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# **American Cultural Diplomacy and Post-War Educational Reforms: James Bryant Conant's Mission to Italy in 1960\***

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**Abstract:** This paper, largely based on new and previously unused documents from U.S. archives, considers the consultancy group financed by the Ford Foundation in 1960 to support the school reforms the Italian Minister of Education Giuseppe Medici was promoting. It was headed by James Bryant Conant, and its evaluations were based on principles of ‘meritocratic’ democratisation: universal access to comprehensive lower secondary school should have been accompanied by ‘cooling out’ mechanisms at subsequent levels.

Conant’s suggestions were ignored. In 1962, the new *Scuola media* was established thanks to a compromise between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, and was founded on uniform treatment and equal outcomes rather than equal starting points in competition. In spite of this, the Italian experience was subsequently used within the Ford Foundation to integrate Conant’s ideas in their strategies for international programmes, and gave birth to planning studies for national education requirements based on manpower needs.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Educational reform, Italy, James Bryant Conant (1893-1978), Secondary Education.

## Introduction

Italian historiography on education has recently made significant contributions to understanding the school reforms of the 1960s. These contributions have enriched the political-institutional premises of earlier studies<sup>1</sup>, and have taken into account the debates that roared in pedagogy, among intellectuals, in the press dedicated to culture and in that concentrated on education alone. These debates could not be reduced to a mere contraposition between the lay world striving to extend public schooling in order to reduce social inequality and Catholics eager to conserve the status quo in order to defend the interests of private schools run by religious orders and groups. On both fronts there were conservative viewpoints concerning institutional organization and curricula, as well as advocates for the development and modernising of programmes, teaching methods and attendance at all levels<sup>2</sup>. In this context, the compulsory fully comprehensive lower secondary school (*Scuola media unica*) was established in late 1962. It was conceived as a ‘democratic change’ in schooling, because it guaranteed the commitment of the State to provide all citizens with right of access to secondary studies, challenging a social stratification that the school system had seemed to accept *a priori* until that time<sup>3</sup>. To be fully effective, such innovation needed to be sustained with changes in pedagogical approaches and curricula that would bring the traditional classicist-literary models into question. The only partial success of these changes led to a

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Giuseppe Ricuperati, ‘La scuola nell’Italia unita’, in *Storia d’Italia*, vol. 5, *I documenti*, vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 1695-1738.

<sup>2</sup> Recent summaries, such as Luciana Bellatalla, Giovanni Genovesi, and Elena Marescotti (eds), *La scuola in Italia tra pedagogia e politica (1945-2003)* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004) and Francesco Susi, *Scuola, società, politica, democrazia: Dalla riforma Gentile ai Decreti delegati* (Rome: Armando, 2012), indicate sources for similar revisions in Dario Ragazzini, *Dall’educazione democratica alla riforma della scuola* (Naples: Liguori, 1987), Giorgio Chiosso, *I cattolici e la scuola dalla Costituente al centro-sinistra* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1988), Angelo Gaudio, *La politica scolastica dei cattolici, 1943-1953: Dai programmi all’azione di governo* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1992), and Angelo Semeraro, *Il mito della riforma: La parabola laica nella storia educativa della Repubblica* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Daria Gabusi, *La svolta democratica nell’istruzione italiana. Luigi Gui e la politica scolastica del centro-sinistra* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2010), and, for a general presentation of current research trends on the topic, *Per i cinquant’anni della scuola media unica*, special issue of *Nuovo Bollettino CIRSE*, 8, no. 1.

failure in the reform of high schools<sup>4</sup> and universities<sup>5</sup> that delayed these latter in comparison to other western educational systems.

Even though scholars have dealt with this aspect only tangentially until now, the Italian cycle of reform and its crisis needs to be placed in an appropriate international context in order to understand it fully. Since the late 1950s, many Western European countries considered how to expand attendance in secondary education, experimenting with comprehensive schooling<sup>6</sup>. Although the U.S. had early adjusted its school system to social diversity and massive attendance, it was likewise experiencing debates about the quality of its school system and about the adaptation of the curricula and the ways of selecting students to the necessities of scientific progress and its role as a superpower<sup>7</sup>.

The paper contributes to this international dimension in the study of Italian education policy in the 1950s-1960s by considering a specific episode of exchange and collaboration involving networks of experts of various origins: the advisory mission financed by the Ford Foundation in 1960. This consultancy had been requested by Giuseppe Medici, Minister of Public Education, and was guided by the ex-President of Harvard, James Bryant Conant, an influential spokesperson for education reform in the U.S. Italian policy-makers worked side by side with the officers of one of the most active American agencies involved in ‘cultural diplomacy’ and in the global promotion of models of development based on the political requirements and the socio-economic conceptions of American elites. This essay will reconstruct the events by employing newly available documents from the Grant Files and

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<sup>4</sup> John Polesel, ‘Reform and Reaction: Creating New Education and Training Structures in Italy’, *Comparative Education*, 42, no. 4 (2006): 549-562.

<sup>5</sup> Giliberto Capano, *La politica universitaria* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Achim Leschinsky and Karl Ulrich Mayer (eds), *The Comprehensive School Experiment Revisited: Evidence From Western Europe* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1999); Susanne Wilborg, *Education and Social Integration: The Development of Comprehensive Education in Europe* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for American School* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Roland W. Evans, *The Hope for American School Reform: The Cold War Pursuit of Inquiry Learning in Social Studies* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For a long-term approach William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common Schools to ‘No Child Left Behind’* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Catalogued Reports collections of the Ford Foundation records, and will explore the cultural and political collocation of Italian reformers active in Western cooperation after World War II. This research is also of use beyond the Italian experience, as it reassesses the Ford Foundation at the beginning of its international activities. It will reconsider some of the interpretations of the role of the main agencies involved in the internationalisation of educational policy, interpretations focussed on their efforts to standardise school systems to the advantage of economically and culturally ‘hegemonic’ countries<sup>8</sup>. It will present the activity of these agencies, their cultural orientation and the extent of the investments as resulting from a ‘negotiation’<sup>9</sup> between U.S. centres of power and the political and intellectual leaders of the destination country.

## The Context

### *The ‘Ten-Year Plan’ and the Debate about the Italian School System in the 1950s*

On 22 September 1958, the Italian government presented the ‘Ten-Year Plan for School Development’ in the Senate. This plan foresaw a 1,386 billion lire investment to update personnel and school buildings, address the issues of the distribution of schools throughout

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<sup>8</sup> Robert F. Arnove, ‘Comparative Education and World-Systems Analysis’, *Comparative Education Review*, 24, no. 1 (1980): 48-62; Id. and Carlos Alberto Torres (eds), *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> This is the interpretation of Ludovic Tournès, *Sciences de l’homme et politique: Les fondations philanthropiques américaines en France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011). The author, who edited *L’argent de l’influence: Les fondations américaines et leurs réseaux européens* (Paris: Autrement, 2010), is a leader in recent studies of American foundations, alongside Giuliana Gemelli, editor of *The Ford Foundation and Europe (1950’s-1970’s): Cross-Fertilization of Learning in Social Science and Management* (Brussels: PIE-Lang, 1998), *American Foundations and Large-Scale Research: Construction and Transfer of Knowledge* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2001), and *American Foundations in Europe: Grant-Giving Policies, Cultural Diplomacy and Transatlantic Relations, 1920-1980* (Brussels: PIE-Lang, 2003, with Roy Macleod). These studies offer more structured viewpoints than those that consider the foundations as mere tools of American ‘cultural imperialism’, such as Edward H. Berman, *The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy: The Ideology of Philanthropy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) and Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

the national territory, and develop the structures and programmes needed to support school attendance<sup>10</sup>. It was promoted by the Prime Minister and leader of the Christian-Democrat Party (DC), Amintore Fanfani.

Four months earlier, general elections had confirmed the DC to head the government, while registering significant growth in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). The moment seemed right for a project Fanfani had been working on for years, which was to include the PSI in a progressive government programme to consolidate the consensus towards democratic institutions. Education was a good starting point, because the PSI's national representative for school policy, Tristano Codignola, had been elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1958.

