, the city of Milan experienced a wave of interest in education and training and a strong drive to innovate in this field (Canadelli 2008). This was partly thanks to new theories and practices then emerging in Europe and the United States, and partly thanks to popular interest in the dissemination of culture and children's rights (Gecchele, Polenghi, Dal Toso 2017). The city was undergoing deep and radical change due to urbanization and industrialization and the introduction of new infrastructure (such as sewage, electricity, and communications networks): these changes on the one hand undeniably improved everyday standards of living and stimulated economic growth; on the other hand, however, they created problems and led to exploitation. Poor children were likely to prematurely enter the workforce and do dangerous or tiring jobs for many hours a day in unhealthy environments. In other cases, these children were abandoned or neglected by their families due to ignorance or a lack of economic resources. In still other cases, they were left alone in unhealthy homes or taken by their mothers to the fields or to opium dens from a young age (Cambi, Ulivieri 1988). These situations of exploitation, suffering, and sometimes violence drove efforts to promote children's rights in Milan (Mapelli, Seveso 2003; Seveso, Finco 2017). These were frequently the work of women's associations, such as the *Unione Femminile Nazionale*, founded in 1899 by Ersilia Bronzini Majno and other activists, with the goal of «elevating the status of women and women's education and defending the rights of children and mothers». Writing in the journal *Unione Femminile*, Bronzini Majno criticized the exploitation of children and pro-

claimed their right to an education, a healthy environment, healthcare, and wellbeing. For example, in 1908, participating in a National Congress on the issues of minors, she proposed a lively and interesting introductory report and stressed the need to guarantee the rights of minors beyond a traditional conception based on charity and piety (Seveso 2020). In the same period, other figures and associations were also devoting themselves to the theme of children's rights, especially the right to improved education and the right to live in healthy spaces<sup>2</sup>. These ideas also met with the growing movement for hygiene, which was spreading in Italy and which was promoted both by positivism and Masonry (Polenghi 2021). It also affected school and childhood; in this regard, Polenghi stresses: «The first task of schools was to provide a healthy environment. The hygiene movement described how a good school building should be, including in terms of the windows, heating, toilets, school desks, etc» (2021, 189). Unfortunately, in Italy, many schools were instead built in unhealthy places and were spaces without the hygiene (Pruneri 2020). At the same time, just in these years, the first open-air schools began, with the aim of accommodating frail and tuberculosis children, thanks to the initiative of doctors, philanthropists, and sometimes also thanks to local administrations (D'Ascenzo 2018b).

These schools, initially created for hygienic and sanitary purposes, became aimed at all children; as we will see later, in the first decades of the Twentieth century, the idea that all children, not only the physically or economically disadvantaged, have a specific need for care

<sup>2</sup> Women's associationism and women's initiatives in favour of boys' and girls' rights were certainly influenced by Ellen Key's writings, translated in Italy at the beginning of the Twentieth century by Sibilla Aleramo (Key 2019).

and attention – both from a physical and educational point of view –, gradually took hold (Tomarchio, Todaro 2017; D’Ascenzo 2018a).

Against this backdrop, in 1892, Prospero Moisé Loria, a wealthy businessman of Jewish origin, died, leaving a legacy of 10 million lira (the equivalent of over €30 million in today’s terms) for the founding of a society with philanthropic purposes: the Società Umanitaria (Humanitarian Society) was set up the following year, with its headquarters in the city center, and with contemporary intellectuals, thinkers, and politicians as its members<sup>3</sup>. The aim of the society, inspired by ideals of equality and social justice, was to improve the cultural, social, and civil status of the people of Milan, especially among the lower classes. In relation to children’s rights, the society took part in the debate on teacher training, and on the reform of schools and childcare institutions. This debate, in fact, was very lively in that period (Zago 2005): pedagogists, thinkers, and politicians made numerous proposals for teacher training and school reform (Morandi 2019; Negri and Seveso 2021); in addition, the teachers started national associations for the first time and actively participated in the reflection on educational and teaching methods (De Giorgi 2012; Ghizzoni 2009; Sani 2001). In this regard, the Società Umanitaria played a key role in spreading the Montessori method, and set up shelters for disadvantaged children and youths. One of the society’s leading concerns was the right of children to healthy environments and outdoor experience to compensate for the sudden and drastic urbanization and industrialization of Milan and other Italian cities<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, on the one hand, the society participated in and led debates on this topic, especially on the pages of the journal *La Coltura Popolare*. On the other hand, it conducted key, innovative projects providing children and young people with opportunities to spend time in nature and outdoors. Furthermore, it consistently promoted the spread of Montessori education in Milan, an approach that emphasized the need for outdoor education. Indeed, as is well known, the Montessori method attributed major importance to the environment, understood as both the indoor setting, which was prepared with great attention to detail, and the outdoor setting, where learning and activities took place that were crucial to children’s healthy development. The

