



Geography in Italian Licei

Gino De Vecchis^a

^a Dipartimento di Scienze documentarie, linguistico-filologiche e geografiche, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

Email: gino.devecchis@uniroma1.it

Received: February 2016 – Accepted: March 2016

Abstract

Following a rapid description of the evolution of the teaching of geography in Italian secondary schools from the Unification of Italy to the end of the nineteenth century, the article focusses on the latest change, brought about with the Gelmini reform, which entered into force with the 2010-2011 school year. In particular, the relationships between history and geography are analysed (two subjects penalised by the new structure and which cannot express all their potential to their best) and some possible solutions are envisaged.

Keywords: Curriculum, History and Geography, Italy, Liceo

1. The Premises

The unification of the Kingdom of Italy (1859-1861), which came about in an atmosphere influenced by positivist philosophical thought, finds its first concrete expression with regard to education in 1859 with the Casati Act (from the name of the Education Minister Gabrio Casati). This law mandated the first directives of Italian school policy, including the introduction of a Liceo course in secondary schools: the Ginnasio-Liceo lasting 8 years in all, made up of a Ginnasio course of 5 years and a Liceo one of 3. In this study cycle the humanistic subjects drawing from the classical tradition of the schools of grammar, rhetoric and philosophy prevail over the others (De Vecchis, 1999, pp. 171-173).

The structure of this course was a foundation for the following big reform that took place in

1923, immediately after the advent of the Fascist regime and which was known as the Gentile reform (from the name of the Education Minister Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher from the idealist school of thought). The reform, which was the outcome of a coherent cultural and political design regarding the whole school, from junior school to university¹, left significant changes which are still in part to be found in the upper secondary school even now, although in very different economic-political and socio-cultural frameworks.

At the cultural level the Gentile reform made an attempt to affirm the unity of knowledge, with the prerequisite that knowledge *par excellence* be represented by the classical-humanistic one

¹ With the Gentile Reform, other Liceo courses were introduced, like the Scientific and Artistic ones.

(classical and modern literature, philosophy, history); not by chance was it that the humanistic studies course (based on the classical languages) was given a broad historical-philosophical slant. Giovanni Gentile stated: “My aim is to concentrate the function of the Middle school in the Classical School, which by way of its national and educational value, will have a clear pre-eminence over the other schools aimed at the education of the spirit of the pupils. Hence the need to give greater importance to the study of classical languages, history and philosophy” (Gentile, 1932, p. 49).

The idealist philosophical thought professed by Giovanni Gentile, with the clear distinction between humanistic and scientific culture, has the actual effect of unbalancing the link between the various school subjects; for geography, which is the “linking” subject *par excellence*, this cultural and didactic choice generated deeply negative consequences. It is either absorbed (but in a completely marginal position) into the humanistic sector, or it is “relegated” among the technical-scientific subjects (even here collocated to a secondary position with respect to the sciences). There is the clear intention to give a minor role to a subject that is considered little relevant in the education of the pupils’ spirit in the Licei. It must be highlighted how this consideration goes against what the influential American philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey declared in the same years, when he saw the strength of geography in its very capacity to investigate natural facts and social events in an integrated manner, thus generating educational values and concrete skills applicable to social and political issues (Dewey, 1916, 1927). In this way the subject is doubly penalised and this state of affairs is never completely overcome by successive reforms, which until today have continued to penalise geography in the Italian school system: the lack of recognition of its educational potential and the fact that it was taught by teachers who as a result of their training, did not truly realise its pedagogical value and often did not even know its theoretical-methodological bases.

During the X Italian Geographical Congress held in Milan in 1927, Carlo Errera wrote: “In the high schools the teaching of geography is entrusted to the teacher of natural sciences and

chemistry following the innovations of the Gentile reform, who often coming from the university science faculty has an all but virtually nil preparation in geography [...]. Therefore, very often it happens that the natural sciences teacher considers geography as a bothersome burden that they had better try to lighten as much as possible, to such an extent that in certain cases it is reduced to nothing. It should come as no surprise therefore that one quite often comes across young people leaving the Italian Licei with such an ignorance of the simplest features of Italy and the world that would not be found in children just leaving junior school” (Errera, 1927, p. 214).

