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Salvemini and American Education

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

One of the most exciting things about Professor Gaetano Salvemini, who died four years ago, is his profound and continuing influence on an entire generation of liberal Italian historians, the very young men who are now beginning to write the critical history of the Fascist Regime.

Recently, for example, I went to see a certain Prof. Carlo Schiffrer here, once a Socialist leader of the Resistance in Venezia Giulia and later a member of the Anglo-American military government in the Free Territory, who has written a number of especially penetrating and thoughtful articles on the recent history of this region. These articles I had found hauntingly familiar both in the philosophical attitudes implicit in them and in their literary style. It was in no way surprising, therefore, when it emerged in the course of our talk that Prof. Schiffrer had been a student of Salvemini in Florence. He bore the same stamp that one recognizes in the thought of another Salvemini disciple, Roberto Vivarelli, now a research fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, working on a history of the rise of Fascism. Or in the writings of another Triestino also a Salvemini collaborator, Elio Apih, like Schiffrer one of the principal contributors to the writing of Trieste history since 1918.

So Gaetano Salvemini, whose reputation as an historian was made before the First World War, and whose Fascist Dictatorship in Italy of 1929 continues to be a classic on the subject requiring only marginal correction, is still writing about Fascism and Italy in 1961...through the agency of his students and disciples. I suppose awareness of such an influence must be more gratifying to the ghost of a scholar than the re-publication of his own works (which in Salvemini's case is also happening, with Vivarelli and Apih among the editors).

This observation becomes even more interesting when one also notices the absence (so far as I know) of any parallel development in Western German historiography, where serious scholars do not yet seem ready to try to face the problem of the history of the Third Reich. No doubt there are important psychological reasons, born of the differences between Fascism and Nazism, for this contrast, but isn't it possible that it is also because there was no German Salvemini?

All of this is a paranthetical introduction to what I really want to write about. I have just been reading Salvemini's memoirs, largely written in 1954 but only published last year, of his life as a fuoruscito, a voluntary exile from Mussolini's Italy and the most distinguished of the active anti-fascists abroad from 1925 to the outbreak of the war. After several years of semi-nomadic existence in France, Great Britain and the United States, earning his way with articles, lecture tours and visiting professorships, he settled at Harvard from 1934-48 as Professor of Italian Civilization.

Many aspects of the American education system fascinated, pleased or distressed him, and in his longest aside from the primarily political subject of his memoirs, he describes our school system to his Italian public. This description by a distinguished and observant anti-fascist Italian educator of American education in the 1930's and 1940's impressed me tremendously as both kind and accurate, and I thought it worth making a rough translation for you. The final paragraph reminds one that these words were originally written in the heyday of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, when many of America's friends overseas thought that American democracy had received a mortal blow.

Professor Salvemini wrote:*

"The high school...is founded on the principle that the student has the right to select, within wide limits, the subjects in which he wants to be instructed. There are therefore only a few courses that are obligatory for everyone, such as English, arithmetic, national history (more or less in pills), and geography, which is no more fortunately taught in America than in other countries. Beyond these few obligatory courses, the student can select from a highly varied menu of materials, which differs from school to school, and extends from Latin to astronomy, from Russian to Italian, from music to photography, to archeology and to heaven knows what. There are at least 274 subjects of instruction in the different schools, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. Each subject is studied ~~three~~ hours a week. The student, from one semester to another, can drop a subject that does not please him and take up another.

"What rational use can inexperienced adolescents make of such a vast liberty? Most do what I would have done, if in my day I could have hopped about among the disciplines according to my own whims: they generally prefer the subjects in which the teachers are the easiest graders. From such haphazard fragments the student does not learn to think in an orderly way or to work with diligence - which ought to be the goal of any education. And when he passes from the high school to the college, he finds great difficulty during the first year (it is called the year of the freshman's crisis) in acquiring the habits of methodical and retentive study.

"Therefore well-to-do families prefer the private schools, often expensive enough, to the free public high school. (In England they call these schools 'public', although because of their expensiveness they are exceedingly private.) These schools give an instruction undoubtedly superior to that of the public schools, not only because the students come from less ill-educated family circles and because the teachers are selected from among the best on the market and are better paid, but also because the studies are coordinated with the European, with less scope for choice, and in some the study of Latin is imposed on all.