Since 1950, through their publishing house *La Nuova Italia*, Codignola and his father Ernesto had been supporting one of the main Italian pedagogical journals, *Scuola e Città*<sup>11</sup>. A leader of the American progressive education movement, Carleton Washburne, had inspired this journal. During World War II, he had headed the Education Subcommittee of the Allied Control Commission, and his reports to the Italian government<sup>12</sup> had led to deep criticism of the school system inherited from the Giovanni Gentile's legislation introduced in 1923 and from the modifications made under Fascism. This system featured segmentation that 'reproduced and...fortified the class and status structures of society'<sup>13</sup>, selectivity that restrained demand for education, and an authoritarian pedagogical approach typical of the Idealist tradition<sup>14</sup>. In Washburne's opinion, secondary education in Italy was still founded on the pre-eminence of classicist and literary models deeply rooted in the Jesuit tradition of *ratio*

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<sup>10</sup> *Atti parlamentari, Senato*, III Legislatura, Documenti, no. 129.

<sup>11</sup> See the journal *La scuola di Firenze: 1950-2010. Prospettive di un bilancio*, special issue of *Studi sulla Formazione*, 16, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>12</sup> The final document was published as *La politica e la legislazione scolastica in Italia dal 1922 al 1943* (Milan: Garzanti, 1947). See also Steven F. White, 'Italian Popular Education between Fascism and Democracy, 1943-1954: The Work and Legacy of the Allied Control Commission Education Subcommittee' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Virginia, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> 'Preface' to Detlef Müller, Fritz Ringer, and Brian Simon (eds), *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), xii.

<sup>14</sup> On the pedagogical viewpoint of Gentile and its persistence, see Giuseppe Spadafora, *Giovanni Gentile: La pedagogia, la scuola* (Rome: Armando, 1997).

*studiorium*, whereas it should be adapted to the new social complexity. He particularly urged the institution of a genuinely comprehensive lower secondary school in substitution to the then-obligatory choice at age eleven between two types of education. These were either a *Scuola media* with an admissions test, organised around the study of Latin and designed as preparatory for the academic high schools, or vocational *Scuole di avviamento professionale* offering training for technical and blue-collar jobs. Institutions and courses offering continued training and further qualifications for pupils who had completed the latter diploma had recently begun to develop thanks to efforts by local consortia, professional associations and the ministries of Education and Labour; however, they often had no structured curriculum and their creation followed no organic plan<sup>15</sup>.

These themes had been developed in *Scuola e Città* mainly by Lamberto Borghi, a high school teacher who had come to the U.S. during the war as a refugee and had become a prominent John Dewey scholar<sup>16</sup>. His articles, along with those of other authors such as Aldo Visalberghi and Francesco de Bartolomeis, had presented Dewey's 'democratic education' and 'child-centered learning' as essential for creating a school system that acted as a lever for the construction of an egalitarian and truly democratic society. On this basis, and with reference to the experiments in school policy implemented by the Labour government in Britain and by Scandinavian socialists<sup>17</sup>, the *Scuola e Città* group concluded that the introduction of a comprehensive secondary school that stimulated the extension of school attendance would work only if it was accompanied by teaching practices founded on interests, personalities and social behaviours of the children, flexible curricula involving students in the choice of their own subject matters, and the introduction of a democratic climate in an

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<sup>15</sup> For further information see Nicola D'Amico, *Storia della formazione professionale in Italia* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> On him, see Luciana Bellatalla, 'Lamberto Borghi interprete di Dewey', *Ricerche Pedagogiche*, 50 (1979): 37-41, and Franco Cambi and Paolo Orefice (eds), *Educazione, libertà, democrazia: Il pensiero pedagogico di Lamberto Borghi* (Naples: Liguori, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> See *L'istruzione in Gran Bretagna*, special issue, 10, no. 12 (1959), and Thorsten Husén, *Mutamenti nel sistema scolastico svedese*, 13, no. 10 (1962): 390-399.



educational administration still based on authoritarian principles<sup>18</sup>. With reference to Dewey and to popular international examples of democratic education, the opinions expressed in *Scuola e Città* strengthened the theoretical foundations for a proposal of school reform.

These considerations gained growing consent in the face of the failure of the government led by the DC to apply the directives of the 1948 Constitution. It called for ‘compulsory and free’ instruction ‘for at least eight years’, indicating that ‘capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources’, should be given the opportunity to ‘attain the highest levels of education’ (art.34). Moreover, while recognising that ‘private institutions’ had the right to ‘establish schools...without any State support’, the Constitution assigned the State itself the duty of establishing schools ‘of all branches and grades’ necessary to society (art.33). While the rapid adaptation of educational institutions was widely invoked, attempts to implement these constitutional requirements around 1950<sup>19</sup> had led nowhere, and subsequently the government had not taken any incisive measure. The provisional solution to meet the compulsory schooling required under the Constitution was based on post-elementary special programmes, three-year extensions of the primary school programme taught by elementary school teachers. This solution took advantage of a level of instruction already widely available across Italy, and of the large availability of teachers who had received their training in specialised secondary schools (*Istituto magistrale*). These post-elementary courses generated lively debate in professional associations and unions in the education sector. Unions of primary school teachers pressed to have post-elementary programmes recognised as a definitive and universal solution, quicker to implement and based on teachers already trained to provide education for all. On the other hand, unions of middle and high school teachers proposed an immediate effort to develop wider-spread lower secondary education

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<sup>18</sup> See the meeting *Giornate di studio sui problemi della scuola media di primo grado*, Rome, 17-19 March 1956 (*Scuola e Città*, 7, no. 5 [1956]).

<sup>19</sup> See the survey carried out in 1947-49 by Guido Gonella, then Minister of Public Education: Giorgio Chiosso, ‘Motivi pedagogici e politici nei lavori dell’inchiesta Gonella (1947-1949)’, *Pedagogia e Vita*, 41, no. 4 (1979-1980): 295-321.

with university-trained teachers. These two fronts included important associations close to both the Catholic Church and the DC, and the Church itself had robust interests in private education. These particularities made it difficult to produce effective educational legislation and hampered the leaders of the DC in their planning of long-term projects of one type or the other. In a country divided by the Cold War, the Christian-Democrat government could not afford to lose consensus, and it was difficult to find a solution in which all the interested groups would collaborate<sup>20</sup>.

Given these issues, anticlerical commentators accused the DC of not guaranteeing the efficient operation of public schools in order to favour the flourishing growth of private, Church-run schools. For many of them, the democratic and progressive reform of public schools became the remedy to the ‘clerical offensive’ against public schools that the government under the DC had no intention to curb. This was the position that the internationally renowned philosopher Guido Calogero expressed in his comments on education policy for the main left-liberal journal of ideas, *Il Mondo*<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, in the mid-1950s, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had likewise expressed a clear stance about instruction. In the immediate post-war period, several communist intellectuals had expressed their opinion that the Soviet polytechnic school was a ‘socialist’ version of the selective system similar to the one modelled on the tradition of Gentile in which they had been raised. Then, the Italian communists had been largely inspired by the thinking about the importance of a truly inclusive plan of general education for social change and for the challenge to the cultural ‘hegemony’ of ruling classes expressed in Gramsci’s newly published *Prison Notebooks*, and could reference Soviet authors such as Suchodolski and Makarenko. Through such elaborations, the PCI came nearer to the pedagogical theories of democratic schooling,

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<sup>20</sup> See Roberto Sani, *Le associazioni degli insegnanti cattolici nel secondo dopoguerra, 1944-1958* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Calogero’s writings about education have been published as *Scuola sotto inchiesta* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965<sup>2</sup>). See also Roberto Sani, *Il Mondo e la questione scolastica* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1987).

including the centrality of the students and their curiosity in order to construct their knowledge base<sup>22</sup>. With a project of this nature, the party could find allies in view of a broad progressive coalition, while enjoying widespread admiration for the educational results demonstrated by the quality of Russian science at that time.