2. A long period of stagnation and experimentation

After the reform introduced by the Minister Gentile, the structure of the Liceo courses incredibly remained almost unchanged until the 2010-2011 academic year; incredibly because this extremely long period was marked – as mentioned before – by radical changes.

The numerous innovations introduced at various stages in the first segments of education and above all the establishment of the compulsory single Middle school (in 1962) should have led to a considerable change in the upper one that was necessary to avoid the break in didactic continuity between the two school cycles, with its negative effects on teaching. In particular the arrival of the single Middle school took away the first three years of its specific syllabus from the Ginnasio course, substituted by the Middle school triennial. The five-year Liceo course (Ginnasio-Liceo) was thus composed of the two remaining classes (IV and V) of the Ginnasio (with the subjects already taught of Italian, Latin, Greek, foreign language, history, geography and mathematics) and by the three-year Liceo course (with the “all-time” subjects of Italian literature, Latin and Greek, history, philosophy, history of art, as well as natural sciences, mathematics and physics). However for geography this change was not limited just to the form but directly affected the contents, which lost the linearity which they had in the five-year Ginnasio syllabus, following a

geographical teaching trend of a mainly regional type:

- I Ginnasio: general geography;
- II Ginnasio: Italy;
- III Ginnasio: Europe;
- IV Ginnasio: Asia and Africa;
- V Ginnasio: America, Oceania, Polar Regions.

In fact, with the various reforms in the Middle school, the contents were structured differently (I Middle school: Italy; II Middle School: Europe; III Middle School: Continents outside Europe), while they were the same in the IV and V Ginnasio, resulting in useless repetition, between III Middle School and the two years of Ginnasio. The latter had the following – and certainly unexciting – syllabus to be distributed over two hours weekly: “Pursuing and completing the investigations already carried out in the lower years, the teacher will lead the pupils on new journeys and discoveries in the non-European continents (Asia and Africa in IV Class; America, Oceania, polar regions in V Class), showing by the study of accounts of journeys the physical configuration, the original conditions of life and civilisations, the progressive adaptation and the transformation and the expansion of the European civilisation in new countries, the economic, political, cultural relations, similarities and comparisons”.

As far as concerns the Scientific Liceo, the geography situation was even more serious, insofar that the Education ministry syllabuses made a further drastic reduction, simply foreseeing: “For geography the syllabuses of the IV and V classes of the Ginnasio will be condensed into one year” It must be added that in other Licei (the Artistic Liceo for example) geography was completely absent.

In order to give a complete picture of the situation it must be stressed that radical changes were greatly needed, so much so that before the 2010-2011 school year there were many attempts to reform the upper secondary school, but they all failed miserably, some even when they had almost reached the final goal². As a fall

² It would be arduous, and all in all of no use for the purposes of this article, to list the causes of the many failures. It is important just to remember the hardship

back to get out of this worrying state of paralysis, a number of experiments were set up, which gradually modified the old courses, even if this phenomenon was more evident in the Technical and Professional Schools than in the Licei. Nevertheless, the results of the experiments, which were made in a disorganised way and without a real structured programme, did not manage to satisfy the needs required by a worthwhile learning-teaching process.

3. The Liceo Reform

As mentioned above, the Gelmini reform (from the name of the Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini) entered into force in the 2010-2011 school year, and concerned the whole grade II secondary school (both Licei and Technical and Professional Schools). As a whole this reform (*National guidelines for Licei*) foresaw such heavy penalisation for geography that it provoked a lively response from the geographers’ community and first and foremost by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, who in January 2010 made an appeal endorsed by all the Italian geographical associations, in favour of an adequate presence of geography on the timetable. The appeal (entitled “*At school without geography*”), even though not achieving actual important results, at least with respect to the timetable structure foreseen by the reform, was hugely successful in the number and quality of consensuses. In fact in a very short time it had 30,000 subscriptions, among whom many rectors, headmasters, teachers and journalists. Support also came from abroad from almost 70 foreign countries, distributed equally over all the areas of the world, with the exception of Africa and Central Asia, probably owing to the difficulty of spreading the message (Marta and Morri, 2011, pp. 81-87).