society’s commitment to children’s rights, disadvantaged children, and the issue of the environment and outdoor spaces were the main ideas that it shared with the Montessori method. This laid the basis for fruitful cooperation between Maria Montessori herself and the secretary, and later chairman, of the society, Augusto Osimo.

Importantly, their cooperation began in the context of an urban renewal project. Specifically, the Società Umanitaria decided to sponsor the redevelopment of some Milanese districts which were overcrowded and rundown. It oversaw the design of new housing for working class families, in keeping with the most up-to-date architectural guidelines and health principles, with a particular focus on open and natural spaces, and encouraging participation in community life. As part of this project, the first two Children’s Houses in Milan were set up in Via Solari and Le Rottole (today Viale Lombardia), with a view to providing these new model working class areas with high-quality educational institutions run on innovative Montessori principles, including an emphasis on outdoor education.

As we have seen, the society’s particular interest in educating children in nature and about nature was reflected in the advertising of projects and the promotion of debates in the journal *La Coltura Popolare*, founded in 1910 as the continuation of an earlier publication, the *Bollettino delle Biblioteche popolari*. The journal, whose first issue came out in March 1911, quickly came to play an important part in the Italian pedagogical debate. It carried lively exchanges on the themes of school reform, teacher education, teaching methods, extracurricular activities and so on. Given the journal’s commitment to children’s rights, and especially their right to health and wellbeing, it advocated for radical reform of schools and education based on enhanced teacher training and on the transformation of material and symbolic learning spaces.

In the period from 1911 to 1920, *La Coltura Popolare* devoted considerable space to outdoor education projects, emphasizing their innovative nature and their implications for the wellbeing of children and families. This content may be divided into three main areas. First, articles about outdoor education projects (which, as we shall see, were highly diverse at that time); second, articles about the spread of the Montessori method, which emphasized outdoor activities; third, information about summer camps, recreational facilities and before- and after-school services. All three areas reflect the journal’s commitment to outdoor education for children and the Società Umanitaria’s efforts to promote children’s right to outdoor education; increasingly, the journal’s articles recognized the importance of outdoor education, not

<sup>3</sup> Among the founders of the Società Umanitaria there were Augusto Osimo, Luigi Majno (jurist, socialist deputy close to Filippo Turati, rector of the Luigi Bocconi University, deputy mayor of the city), Osvaldo Gnocchi Viani (promoter of the first Chamber of Labour in Milan).

<sup>4</sup> An official report notes that, as early as 1886, in many big cities in Northern Italy, the population density was very high and attics and basements were usually used as homes (DIREZIONE GENERALE DELLA STATISTICA 1886, XCIVff).



just for children who were disadvantaged (physically or economically), but for all children. This contribution focuses mainly on the activities carried out by the Società Umanitaria to promote holidays camps and recreational facilities as recorded in the pages of the aforementioned journal.