"When all this has been said, one should think twice before condemning the American high school. Above all, the boys and girls go willingly, enjoying years of relatively carefree and happy life. This country has been called, and it really is, the paradise of children. They arrive at college ignorant de omnibus rebus et de quibusdam aliis; but their spirits are not tired and are ready to learn, if only they find a teacher who knows how to direct and discipline their curiosity.

* From *Memorie di un fuoruscito* (Milan, Feltrinelli editore, 1960), pp. 138ff. The words in italics are in English (or Latin) in the original.

"Besides which, the high school educates a civic sense in the future citizens of the American democracy. The student participates in meetings, in which the problems of daily school life are examined, or the next administrative or political elections are discussed; he must listen without interrupting, take the floor only when his turn comes, act as president at meetings; keep minutes as secretary; collect dues as treasurer; act as judge or prosecution or defense in trials for acts of indiscipline. This civic education, entirely lacking in our schools, is the real goal of the American high school, and it is achieved in large measure. Finally, one must not forget that for boys and girls who are children of recently immigrated parents, the high school is a means of rapid national assimilation.

"I became an advocate of the right of youth to be ignorant especially after having seen these beneficent effects produced by the exercise of this right among American youth. Naturally one must not exaggerate even in this. But above all one must not omit the practice of certain duties, which have much more significance for life in society than Latin declensions or the knowledge of how to solve a quadratic equation."

He goes on to talk about his experiences teaching in an American university (if hardly in a typical one!). It is interesting to learn what impressed this distinguished Italian professor of international reputation well seasoned. He was amazed at the Wiedner Library at Harvard: at the convenience of the opening hours (he cites them open-mouthed and comments: "imagine, they are ordered for the convenience of scholars, not of personnel!"), and at the idea of free access to the stacks for teachers and graduate students, with the system of carels for study...and that so few books are stolen in the face of this freedom. He notes that the American pays high tuition fees and expects to get his money's-worth from the professors; that the Italian commonplace of a professor who skips his lectures to earn money as a lawyer or to run for Parliament would not be tolerated in America. (Just this week, coincidentally, I attended a round-table student-faculty discussion at the University of Trieste where this same problem was aired.) On the other hand the American academic has that wonderful institution of the sabbatical leave, with institutes offering money for research trips and the like; "this is not only the paradise of children, it is also the paradise of men who want to study." Like all continentals, he was intrigued by the afternoons free for "hobbies", especially sports, and by the residential college system...and above all, by the working-your-way-through-college tradition - he notes with approval that a commonplace at Harvard was to wait table in the college houses, and that this was a respected way to make one's way to which no social stigma was attached. And the examination system comes in for highest praise - although he adds several reasons why it wouldn't work in an Italian university, primarily because cheating is considered a fair game and a refined art in Italy.

At the end he returns to the subject of civic education in the high schools:

"Naturally all is not gold that glitters, in the United States as in any other part of the world. The almost infantile ingenuousness that the majority of the population inbibes in the high school without going on to the stabilization of the college makes possible in this people the formation of irrational currents, to which they submit, impetuously and noisily, and which cause one to fear a dismal crisis in American democracy. But there exists in the mass of the people a reserve of good sense - they call it horse sense - which sooner or later leads the majority back to equilibrium. There always remains among this people, as among all others, a section which there is called the lunatic

fringe..., where every oddity and every excess find fertile ground. But the noise aroused by this lunacy must not lead one to forget that stabilizing power, which always remains in the overwhelming majority of the people. This power is created by that same high school, to which one must also attribute the ease with which certain spiritual epidemics are propagated. The solid civic education given by the high school is the compensating force that sooner or later regains the overhand. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association are not taught in the high school as abstract precepts, but practiced as vital everyday necessities. These liberties can be limited or even suppressed to the damage of some group in periods of excitement or danger, more or less real, more or less imaginary; but it is not possible to suppress them for the overwhelming majority of the people. And thus, sooner or later, the stabilizing force is found again in the majority that remains exempt from the epidemic of the day."

Rather nice, don't you think?

Yours sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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