With the Gelmini reform, history and geography are incorporated in the first biennium of the Licei in a single number of total hours with only one overall assessment, even though remaining distinct in the wording (history and geography). Nevertheless, they undergo a

in breaking acknowledged interests and the instability of a number of governments, whose fall brought about the deterioration of the reform itself.

considerable reduction from 4 hours (2 for history and 2 for geography) to 3 hours weekly. Six types of Liceo were affected by this (Artistic, Linguistic, Musical and Choral song and dance, Scientific, Human Sciences), all having the same number of hours and the same syllabus.

For geography there was no retrieval – which had been hoped for – as the timetable in the triennium remained unchanged and did not foresee the teaching of this subject. The re-dimensioning in the Licei was felt heavily as it affected a subject that was already reduced to minimum terms (two hours and only in the first biennium). This is also contradictory with respect to what is stated in the PECUP (*Educational, cultural and professional profile of Licei*), according to which geography should have an important role in the historical-humanistic area³ for the acquisition of transversal skills. This important reform document in fact states that upon completion of the course of each Liceo pupils must:

- Use methods (spatial perspective, man-environment relations, regional synthesis), concepts (territory, region, localisation, scale, spatial diffusion, mobility, relationship, sense of place...) and instruments (maps, geographical information systems, images, statistical data, subjective sources) of geography for the interpretation of historical processes and the analysis of contemporary society.
- Know, with reference to events, geographical contexts and the most important figures, the history of Italy within the European and international context, from ancient times to modern day.

3.1 History and geography in the Liceo reform

The institutionalised combination of history and geography in the Licei is something new in the Gelmini reform (even if the connections

³ The Liceo culture makes it possible to make an in-depth study of and develop knowledge and skills, gain competences and acquire tools in the methodological, logic-reasoning, linguistic and communication, historical-humanistic, scientific, mathematic and technological areas.

between the two subjects are well developed in the first school cycle), which should have brought about significant inputs towards a more fruitful integrated course. On the other hand, the need is shared by most of the teachers to include the spatial dimension in the study of historical facts, in the same way as the temporal dimension in dealing with the regions, themes and geographical issues. In the development of spatial and temporal approaches, both subjects represent efficient systems of knowledge layout, in order to arrange and give value to the information reaching us from experience and sensorial perceptions. History is the result of processes that take place in geographical space, having relations with its conditions and resources and modifying it; on the other hand, as a container of memories, the geographical landscape is one of the key concepts that make it possible to pass from one subject to another (De Vecchis, 2011, p. 148). In turn geography includes temporal evolution in its study method, and by means of historical processes identifies the signs and processes that merge together to explain the territorial systems of the contemporary world.

Unfortunately the framework of the reform, as well as the overall unjustifiable penalisation of the two subjects, is also lacking with regard to an integration between history and geography on an equal didactic standing and presents a number of failings. Above all it has kept the exclusion of geography from the triennium, still leaving that old remnant left over from the Gelmini reform, whereby history and geography are taught by the same teacher in the triennium, even though at different times (in the classical Liceo for example with three hours weekly for each subject). The differentiation to be found in the five-year Liceo course is rather singular: in the first biennium history is taught, even with some variations, together with literary subjects and geography, while in the following triennium only together with philosophy. Another singular aspect must be highlighted with regard to this, a legacy from the past: geographical contents included in the teaching of natural sciences and also allocated to the teacher of this subject area. In this way geography was taught in the first years of Liceo by a teacher of the humanistic area and in the last year by a teacher from the

scientific area. Even though this confusion and mix of contents are less evident in the present reform with respect to the previous situation, they have not disappeared completely⁴.