Through Fanfani's 'Ten-Year Plan', government interrupted a legislative stasis concerning education, in view of a policy intervention which could no longer be delayed, and had the chance to begin a dialogue on the topic with the PSI, which had important ideas to propose. However, the DC establishment was diffident about working with a party still connected to Marxism; in February of 1959, it removed its support of Fanfani and promoted the formation of a new Cabinet led by another DC member, Antonio Segni<sup>23</sup>. The Minister of Public Education who was called to define the political and cultural contents of the economic investment foreseen in the 'Plan' was Giuseppe Medici.

### ***Medici and the Ford Foundation***

The educational background of Medici, professor of Agricultural Economics, was far from that of the literary classicism typical of the most influential Italian intellectual circles. Moreover, although affiliated with the DC, he was ideally identifiable as an 'old-school' liberal. In education, he guaranteed the reformist approach without giving in to radical programmes. He considered school reform as a necessary companion to the 'rise' of a 'new type of society', a democratic society in which widespread instruction was necessary for political participation, and especially a society in which 'productive work' required ever-

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<sup>22</sup> See Fabio Pruneri, *La politica scolastica del Partito Comunista Italiano dalle origini al 1955* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1999), and Pietro Maltese, 'Gli intellettuali e la riforma della scuola: Un dibattito sulle pagine di *Rinascita*', *Studi sulla Formazione*, 12, nos. 1-2 (2009): 235-253.

<sup>23</sup> See Francesco Malgeri (ed.), *Storia della Democrazia cristiana*, vol. 3, *Gli anni di transizione: Da Fanfani a Moro* (Rome: Cinque Lune, 1988).

greater numbers of specialised, qualified personnel and fewer blue-collar workers<sup>24</sup>. In short, the school system did not need to challenge the fundamental order of advanced capitalism, but rather support the development of a productive system that could best guarantee wealth and wellbeing.

An analysis of Italian schools from the perspective of manpower training had been carried out by the Social Democrat Roberto Tremelloni as part of a parliamentary inquest into the problem of unemployment several years before this, from 1951 to 1953<sup>25</sup>. This analysis had revealed the exasperation of industry with a school system in which less than 20% of the workers had continued their studies beyond primary school, where many were still illiterate and where young people could not obtain the technical knowledge needed in a modern western economy, due to the scarce attention given to vocational training. In light of this information, in the mid-1950s Medici had encouraged the development of education for all in the rural South, where the struggle for more widespread educational opportunity had accompanied the redistribution of land to new farmers since 1950<sup>26</sup>. In particular, Medici was one of the political backers in favour of financial support from the Ford Foundation, first for the National Anti-Illiteracy Union<sup>27</sup>, then for joint studies and exchange programmes for visiting scholars between Italy and the U.S. promoted by the Association for the Industrial Development of *Mezzogiorno* (SVIMEZ)<sup>28</sup>.

The involvement of the Ford Foundation in these projects had taken place while its international programmes were developing, and the Associate Director of International

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<sup>24</sup> Giuseppe Medici, *Introduzione al piano di sviluppo della scuola* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1959), 12, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Giusy Palamara, *Una Repubblica fondata sul lavoro: L'inchiesta parlamentare sulla disoccupazione 1950-1954* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Emanuele Bernardi, *La riforma agraria in Italia e gli Stati Uniti: Guerra fredda, piano Marshall e interventi per il Mezzogiorno negli anni del centrismo degasperiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY (RAC), Ford Foundation (FF), grant files nos. 53-34, 54-29, and 58-117.

<sup>28</sup> RAC, FF, grant file no. 57-280.

Affairs, Waldemar Nielsen<sup>29</sup>, had soon outlined an overall strategy for its Italian activity. In the struggle against Communism and the social and economic underdevelopment in which it might prosper, Italy was considered a ‘bridge’ between the more advanced European countries and the Mediterranean area. The promotion of new patterns of social reform in Italy might lead to a development model that could be used in other nations<sup>30</sup>. Nielsen had confirmed this conclusion after his travels in Italy in November-December 1956. There, among other contacts, he had reached agreements with the cultural group *il Mulino*<sup>31</sup>, mainly composed of scholars based at the University of Bologna. They were ‘about equally of Catholic and non-Catholic members’, and according to American officers that allowed them to speak with all democratic segments of the Italian society without being tied to the governing establishment<sup>32</sup>. Since 1951, *il Mulino* had been presenting Italy with the best foreign ideas in social sciences and with its journal it strove to build up the theory for a school and higher education policy that joined innovation in teaching with a contribution to modernisation. Key commentators on the theme were progressive educators of Catholic background, who were open to discussions with more radical reformers and curious about pedagogy in the U.S and Northern Europe. These included such figures as Luigi Pedrazzi and Giovanni Gozzer<sup>33</sup>, called to work some years before at the Research Offices of the Ministry of Public Education in view of possible reforms.

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<sup>29</sup> On him and the international activity of the Ford Foundation see Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe: Shepard Stone between Philanthropy, Academy, and Diplomacy* (Princeton: University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> See Frédéric Attal, ‘L’Institut Croce, la revue *Nord e Sud* et la diplomatie culturelle des fondations américaines (1946-1964): Histoire, sciences sociales et “guerre froide culturelle” dans le Mezzogiorno italien’, *Storiografia*, 14 (2010): 9-178.

<sup>31</sup> See Alberto Bertoni, ‘Un gruppo intellettuale imprenditore di se stesso: Appunti per una storia del “Mulino”’, in A. Berselli (ed.), *Editoria e università a Bologna tra Ottocento e Novecento*, (Bologna: Istituto per la Storia di Bologna, 1991, 255-271), and Luigi Pedrazzi (ed.), *Gli inizi de ‘il Mulino’, 1951-1964* (Bologna: Assindustria, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> RAC, FF, log file no. 57-100, Francis X. Sutton, memorandum of a conversation with Fabio Luca Cavazza, 14 May 1956. In 1956 Cavazza, founder of *il Mulino*, was in the U.S. as part of the Foreign Leader Program funded by the Department of State. There he came into contact with the Ford Foundation.

<sup>33</sup> Gozzer and Pedrazzi also participated in the convention *Processo alla scuola*, organised in February 1956 by *Il Mondo*, along with Calogero, Borghi, some authors of *Scuola e Città*, and representatives of the politics and the economy. See *Dibattito sulla scuola* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1956).

With its choice to finance a committee created by *il Mulino* ‘to study the problem of the reform of higher education’<sup>34</sup>, for the Ford Foundation education itself became a field for modernising efforts in Italy, and once again the country could be a policy laboratory for both developed and underdeveloped areas. In February 1959, Nielsen expressed this point of view in a report about the necessity of focussing Ford’s International Affairs office on education, to reinforce ‘free world countries’ in the competition with the ‘Sino-Soviet bloc’, to remediate the economic difficulties created by the ‘lack of trained manpower’, and to ‘indicate the interest of the American government in individual opportunity, social democracy and international fraternity’<sup>35</sup>.

Medici was aware of the cultural and institutional influences that he was working with as well as the need to base his educational policies on reliable data when in June 1959 he commissioned a research group of the SVIMEZ Sociological Section to undertake a study. Its leader, Gino Martinoli, was an engineer who had long worked as a human capital management expert for some of the main Italian industrial firms, and because of his background he essentially looked at education as an asset for economic growth<sup>36</sup>. Not by chance, his group was asked to prepare ‘a...prevision of the demand for personnel at various levels of qualifications foreseeable in the next two decades...of Italian economic development’ and an ‘investigation into the needs...for renewal of cultural and instructional content in relation to the nature and transformations of the economic organisation of a modern society’<sup>37</sup>. This guaranteed not only the services of a research centre at the cutting edge in the use of econometric tools for economic planning but also the involvement of the Ford

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<sup>34</sup> RAC, FF, log file no. 57-100, Nielsen to Shepard Stone, 10 November 1958. For financial details, RAC, FF, grant file no. 58-213.