#### INITIATIVES OF CHARITABLE AND PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS

In relation to health-promoting or recreational holiday camps, an article by Angelo Merlini<sup>5</sup>, entitled “L’Assistenza Scolastica a Milano” [School Welfare in Milan], informs us that already in 1909, a charitable organization called Opera Pia Scuola e Famiglia, founded its Colonia Climatica o Educatorio all’Aperto – a health-promoting and outdoor education centre – in Vaccinaghetto d’Ameno, «where, during the autumn break, it hosted, for six weeks at a time, two groups of 25 children chosen amongst the weakest and most afflicted» (Merlini 1913, 796). The author of the article devotes an entire section to the work of the 45 school institutes, who sent around 1500 pupils a year on seaside or mountain holidays, charging only a modest fee (60 lire for 40 days, travel included). He also describes the efforts of the Opera Pia Balneare, another charity that, almost entirely free of charge, provided seaside holidays to children aged between 6 and 15 years. And those of the Opera Pia Cura Climatica, who – completely free of charge – sent poor, underdeveloped schoolchildren to Berzonno, on Lake Orta, for one month each year for three consecutive years<sup>6</sup>. Merlini’s paper proves the journal’s strong commitment to outdoor education: the author not only describes existing outdoor education initiatives in detail but also calls for outdoor education to be more widely practiced and to be funded with public monies and not just by private individuals or associations.

<sup>5</sup> Doctor Angelo Merlini was the author of *Il patronato: manuale per l’organizzazione e il funzionamento del patronato scolastico comunale, e delle opere di educazione di coltura popolare*, con prefazione di Camillo Corradini, e un’appendice del dott. G. Rocca su le istituzioni di assistenza scolastica all’estero. Milano: Unione Italiana dell’Educazione Popolare [The Patronage: Manual for the Organization and Operation of the Municipal School Patronage, and Works of Popular Culture Education with a preface by Camillo Corradini, and an appendix of dr. G. Rocca, about institutions of school assistance abroad] (Merlini 1915).

<sup>6</sup> The goals of the Opera Pia Cura Climatica were mainly oriented towards prevention, with health in first place. There were, however, declared educational purposes, such as teaching hygiene habits, the development of aesthetic sensitivity and of an appropriate way of relating. Although the Cura was something quite different from the typical school setting, the organisers pointed out that the days spent in Berzonno also seemed to have positive effects on school performance (Tibaldi 1885; 1906, 8).

Children had the right to outdoor education and health-promoting holidays, the provision of which could not be left to charitable organizations but should largely be the responsibility of the community and local authorities. In Merlini’s words:

... the need for broader and more solid regulation, no longer subordinated to variations in private charity, but rather more directly linked to the gradual but constant development of the life and needs of the city. We believe that the time has come for greater and more decisive action on the part of the City Council (Merlini 1913, 796).

This article also describes before- and after-school services and school libraries, run for the most part by the school institutes and by associations: again, the author’s interest in outdoor spaces is clear, as is the call for greater commitment from local government: Merlini calls on the City Council to invest in improving existing services, take them over from private charities and remove them from the influence of political or religious groups; he emphasizes the need for health-promoting and recreational holiday camps to provide «sports fields, swimming schools, as well as city camps, excursions, and children’s sports competitions...» (Merlini 1913, 801). The purpose of these activities is to enhance the quality of life of working-class children and youths, to improve the health of weak or underdeveloped children, to take disadvantaged children off the streets, or to prevent them – even worse – from becoming juvenile delinquents. We can see that the journal contributed to the transition from seeing outdoor education as a welfare requirement or accessory need to seeing it as a basic universal need and right, although initially it was still seen as more of a health requirement than as part of children’s overall well-being and learning<sup>7</sup>.

#### THE “PERMANENT HOLIDAY CENTER” OF VILLA VERGA

On the same topic, two years later in 1915, *La Coltura Popolare* informed its readers that the Società Umanitaria – in light of the tragic events of the war – had decided to open «a permanent holiday center as one of the most effective means of providing for the physical health, education and upbringing of poor children» (1915, 749). The board of directors unanimously approved the purchase of Villa Verga, a stately home in

<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on the right to an outdoor education went hand in hand with the journal’s campaign to remove early childhood education in general (0-6 years) from charity and assistance and place it under the aegis of state law and commitment: see for example Pellegrini, 1915.



Cocquio Sant'Andrea in the province of Varese, which came with a large garden and outbuildings. Located in the heart of the countryside, the villa had the capacity to host – in the months of July, August and September – groups of around 100 children and youths who during the school year attended the Children's Houses in Milan or the vocational schools run by the Società Umanitaria. The children were accompanied by teachers and educators and the day was spent on walks and outdoor games, but also on individual and group chores (such as cleaning the dormitories and refectory, gardening, kitchen duty, or minor repairs). The house was large and comfortable and in 1917 was converted into a permanent centre for war orphans and child refugees. Outdoor activities were at the core of the educational program offered at Villa Verga, because the natural environment was seen as key to both physical and psychological well-being and development. This project clearly reflects the Società Umanitaria's progression from the notion of health-promoting holiday camps for children and youths who were underdeveloped, weak or ill, towards a notion of outdoor education for all. The permanent centre in Cocquio hosted large numbers of children and youths: for example, in 1923 it hosted over 20,000, with a daily average of around 80 children.

