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Elite and masses in italian secondary school. The 1923 Gentile Reform

The connection élite-masses represents a fundamental reference for the identity of modern school system: besides, it expresses a more generale dynamics that characterizes modern society, that's to say the necessity of uniforming and that of diversifying. This connection has usually been identified by an evident asimmetry: sometimes it was the élite to prevail as the element to oppose to (this is the case of postunitarian liberal Italy, with the strictly élite organization of scholastic system); sometimes it was the masses (this is the case of school mass processes, that have become of a central relevance starting from the Seventies of this century).

In this dynamics secondary instruction is twice involved. At a first level, it represents the élite in comparison with the masses represented by elementary instruction: elementary instruction has traditionally the role of assuring a widespread and uniform "base knowledge"; secondary instruction has that of offering a selective and diversified "specialised knowledge".

At a second level secondary system develops on its own a contraposition between élite knowledge, steps and aims, on one hand, and mass ones, on the other.

My paper aims at defining the characters, the meaning but also the paradoxes and the contradictions of this situation, beginning with the particular case of secondary system put into effect by the Gentile Reform in 1923.

The importance of this Reform is outlined by the fact that it still remains an unsurpassed reference for italian scholastic system, especially as far as secondary school is concerned. It has remained unsurpassed in spite of the deep changes and the drastic transformations, if we think that the willing of "reforming the Reform" began immediately after its realization. Yet, as recent chronicle has allowed to note, the 1923 Reform still represents the conceptual cage through which secondary school continues to be conceived, to begin just with the ones who pretend to reform it.

However, considering the specific connection élite-masses, it is important to say that the Reform faces both those aspects, even if in a conflictual atmosphere. At this regard we must consider the context in which it was conceived, characterized by a deep political transformation, that is to say the substantial "massive" enlarging of the right to vote. From an institutional point of view, it is now that the mass was born as an active political subject: now it becomes, as a consequence, an explicit object of a growing educative and political attention. Besides, the strict connection that exists between Gentile Reform and fascism certainly constitutes a further reason of interest. This interest gets even deeper if we think that the terms of the problem (such as meritocracy) are still *in fieri*, in and outside Italy - as the present "adventures" of secondary instruction clearly testify.