<sup>35</sup> RAC, FF, *Catalogued Reports*, Waldemar A. Nielsen, ‘A Proposal for an International Educational Development Program’, February 1959.

<sup>36</sup> On Martinoli, see the biographical entry in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 71 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2008), now online ([http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gino-martinoli\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gino-martinoli_(Dizionario-Biografico))).

<sup>37</sup> SVIMEZ Historical Archives, Rome (ASSVIMEZ), series 3 (*Studi e Ricerche*), box 103, folder 46, Medici to Pasquale Saraceno, 20 June 1959.

Foundation, which wanted ‘a(n)...opportunity...to influence the development of one of the most retrograde and at the same time one of the most important educational systems in Europe’<sup>38</sup>. Medici looked to the efficient American modernising principles and growing international prestige of the Ford Foundation for the legitimisation of his initiatives, knowing he would have to compete with a left-wing educational policy sustained by the authority of Dewey and his pedagogical school. For their part, the officers of Ford Foundation had a favourable opinion of Medici, confirming that he ‘was out to establish (a)...vigorous reputation as the new Minister of Education’<sup>39</sup>. Nielsen met Medici in Rome in the summer of 1959 in order to organise this latter’s visit to American partners of the Italian universities participating in exchange programmes<sup>40</sup>. On that occasion, Nielsen accepted the proposal for an even closer cooperation, guaranteeing that ‘the Foundation was prepared to’ send ‘one or more outstanding educators from the United States...who would serve as “private advisors” in the reform’<sup>41</sup>. Considering the objectives and the political context, James Bryant Conant was chosen as leader of the undertaking.

### *James Byrant Conant, the U.S. and Europe*

Born in a middle-class family in Boston, Conant studied Chemistry at Harvard, and after specialising in Germany in the mid-1920s he became an internationally renowned scientist. He began to commit himself to education policy after he had become President of Harvard in 1933. Conant was fascinated by the results Horace Mann’s *common school* had achieved in various areas of the United States in the Nineteenth century in expansion of attendance and social promotion, and in his reflections he adapted the Jeffersonian ideal of education as a

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<sup>38</sup> RAC, FF, grant file no. 60-137, Nielsen to Stone, 7 July 1959.

<sup>39</sup> RAC, FF, *Office Records, International Affairs* (Joseph E. Slater), Series I (*Chronological files*), box 12, folder 120, memorandum of Joseph E. Slater on his trip to Italy, 19-24 May 1959.

<sup>40</sup> The trip took place between September and October: see RAC, FF, grant file no. 58-203, Charles Aikin to Victor Jones, 2 October 1959, and Aikin to Nielsen, 9 October 1959.

<sup>41</sup> Nielsen to Stone, 7 July 1959.

mechanism for the creation of a ‘natural aristocracy’ in the era of institutional and material public support for schooling. For him, universal and inclusive access to school should be the vehicle for the promotion of the best students, independent of their origins, in view of a fully ‘classless society’, fluid enough to make every position accessible to anyone with the necessary abilities<sup>42</sup>. According to such ideas, while in office at Harvard Conant began a meritocratic reform programme that reached its highest point in the introduction of standardised tests for the distribution of financial aid to students of the National Scholarships Program<sup>43</sup>.

After World War II, Conant reset this vision in the context of the competition with the USSR and the new role of the U.S. as leader of the ‘free world’. He became convinced of the efficiency of the American education system after having visited universities and research centres in the British Commonwealth in 1951 as a representative of the American government and of the Carnegie Corporation<sup>44</sup>, and after having accepted the role of High Commissioner and then Ambassador to West Germany in 1953<sup>45</sup>, at the end of his mandate at Harvard. The segmentation of European secondary education limited the obtainment of high school diplomas to about 20% of the pupils and the access to higher learning to about 4-5% of the students. Selection based on social background led to the reproduction of class divisions and social conflict, as well as to the waste of young talent. The connection between comprehensive high schools and college instead allowed a higher percentage of students access to an advanced general education and thus to highly skilled professions. He considered

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<sup>42</sup> See his ‘Education for a Classless Society: The Jeffersonian Tradition’, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1940: 593-602, and the later *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963). See also Wayne J. Urban, ‘James Bryant Conant and equality of educational opportunity’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 46, nos. 1-2 (2010): 193-205.

<sup>43</sup> Morton and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America’s University* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 13-31.

<sup>44</sup> Craig Campbell, ‘Cold War, the Universities and Public Education: The Contexts of J.B. Conant’s Mission to Australia and New Zealand, 1951’, *History of Education Review*, 39, no. 1 (2010): 21-37.

<sup>45</sup> Conant’s thoughts about this experience can be found in *Germany and Freedom: A Personal Appraisal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).



this the cornerstone for the spread and efficient social use of knowledge in the ‘free world’, as it guaranteed the social mobility that would impede the affirmation of communist doctrines<sup>46</sup>.

Conant maintained his point of view even when ‘the Russians’ success with rockets opened the gate for a flood of talk about our schools’<sup>47</sup> in October 1957. The Carnegie Corporation commissioned Conant’s report *American High School Today*<sup>48</sup> a few weeks before the Sputnik launch and Conant presented the final version in 1959. In it, he rejected the idea of returning to European selectivity to solve the failures of a school in which inclusivity seemed to hinder excellence. Conant believed that the structure of American high schools was the most appropriate one given the complex needs of a developed democratic society. These schools gathered all students in a single organisation and offered them identical basic education followed by performance-based selections of bright students to prepare at a higher level in elective programmes. Conant rather favoured abandoning radical experiments of active learning, which had taken place between the two world wars, and returning to a more conservative essentialist approach in teaching methods and curricula. He preferred more traditional classroom activities in which the teacher led the children in acquiring shared and well-defined knowledge and behaviours<sup>49</sup>. The assessment of learning and the promotion of gifted students in accordance with these common traditional standards would also guarantee the transmission of consolidated values and social relationships. This was the spirit that

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<sup>46</sup> Conant expressed these concepts in *Education in a Divided World: The Function of the Public Schools in Our Unique Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), and *Education and Liberty: The Role of Schools in a Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

<sup>47</sup> Conant often began his conferences in this way in 1958: the texts are in the Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, James Bryant Conant Papers (JBC), box 98. For the repercussions of the Sputnik launch in American public opinion, see Barbara Barksdale Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), and Paul Dickson, *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* (New York: Walker, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Education of American Teachers* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), and the effort to create the general education curriculum of Harvard in 1943-45, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946).

Conant had demonstrated when he was president of Harvard, where his meritocratic admissions policy had not upset the socio-cultural habits of the university community<sup>50</sup>.

In conclusion, the Ford Foundation found Conant could effectively lead the mission to Italy for various reasons. Firstly, he knew the problems of European school systems and by comparing these to the American situation had found possible operative solutions. Secondly, he was a reliable cold warrior in the bipolar contest with the USSR. Lastly, although he was a convinced supporter of democratised schooling, he was opposed to radical and destabilising proposals.

## **Conant in Italy**

### ***The Organisation of the Trip***

The ‘Summary review of Italian educational progress’ was granted \$25,000 in funding by the Ford Foundation on 10 February 1960<sup>51</sup>, and its organisation required careful planning. The foundation took care that the undertaking was not perceived in Italy as American interference in internal affairs<sup>52</sup>. It framed the trip as a research study carried out by a comparative education expert, leaving Minister Medici the choice whether to use Conant’s report or not<sup>53</sup>. In the meantime, Conant improved his knowledge of Italy with preliminary readings from which he outlined the issues to work on. Relying on the organisation he had experimented with in his work on American high schools, Conant sought an advisor for each issue. They were to visit Italy before he did, contact the Italian political and intellectual

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<sup>50</sup> Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2005), 168-199.

<sup>51</sup> RAC, FF, grant file no. 60-137, ‘Program Action’.

<sup>52</sup> The American Ambassador to Italy expressed such worries. See *Ibid.*, Vincent M. Barnett, Jr. to Ambassador James D. Zellerbach, 8 December 1959.