In 1917, a Montessori Children's House was added to the Villa Verga centre: in 1920, *La Coltura Popolare* published extracts from the diary of the director of the Children's House, Antonietta Etro, who described in lyrical detail the natural environment surrounding the villa, which served to engage the children in observation, experience, and action:

In silent and simple Cocquio, where peace reigns because all around is pleasant, among these almost perennially green hills; in this merry villa, surrounded by fragrant olive bushes, linden trees, rose bushes and perfumed jasmynes, with the huge grounds full of evergreens, ash trees, and majestic magnolias that emanate a most healthful and enlivening force. In this small Eden, I was entrusted twelve children... (Etro 1920, 88).

This description tells us that the location chosen by the Società Umanitaria for its recreational and holiday center and Children's House was surrounded by a rich natural environment and that this environment was seen as crucial to the centre's activities.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF "LA GIOIOSA"

This firm belief in children's right to be educated in nature and about nature was also clear when, in 1918,

the Milanese Federation of Cooperatives – which had close links with the Società Umanitaria – bought, for the princely sum of 250,000 lire, an 18<sup>th</sup> century stately home with large grounds – La Gioiosa in Cormanò – with a view to converting it into a countryside recreational centre for the children of workers and cooperative members, as well as for war orphans attending the Società Umanitaria's vocational schools<sup>8</sup>. Initially intended as a Sunday destination for children between 10 and 18 years of age, it soon became a venue for summer holiday camps (which hosted 12,351 children in 1921-22 and 11,501 children in 1922-23): the grounds extended over an area of 30,000 square meters, and contained woodlands, paths lined with evergreen trees, a large vegetable garden, courtyards, chicken coops, a playing field with gymnastics equipment, swings, goal nets and so on. Many outdoor activities were organized for the guests, such as tournaments, gardening, and dedicated workshops in relevant buildings (cooking, embroidery, wood, etc.)<sup>9</sup>.

This project received ample coverage in *La Coltura Popolare*, which in 1918 published an article by its own president, Augusto Osimo, entitled "Una casa di autoeducazione e di svago per i figli dei lavoratori" [a house of self-education and recreation for the children of workers].

Wrote Osimo:

It is crucial that we offer the people, and especially the children of the people, different environments to the normal ones. Unfortunately, the countryside near Milan is not very pleasant, nor is it possible for now to take most of our children to the delightful towns of Varese and the lakes on every holiday. Perhaps this will come about gradually through occasional day trips and excursions, but certainly not every Sunday. However, our children should be taken out of the closed-in city environment and brought to stay in one of the beautiful villas situated near our city (Osimo 1918, 717).

The goal of this recreation centre was, as the author sets out to show, «to renew the life of the body and of

<sup>8</sup> By Law 487 of 4 June 1911, and its implementing regulation R.D. 604 of 2 January 1913, the Ricreatori (Recreation Centres) became officially recognised institutions, dependent on the School Patronages.

<sup>9</sup> The importance given to outdoor activities can be found in other Milanese experiences of the time; an example is the Maresio colony (north-east of the Lombard capital), where the boys from the Martinit boys' orphanage in Milan stayed in the early Twentieth century: the diary of activities reveals long daily walks in the surrounding area, often accompanied by a swim in the river (Archivio Fondazione Stelline Martinit 1901; Comerio 2019). About the origin of holiday camps as philanthropic initiatives aimed at protecting children from the negative influences of industrialised urban environments see Comerio 2017; an in-depth study of the history of holiday colonies in Europe in the first decades of the Twentieth century was conducted by Rey-Herme (1954, 1961).

the spirit» (Osimo 1918, 718) through a range of activities and

by fostering appreciation of the joys of the spirit inspired by the wonders of nature and life in contact with nature, by the wonders of art, and by scientific reasoning and observation, thereby contributing to the formation of the young personality (Osimo 1918, 718).