<sup>53</sup> See *Ibid.*, Stone to A.V. Boerner, 17 December 1959, and Medici to Henry T. Heald, 31 December 1959.

figures involved and gather ideas and documents<sup>54</sup>. Conant called on Francis M. Rogers for the study of higher education. Rogers was a scholar of Romance languages and literature, dean of Harvard Graduate School, collaborated with the State Department in language training for military and diplomatic personnel<sup>55</sup>, and helped advertise American university instruction abroad<sup>56</sup>. The work on teacher training was instead entrusted to Francis Keppel, Dean of the Harvard School of Education and Conant's 'right hand' in his studies of school systems. Secondary education and vocational training were perhaps the most delicate matters in the reform debate and for these Conant chose a professional he did not personally know, Julio Bortolazzo, president of the College of San Mateo in California.

Bortolazzo had visited Italy in 1955 for the U.S. Operation Mission in Rome and had written a 'Report on Recommended Changes and Reform in Vocational Training in Italy'<sup>57</sup> for the National Committee for Productivity (one of the Italian Parliamentary working groups formed in the wake of the worrisome data that emerged from the Tremelloni survey). In this document, Bortolazzo confirmed that the vocational sector in Italian education was not integrated with a school system where the classical tradition prevailed. It was neglected by the Ministry of Public Education, which was unable to provide appropriate practical training to the teachers, to connect the training programmes to local industries, or to find clear-cut forms of collaboration with local institutions and other organisations that participated in the economic support of the schools. His suggestions included investing in the creation of a greater number of technical institutions and in the improvement of their equipment, promoting teacher training courses in the faculties of technical universities, introducing new teaching, classroom and laboratory techniques through the creation of 'pilot centers' and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Conant to Nielsen, 28 December 1959, and Nielsen to Stone, 8 January 1960.

<sup>55</sup> Rogers wrote about his experience in 'Languages and the War Effort: A Challenge to the Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages', *The Modern Language Journal*, 27, no. 5 (1943): 299-309, and 'Languages and the War Effort: Additional Remarks', *The Modern Language Journal*, 27, no. 8 (1943): 571-573.

<sup>56</sup> His *Higher Education in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), translated in many languages (in Italian in 1956), gathered material from conferences held in Brazil for the State Department.

<sup>57</sup> A copy, dated 29 December 1955, is in RAC, FF, log file 57-100.

financing exchange programmes to permit teachers and administrators to visit vocational training programmes in America. The Italian Ministry of Public Education indicated its willingness to implement these recommendations<sup>58</sup>. Conant, after reading Bortolazzo's report, proposed the author return to Italy to 'determine to what degree...recommendations had been accepted', and examine 'the education of those who are not going to university, and...various proposals of reform'<sup>59</sup>.

### *The 'Medici Plan'*

Conant's advisors were recruited in January and February of 1960 and were in Italy in March and April of the same year; Conant himself visited Italy in May.

Meanwhile, the debate about school reform had accelerated. In January 1959, The Communist parliamentarians Ambrogio Donini and Cesare Luporini sought leadership of the progressive front by presenting a bill in which the *Scuola media* was integrated with primary school in an eight-year programme of compulsory attendance. The curriculum did not include Latin but instead featured historical and social studies and the natural sciences, and was aimed at developing both intellectual and functional skills in all students<sup>60</sup>. Medici was called on to present an alternative proposal from the government and he managed to do so in January 1960<sup>61</sup>. Medici's *Scuola media* was compulsory and comprehensive, and promoted the continuation of studying by providing for elective courses that would help children develop their own aptitudes. However, the electives conditioned the child's future: the knowledge of Latin was in particular necessary for access to the *Licei*, the academic high schools whose diplomas allowed the admittance to a greater number of university faculties.

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<sup>58</sup> See the document prepared by the Ministry on 15 November 1956, of which a copy is *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> RAC, FF, log file no. 60-137, Conant to Julio L. Bortolazzo, 25 January 1960.

<sup>60</sup> *Atti parlamentari, Senato*, III Legislatura, Documenti, no. 359.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 904.

At the same time, Medici presented the general cultural orientation of his project for allocating the funds of the ‘Ten-Year Plan’ across all levels of instruction, which provided the context in which to interpret the importance of the new *Scuola media*. The weight of the choice of Latin was balanced by the fact that the high school curricula including it lost all formal privilege for university admittance. Each university faculty could permit access by verifying the competence of students in the specific disciplines, with no reference to the type of high school diploma presented. In this way, students chose their curriculum based on their personal interests rather than on their future plans<sup>62</sup>. In view of the partial liberalisation of access to higher learning, Medici proposed the full implementation of long-invoked post-secondary professional courses. Those would be an alternative to traditional university programmes which would be improved in quality and based on a closer contact to the most updated research. With these objectives in mind, universities were to be redistributed throughout Italy by specialising degree plans and offering economic support to students to attend the university of their choice. Student residences (*collegi*) were to be built to provide housing, community life and support to selected high-profile students<sup>63</sup>.

The school system designed by the ‘Medici plan’ found its backbone in the reorganised vocational *Istituti professionali*, which were to be developed organically by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with local industry in order to guarantee realistic work-study environments and the absorption of the students in the local job market<sup>64</sup>. The first results of the SVIMEZ surveys revealed optimism that industry-based economic growth and subsequent demand for qualified workforce would continue<sup>65</sup>. Based on this, Medici predicted that after compulsory schooling 80% of the students would have chosen this vocational option.

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<sup>62</sup> Medici, *Introduzione*, 34-37

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-67.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-47.

<sup>65</sup> The first results were presented on 3 November 1959: see ASSVIMEZ, series 3, box 103, folder 46.

During their stay in Italy, the American advisors thus drew up their evaluations with this new reforming platform in mind.

### *Evaluations and Suggestions*

Conant was convinced that ‘education is not an exportable item’, and that ‘the primary purpose of studying...other countries is...to discover the ways in which different societies...have evolved their own educational systems, usually to meet very similar problems’<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, he did not consider his trip as an imposition of an advanced institutional model on another country. He and his advisors rather interviewed educators and ministerial administrative personnel in many large Italian cities in order to evaluate the suitability of the new Italian school policy for the needs of a modern society. To this end.

The new, compulsory *Scuola media* at the centre of the reform was met with favour by the American advisors. It was considered a great improvement over the state of abandon in which children found themselves if they decided to pursue a vocational curriculum at 11 years of age. Bortolazzo wrote that ‘in a democratic society the Medici proposal made a lot of sense’ and was more ‘realistic’ than the Communist project<sup>67</sup>, which ‘wanted all children at this age to take exactly the same subjects’<sup>68</sup>. Conant himself, in the report sent on 5 September 1960 to the Italian Ministry of Public Education, defined the proposal as ‘a bold innovation’, destined to make ‘Italy...the leader in education reform in Europe’. While all over the Continent the ‘tradition of sharp segregation in special schools...of those who aimed at attending a

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<sup>66</sup> JBC, box 101, folder *International Conference of ETS. 10/31/1959*.

<sup>67</sup> RAC, FF, grant file 60-137, Julio L. Bortolazzo, ‘Problems and Issues in Italian Elementary and Secondary Education, 1960, Especially as Related to the “Medici Ten-Year Legislative Plan for School Development”’, 20 April 1960, 12, 19-20.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Francis Keppel, ‘Draft of Report for Mr. Conant’, 22 April 1960, 11.

university had been vigorously challenged', only Italy had decided to immediately implement large scale solutions that elsewhere were still only experimental<sup>69</sup>.

The breadth of the change did however lead to doubts that a country still struggling against illiteracy and widespread school dropout rates was ready for such a challenge. There was first of all a problem of infrastructure, with great regional disparities. In rural areas, especially in the South, there were not enough schools and the services that would encourage attendance were lacking, such as lunchrooms and school buses<sup>70</sup>. Conant recommended making the application of the reform gradual, experimenting first in the better-equipped areas and preparing the more problematic regions by investing in the public works foreseen under the 'Ten-Year Plan'<sup>71</sup>.

The management of the period of transition was also problematic. For rural areas with no *Scuola media*, Medici confirmed the provisional post-elementary programmes. Bortolazzo criticised the solution, claiming that it 'closed the door' for many 'competent youngsters' who wished to continue their studies, because the elementary school teachers could not offer an adequate preparation<sup>72</sup>. Keppel also considered the education of the elementary teachers a problem. He recommended the creation of structured university teacher training both for them and for future secondary school teachers, contrary to the typically idealistic refusal of teaching technique in preference for the transmission of 'pure' knowledge. This training could be carried out in the 'so-called pedagogical faculties' or *Facoltà di Magistero*, which had been created to allow elementary teachers the possibility to teach at higher levels or to become school administrators. They were not given great weight in Italy, but were possibly the nucleus of a curriculum comparable to that of the American Master of Arts in Teaching<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., James B. Conant, 'Some Observations on Italian Education: A Report on a Visit to Italy in May, 1960', 5 September 1960, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Bortolazzo, 'Problems and Issues', 6-7, 21-23.

<sup>71</sup> Conant, 'Some Observations', 11.

<sup>72</sup> Bortolazzo 'Problems and Issues', 18-19.

<sup>73</sup> Keppel, 'Draft of Report'9-10.

In general, the reinforcement of training for all future teachers was of pivotal importance for the successful implementation of the reform. Greater teaching competences would have led even the teachers of the *Scuola media* to a heightened awareness of the needs of socially and culturally diverse student bodies. These teachers were accustomed to ‘call themselves *Professore*’, consider themselves to have more in common with university professors than with elementary teachers, and consider strictness as the only relevant quality a teacher needed<sup>74</sup>. Only by changing attitudes through teacher training could these teachers follow the example of similar experimental French institutes and provide a ‘orientation process’ combining ‘the continuing fundamental education of all future citizens...with a discovery of the ambition and potentialities of each pupil’<sup>75</sup>.

A new class of teachers better prepared for their jobs and less concentrated on the symbolic prestige of traditional subjects such as Latin could contribute to the reduction of early school abandonment among less affluent students as well as clear the way for a reform of the upper secondary schools. Bortolazzo believed that the entrance of well-prepared and responsive fourteen-year-old students in *Istituti professionali* would encourage the development of the facilities of these vocational schools along with the improvement of education in general and its practical applications. By taking advantage of the creation of new school buildings foreseen under the ‘Ten-Year Plan’, some could be integrated with high schools offering technical-scientific curricula within ‘experimental schools’ that could share laboratories and academic subjects. This would ‘give the program a certain flexibility so that students could change from one program to the other based on their achievements and interests’, in a gradual ‘comprehensive turn’ of upper secondary schooling<sup>76</sup>.

Given the importance of teacher training, the most urgent efforts were needed for the university, where this was to take place. Rogers arrived in Italy prepared to find a university

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 2; Bortolazzo, ‘Problems and Issues’, 7-9.

<sup>75</sup> Conant, ‘Some Observations’, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Bortolazzo, ‘Problems and Issues’, 3-6, 27-29.



system structured according to the most backward of European traditions, a collection of ‘degree-granting institutions offering specialized instruction for scholarly, scientific, or professional ends’ with no connection to social and economic institutions and managed by individualistic and self-referential professors<sup>77</sup>. He had been impressed by the reforming spirit of several participants in the meeting *Una politica per l’università* (A Policy for the University) organised in Bologna by *il Mulino* on 2 April 1960<sup>78</sup>. There, higher education professionals discussed with leading national politicians and representatives of associations of students and scholars about the changes needed to prepare Italian universities to fulfil their role in the cooperation within NATO and the European Common Market. The main demand was the pluralisation of university qualifications. On the one hand, the needs of a student body with more varied backgrounds and expectations necessitated the creation of professional *diplomi*, requiring less study than the traditional university degree, the *laurea*. On the other hand, the adoption of the doctoral programmes by now available in many European countries allowed more modern recruitment practices of professors in place of the traditional co-option between professors and their students. It also permitted reorganising teaching and research no longer on the basis of the traditional and inefficient *istituti monocattedra* (one-subject institutes) run by single professors but rather into cooperative departments, as scholars who returned from exchange periods in the U.S. had been requesting for years<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> R.C. Simonini, Jr., ‘The Universities of Italy’, *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 40, no. 4 (1955): 571-572, offered this description. The text was the ‘summary statement’ known by the greatest number of American academics and Rogers’ principal preparatory reading.

<sup>78</sup> See *Una politica per l’università* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1960).

<sup>79</sup> The American advisors read these proposals in the report ‘On the Scientific Research in Italy and the Ways to Increase It in the Future’ prepared for the NATO working group on scientific research by the physicist Giampietro Puppi on 3 February 1960 (a copy is in RAC, FF, grant file no. 60-137). The geneticist Adriano Buzzati-Traverso was considering the same issue in the same period, and presented a reform proposal with Puppi and other colleagues at the meeting of *il Mulino*: see Francesco Cassata, *L’Italia intelligente: Adriano Buzzati-Traverso e il Laboratorio internazionale di genetica e biofisica (1962-59)* (Rome: Donzelli, 2013).

Rogers looked with favour upon the introduction of post-secondary qualifications ‘not unlike the American concept of community college’ and of ‘a true doctorate’<sup>80</sup>. The different levels of training were useful in general to guarantee the quality of higher learning while opening universities to ever-greater numbers of students. They could also be used as a place for teacher training, differentiating between the needs of primary and secondary schools. To achieve this, Italian intellectuals had to overcome their diffidence for subjects such as sociology, psychology and anthropology<sup>81</sup>. Another basic issue for the modernisation of universities was the need to update their physical structures in order to avoid the overcrowding that threatened the quality of studies. For this reason, while the government continued to improve the universities’ ability to absorb students, in those universities where ‘the number of *able* applicants continued to be larger than the number of places..., enrolment...should be limited by the size of the staff and the facilities’ through admissions tests. This was especially necessary in the technical faculties, where the student-facilities ratio was crucial<sup>82</sup>. The Ford Foundation could participate actively in the improvement of the university facilities, building either ‘a model student-oriented library’ or ‘a model *collegio* in the American manner’, hosting ‘a lively educational program’, for a major university<sup>83</sup>. Improving students’ quality of life could even be used as a meeting ground between public institutions and the Catholic world. Tensions and prejudices around Catholic education were deep-rooted, and the Cold War had intensified them, but Rogers was certain that collaborating on concrete projects could contribute to overcoming them. ‘The Catholic Church’ could ‘build student residences at the State universities’, and foundations could organize trips to the

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<sup>80</sup> RAC, FF, grant file no. 60-173, Francis M. Rogers, ‘Problems of Higher Education in Italy’, 17 May 1960, 17, 20.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26, and Keppel, ‘Draft of Report’, 12-13.

<sup>82</sup> Conant, ‘Some Observations’, 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, Rogers to Stanley Gordon, 17 May 1960.

U.S. for higher education professionals, showing the power of collaboration between universities and Christian associations by investing in facilities<sup>84</sup>.

### **A Lost Opportunity?**

While the reports for the Italian government maintained a constructive tone, Conant was more pessimistic in his reports back to the Ford Foundation. These included the ‘Highly Confidential Memorandum for the Officers of the Ford Foundation’ written when he returned from Europe, and the ‘Possible Expenditure of Ford Foundation’s Funds for the Improvement of Italian Education’ prepared the following September. ‘Italian education’ seemed to him to be ‘unsatisfactory in so many respects that one did not know where to begin in drawing up specifications for betterment’ or indicate a ‘chance to spend American money successfully...on specific educational projects’<sup>85</sup>. The Italian ‘educational structure’ was backward even by European standards, ‘aristocratic’ because self-referential and lacking both in competitive means of social promotion, such as admission to the French *Grandes Ecoles*, and in programmes for the development of the professional skills truly needed by industry. Medici’s reform was actually ‘a radical alteration’, but there was the danger that it would be interpreted as ‘intended primarily as counter propaganda to the communist demand for a classless polytechnical education’. Rather than participate in serious reforms, many might prefer immobility and justify it as anticommunism<sup>86</sup>. If Medici’s shock ‘from above’ failed, updating the educational system would be harder due to the over-centralised administration of public education. The rigidity of this administration had surprised advisors accustomed to the flexibility and autonomy of American schools. It complicated the strategy that the Ford

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<sup>84</sup> Rogers, ‘Problems of Higher Education’, 30-32.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., James B. Conant, ‘Memorandum for the Officers of the Ford Foundation’, 15 September 1960, 1-2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Id., ‘Cross Currents in Italian Education’, 6 June 1960.