As Osimo's article makes clear, education in nature and about nature was seen as a key factor – on the same level as art, science, and rational thinking – in the balanced and healthy development and education of children. For this reason, the Società Umanitaria tried to make this amenity as economically accessible as possible: families were only required to pay for the children's transport and a meal, at a maximum cost of 30 or 40 cents.

Unfortunately, La Gioiosa, one of the society's most successful experiments, on the death of Augusto Osimo, and on account of the changed political conditions and the consequent difficulty in meeting the house's considerable overheads, ceased operations in 1923 and was later sold to a charity for disadvantaged girls. One year later, the project was recalled with admiration and regret in the pages of *La Coltura Popolare*, which published a sort of teacher's journal entitled "Una testimonianza dell'opera nostra. La Gioiosa. Casa di liberi studi e di svago per i figli dei cooperatori e degli operai" [A personal account of our work. La Gioiosa. House of free study and recreation for the children of cooperators and workers] (Molinari 1924). The author, Aurelio Molinari described in detail the moral aims of the institution and the activities and workshops offered to boys and girls, also dwelling at length on how the beauty of the place and its closeness to nature had played a key role in the moral and intellectual development of the young guests:

The grounds of the villa, with its green lawns, its lines of shady trees, and its flowering shrubberies inspired feeling for nature and respect for plants, which are so lacking in large cities. I don't mean to say that the grass, the flowers, and the fruit of the Gioiosa were always respected: for children from Milan, it was too tempting to sit or do heads over heels on the lawn, pull leaves off shrubs, or pick and bite into a piece of fruit: I would even go so far as to say that giving in to such temptations was not always a sin. In any case, actual rule breaking or mistreatment of property were infrequent... (Molinari 1924, 261)

The author saw this natural environment, along with other factors (well-trained teachers, practical workshops, sensitivity to the relational dimension), as key to forming children to become responsible citizens, emphasizing that the house was «rich in indirect but highly effective

educational stimuli» (Ibid, 262). Open spaces were crucial to the activities carried out but also to the transmission of values: «Physical education, along with aesthetic-moral education, mainly took place outdoors, in an environment that was healthy and healthful from every point of view» (Ibid.).

Notably, the outdoor education was not confined to the spaces of La Gioiosa itself, but rather extended to activities in other spaces: the author recalls the setting up of the Mountaineering Club, which

was the hoped-for fruit of the habit of and taste for excursions, thanks to the day trips from La Gioiosa to the mountains and lakes... [...] Excursions were expected to be of cultural as well as physical and spiritual value. Hence, they were carefully planned with detailed itineraries... (Molinari 1924, 264)

The author's concluding remarks were laced with nostalgia and regret concerning the closing down of La Gioiosa. He closed with a final assessment that emphasized the originality and efficacy of this project: «In addition to representing a most valuable social institution, it was also an interesting pedagogical experiment that impressed and gave food for thought to all the educationalists that studied it» (Ibid, 265).

## CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of articles published in the journal *La Coltura Popolare* clearly documents the commitment displayed by the Società Umanitaria, in the early Twentieth century, to promoting children's right to outdoor education. This took place against a backdrop of particular awareness of the theme of outdoor education, at both the European and national levels, thanks to the work of new experimental schools and to the lively debate on school reform in Italy.

The output of the journal, which was founded and directed by leading exponents of the Società Umanitaria itself, clearly reflects the promotion and publicization of projects such as health-promoting and recreational holiday camps and open-air before- and after- school activities. While some contributors, especially those with backgrounds in medicine or public health, saw outdoor education as a need and right of weak and (physically, economically, or socially) disadvantaged children in particular, others saw outdoor education as a right of all children.

In sum, the early 1900s were a crucial, lively, and foundational period for Italian outdoor education; the articles published by the journal also reflect a develop-

ment over time. Unfortunately, this period came to an end with the rise of fascism and the consequent school reforms based on physical fitness for military purposes and the exaltation of physical exercise with propagandistic aims.

The journal *La Coltura Popolare* is a valuable source that allows us to reconstruct key phases in the history of Italian and European education, including with a view to advancing our understanding of contemporary phenomena and developments.

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