Foundation was considering, which involved the creation of ‘pilot plants’ in order to introduce experiments with ‘bottom-up’ examples. The situation was worsened by the difficulty of finding partners among the educators: those interested in collaborating with the U.S. on reform were mainly victims of a ‘misunderstanding’ that assimilated American education with the most radical form of progressive education. The greatest opportunities for the Foundation were rather in higher learning. Since the 1920s, university and advanced research had been central for investments from American philanthropy to establish innovative fields of study and transnational collaboration, and to promote the participation of intellectuals in civic life as ‘experts’ in the treatment of major social issues, according to the standards of international epistemic communities. Therefore, higher education offered a field where it was more likely to find local partners truly ready and interested in collaborating in ‘the development of residential colleges’ and the establishment of the disciplines of sociology and psychology<sup>87</sup>.

As late as February 1962, while remembering the Italian trip with Bortolazzo, Conant defined it ‘a wild goose chase’, complaining that he ‘had neither received information nor any indication that anyone of importance had read what we had written’<sup>88</sup>. Not long after, Nielsen told him Medici had returned to the government as ‘minister of “Bureaucratic reform”’ and mentioned the ‘statements’ of the new Cabinet about beginning work again on ‘educational reform and development’. Nielsen expressed the hope that ‘our old report would yet have a strong impact of the course of Italian affairs’<sup>89</sup>. Conant replied coolly: ‘I have not kept up with Italian politics’<sup>90</sup>. Both Nielsen’s hopes and Conant’s pessimism were well founded.

In the summer of 1960 the instability of the Italian government had led to Medici’s removal from the Ministry of Public Education. The Ford Foundation had presented its

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<sup>87</sup> Id., ‘Memorandum for the officers’.

<sup>88</sup> JBC, box 127, folder *B. Personal file in N.Y. 1957-1964*, Conant to Bortolazzo, 19 February 1962.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., box 131, folder *N. Personal file in N.Y. 1957-1964*, Nielsen to Conant, 6 March 1962.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Conant to Nielsen, 7 March 1962.

reports to his successor, Giacinto Bosco<sup>91</sup>. He promoted a small number of experimental classes of *Scuola media*, whose curriculum could be partially oriented by choosing the attendance of courses in either Latin or ‘technical applications’. However, for over a year new priorities in the Parliamentary agenda impeded a final arrangement for the issue. In those months, the Ford Foundation tried to orient debate by supporting reflection around the matter. It financed publications and surveys on higher education by *il Mulino*<sup>92</sup> and followed the progress of the SVIMEZ research team led by Martinoli studying the relationship between trained workforce requirements and economic development<sup>93</sup>. This study was particularly appreciated because it best expressed the urgent needs for technical skills and managerial abilities in a industrially developed nation. The results of this research could not be ignored in July 1962, when Fanfani was again Prime Minister thanks to a new agreement with the PSI. Aiming to once again take up educational reform, he promoted a committee to update educational policy composed of parliamentary members and educational professionals. The committee was headed by DC member Giuseppe Ermini, former Minister of Education, and included Pedrazzi and Martinoli, as well as Tristano Codignola, some authors of *Scuola e Città* and intellectuals from various backgrounds. It worked until July 1963. In part thanks to the efforts of Commission members who had worked on the Ford Foundation project, the final proposal integrated a number of suggestions that the American observers had found useful and positive in Italy. Since the necessity of the new comprehensive *Scuola media* was by now clear, the committee proposed that upper secondary schools with similar curricula be grouped in *bienni comuni* (common first two-year classes), allowing the possibility of moving from one programme to another even in the following years. The development of vocational options following the *Scuola media* was confirmed, as was the liberalisation of access to

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<sup>91</sup> RAC, FF, grant file no. 60-137, memorandum from Nielsen about conversations with Medici and Conant, 19 October 1960.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., grant file no. 62-377.

<sup>93</sup> See *Mutamento della struttura professionale e ruolo della scuola: Previsioni per il prossimo quindicennio* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1961), and *Trasformazioni culturali in Italia e loro riflessi sulla scuola* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1962).

higher education from all high schools (with universities given the possibility to administer in-house admissions exams). Brief training programmes for highly skilled professions were to be introduced in universities, as well as doctoral programmes for graduates wishing to begin research and an academic career. The proposal repeated the importance of the *collegi* to guarantee economic support to students and favour social mobility. Administratively, *istituti monocattedra* were substituted by *dipartimenti*, following the American model. The ‘Ermini commission’ also gave priority to the education of teachers by renewing the *Facoltà di Magistero*, which was to house the specialising courses for elementary and secondary school teachers<sup>94</sup>. Pedrazzi wrote, recalling the discussions:

Only new and more numerous teachers trained in modernised universities would allow the enlargement of the base of the scholastic pyramid without causing an excessive lowering of the traditional standards of study and learning.<sup>95</sup>

However, while the Commission was working, the DC and PSI came to a compromise agreement in Parliament about the *Scuola media unica*<sup>96</sup>, based on immediate implementation (beginning with the 1963-64 school year) and a substantially uniform curriculum (Latin during the last year was the only optional course). Luigi Gui, Minister of Public Education, admitted that the measure was approved to take advantage of a convergence among political parties that was unlikely to reoccur<sup>97</sup>.

In the following years, the establishment of the new school proved to have positive effects on the attendance and social diversity of secondary schools, and now it is widely considered as ‘the only educational legislation which brought about a substantial change in the Italian

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<sup>94</sup> *Relazione della commissione di indagine sullo stato e sullo sviluppo della Pubblica istruzione in Italia*, (Rome: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1963).

<sup>95</sup> Luigi Pedrazzi, *La politica scolastica del centro-sinistra* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1973), 14.

<sup>96</sup> Law no. 1859, 31 December 1962.

<sup>97</sup> Parliamentary speech in *Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, III Legislatura, Lavori*, 21 December 1962.

social framework'<sup>98</sup>. However, the agreement overturned the organic plan of the 'Ermini Commission', and blocked any proposal for innovative training of new teachers. The *Scuola media unica* was to be run by the teachers from the old elitist *Scuola media*, resisting change with their diffidence and their regret for a recent past in which secondary school teaching was considered as having enjoyed greater social respect<sup>99</sup>. This attitude represented the most important constraint both to the attempts to give the new *Scuola media* a clearer pedagogical outline, with experimental courses and advanced laboratories<sup>100</sup>, and to the reform of high schools. In 1965, reform of the university was taken up again to deal with the ever-increasing access to higher learning. However, the radicalisation of students' protests, combined with the conservative attitude of professors' professional associations, contributed to policies of unlimited access to tertiary education for all and to the creation of new universities offering traditional programmes all over the country, with no distinction in functions and objectives<sup>101</sup>.

The suggestions of the American advisors were put aside. The Conant Report was published in Italian by the Ministry of Public Education in February 1963, when the law concerning the *Scuola media unica* was already approved. The report was presented as a relic of the past, useful for 'a retrospective appraisal, tested by events of the past two years'<sup>102</sup>. Conant never carried out the 'full scale study' on Italy foreseen at the beginning<sup>103</sup>. In 1963 he returned to Europe for the Ford Foundation, but he worked on projects financed in Berlin,

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<sup>98</sup> Giuseppe Ricuperati, *Storia della scuola in Italia* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2015), 101.

<sup>99</sup> This became clear during the first survey of teachers in the reformed *Scuola media*, significantly promoted by *il Mulino*: Marzio Barbagli and Marcello Dei, *Le vestali della classe media* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1969).

<sup>100</sup> Proof of this can be found in Tristano Codignola, *Per una scuola di libertà: Scritti di politica educativa (1947-1971)* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1987), 176-250. Among the international comments on the school reform, see Antonio Santoni Rugiu and Anthony Scarangelo 'The Evolution of the Italian Educational System, 1956-1966', *Comparative Education Review*, 11, no. 3 (1967): 348-359.

<sup>101</sup> Francesco Bonini, 'Una riforma che non si (può) fa(re): Il sistema universitario e il piano Gui', in Alessandro Breccia (ed.) *Le istituzioni universitarie e il Sessantotto* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2013), 37-49; Andrea Mariuzzo, 'Mito e realtà d'oltreoceano: L'Italia e il modello accademico americano nel Novecento', *Memoria e ricerca*, 48 (2015): 79-82.

<sup>102</sup> 'Presentazione' to *Il rapporto Conant sulla situazione della scuola italiana* (Rome: Quaderni di Studi e Ricerche sull'Amministrazione della Pubblica Istruzione, 1963), 3.

<sup>103</sup> Nielsen to Stone, 8 January 1960.

in collaboration with the Free University and local educational authorities<sup>104</sup>. Even his memoirs contain no mention of his Italian trip<sup>105</sup>.

## Conclusion

A modern school cannot...consider itself a school for the elite, for only a certain and limited part of the population. But it also does not...refute the elite principle: it accepts it and applies it according to the principles and ideals of democracy. It aims...to be of service to all young people of school age so that the elite may receive the training they need through a natural process of selection that extends to all citizens....<sup>106</sup>

This is how Medici presented his idea of school at the end of 1959, expressing a ‘meritocratic-conservative’ idea of equal opportunity. Everyone should have access to the learning needed to enter the economic and productive system of advanced industrial capitalism. And this should take place in a social system in which freedom of choice, competition and respect for individual success were conditions to be constantly reaffirmed with the acquisition of a broader basis of social consensus. For this reason, the high-quality programmes that followed good compulsory education were protected by offering ‘cooling out’ solutions<sup>107</sup> in upper secondary schools and universities. Although conceived in a different context, Medici’s idea was close to the ‘conservative reform’<sup>108</sup> of education that Conant and the Carnegie Corporation proposed to the American public opinion during the Sputnik crisis. The presence of an influential representative of international education such as

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<sup>104</sup> The documentation is in RAC, FF, grant file no. 639-3.

<sup>105</sup> *My Several Lives: Memoirs of a Social Inventor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>106</sup> Medici, *Introduzione*, 7.

<sup>107</sup> See Burton R. Clark, ‘The “Cooling-Out” Function in Higher Education’, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 65, No. 6 (1960): 569–76.

<sup>108</sup> See Ellen C. Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).



Conant, made possible by the Ford Foundation, could secure a significant support for a both efficient and politically acceptable modernisation of educational infrastructures.

The ideal proximity between Conant and Medici explains why the American advisor and his assistants found the general structure of the reform and some specific solutions so positive. These included the ‘comprehensive turn’ in secondary schooling, the diversification of university training and the development of a residential dimension in university life. Conant’s doubts about the real possibility of implementing change came from the delicate political stability and from the attitudes of the teachers. In fact, the *Scuola media unica* that was finally approved, with a uniform programme and no structured individual elective options, was based on a political compromise that accepted the PSI’s request for a school policy based on uniform treatment and equal outcomes rather than equal starting points in competition. The Italian left paid for this choice by relinquishing the expression of an innovative educational viewpoint in the new school: although Deweyan progressive education was fundamental for Italian radical reformers, it was absent in the administration, teaching methods and curricula of the new school<sup>109</sup>. In general, the law introducing the *Scuola media unica* marked the pre-eminence of political compromise rather than inspiration concerning existing institutional and methodological models, and it substantially obstructed further reform efforts.

Although devoid of policy-related results, Conant’s Ford-funded mission to Italy had long-term effects on the Foundation’s activities in culture and education in the years of liberal ‘optimism’ about development<sup>110</sup>. The Ford Foundation’s leaders looked at Conant’s meritocratic approach as a possible contribution to the global democratisation of school

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<sup>109</sup> Luciana Bellatalla, *John Dewey e la cultura italiana del Novecento* (Pisa: ETS, 1999); Cristina Alleman-Ghionda, ‘Dewey in Postwar Italy: The Case of Re-Education’, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 19, nos. 1-2 (2000): 53-67; Larry A. Hickman and Giuseppe Spadafora (eds), *John Dewey’s Educational Philosophy in International Perspective. A New Democracy for the Twenty-First Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Josh Cole and Ian McKay, ‘Commanding Heights, Levers of Power: A Reconnaissance of Post-War Education Reform’, *Encounters/Encuentros/Rencontres on Education*, 15 (2014): 23-41.

systems. The Foundation gave him an office in Berlin, making him one of its most influential officers in Europe. In Germany, Conant's activities received attention and positive feedback, thanks to a wide network of personal relationships with intellectuals of a country that the advisor knew well<sup>111</sup>. All the same, the difficulty of concretely affecting educational policy indicated that the problems encountered in Italy were of a general nature, and confirmed some operative premises for the Ford Foundation's intervention in Europe. These included the impossibility of coordinating the policies of western European countries because of their deep roots in the national cultures, the involvement of local elites in the reform, the confirmation of universities and research as the most probable grounds for the success of projects and of more efficient internationalisation<sup>112</sup>.

The Italian 'laboratory' for growth strategies also gave additional fruit. Despite a problematic reception in Italy, thanks to the collaboration with the main international agencies, the Ford Foundation guaranteed a significant promotion of the SVIMEZ study on planning of national education requirements based on manpower needs. The work was presented at the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC)<sup>113</sup>, and was a model for the Mediterranean Regional Project, research conducted by the OEEC (transformed in 1961 into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) on the relationship between growth and training of human capital in Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Turkey and Yugoslavia<sup>114</sup>. Its results, focussed on the reproducibility and continuity of more

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<sup>111</sup> RAC, FF, *Catalogued Reports*, James B. Conant, 'A Report to the President and Board of Trustees of the Ford Foundation', June 1965, and 'Candid Opinions on German Education', August 1965. About German educational policy in those years see Saul B. Robinson and J. Caspar Kuhlman, 'Two Decades of Non-Reform in West German Education', *Comparative Education Review*, 11, no. 3 (1967): 311-330. About American influence in the debate, see Thomas Koinzer, 'German Postwar Educational Reform and "The American Way of Life"', in Noah W. Sobe (ed.), *American Post-Conflict Educational Reform. From the Spanish-American War to Iraq* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147-165.

<sup>112</sup> See the analysis in RAC, FF, *Office of the Humanities and the Arts, Office of the Vice President* (Wilson McNeil Lawry), series IV (*Programs*), box 15, folder 5 (*Conference on Foundation Programs in Europe, 2/24-25/1971*), 'Memorandum on the Foundation's Interest and Work in Education and Research in Europe'.

<sup>113</sup> About the contacts between the Ford Foundation and the OEEC for the organization of meetings on this topic, see RAC, FF, *General Correspondence, 1960*, folder OEEC.

<sup>114</sup> Stefano Spalletti, 'The Economics of Education in Italy (1960-1975): An Outlook of Economic Planning', *History of Economic Ideas*, 16, nos. 1-2 (2008): 225-243.

advanced models of industrial development, conditioned the orientation of OECD surveys on education, establishing the most influential concept of the role of education in economic growth at least until the crisis of theoretical paradigms of development in the mid-1970s<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>115</sup> For Ford's support to these projects see RAC, FF, grant files nos. 60-2015 and 63-492. The analytical framework was expressed at best in C. Arnold Anderson, Mary Jean Bowman (eds), *Education and Economic Development* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965).