The interruption of the teaching of geography at the end of the first year damages the image of the subject, and above all pushes the teachers to focus more on one subject (history), the syllabus of which is developed all through the five-year Liceo programme rather than one with a short course and absent in the final three years. The devaluation of the subject, as seen in the structure of the Gelmini reform, was however worsened even more by the reduction of two marks (one for history and one for geography) to one only. It is in fact evident that the teacher will be more concerned – and the mark can play an important role in this – with a subject that will continue its course up to the end of the whole cycle.

While the integration between the two subjects is lacking with respect to a mainly quantitative criterion, owing to an imbalance in the number of total hours, it does not find support even with regard to the criteria based on objectives and contents. In the Liceo biennium in fact the history syllabus deals with the ancient world: it is dedicated to the study of ancient civilisations and the Early Middle Age one (essential thematic core subjects: the main civilisations of the Ancient Near East: the Jewish civilisation; the Greek civilisation; the Roman civilisation; the advent of Christianity; Roman-barbarian Europe; society and economy in early medieval Europe; the Church in the Early Middle Ages; the birth and spread of Islam; Empire and kingdoms in the early Middle Ages; stately and feudal particularism. In reality the spatial viewpoint is compared with the issues of the modern and contemporary world, where the mutual connectedness between the two subjects is undoubtedly

⁴ In the previous system, the last year of Liceo foresaw the following syllabus for sciences: “General Geography; from astronomical geography to terrestrial physics and with phenomena of exogenous and endogenous dynamics and anthropic and economic geography. It will end with considerations on the evolutionary laws of life of the mineral, vegetable and animal world”.

much closer. The main themes outlined for geography in the first two years are: landscape, urbanisation, globalisation and its consequences, cultural diversity (languages, religions), migrations, population and the demographic question, the relationship between economy, environment and society, the imbalances among the regions of the world, sustainable development (energy, water resources, climatic change, nutrition and biodiversity), geopolitics, the European Union, Italy, Europe and its principle states, the continents and their most important states. Aware of this basic incoherence in the last year of Liceo, the ministry Committee stated among the objectives of history of the triennium: “A number of topics of the contemporary world will be examined bearing in mind their geographical nature (for example, the distribution of natural and energy resources, the migration dynamics, the demographic features of the different areas of the planet, the relationships between climate and economy”.

It is quite evident however that this addition cannot give significant contributions in didactic practice.

3.2 The practical translation of the Reform

The practical translation of the reform is even further penalising for geography than the drafting of the reform itself, as it conveyed a negative message to the teaching community, stressing the subordination of geography to history. It must also be added that during their university courses to qualify to teach literary subjects in Licei⁵, except for a few with personal syllabuses, the teachers had their study load for geography halved with respect to history and other literary subjects being taught. Since teachers manage to convey their competences and skills best in the subjects in which they are qualified, geography is at a disadvantage also with regard to the initial teacher training with respect to the other subjects of the humanistic area. The problems relative to the training and

⁵ The literary subjects are: Italian, Latin, Greek, History and civic education, Geography for the Classical Liceo. Italian Latin, Greek, History and civic education, Geography for the Scientific Liceo. Italian, History and civic education, Geography for the other Licei.

refresher courses of the teachers of the subject have on numerous occasions been brought to the attention of the Minister by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers.

In practice, the most evident aspect of this penalisation has consisted in the very change of the appellation of the two subjects; in fact, despite there being no reference to them in the ministry documents, the history and geography binomial has often been transformed (or rather altered) into Geohistory. This title, rather than for an integration or interdisciplinarity among subjects, was born from a current of historical studies introduced by Fernand Braudel. It is generally used today to describe situations in which the historical evolution is fundamental to explain a process of territorial transformation or the geographical conditions, in particular the physical ones, are used to understand the evolution of historical facts. Unfortunately in schools “these attempts clash with the great complexity of information to manage, risking being translated into simplified didactic courses, which group together the contents without referring to the methods and theories of the different subjects, impoverishing a fundamental component typical of the development of skills” (Giorda, 2013, p. 246).

Furthermore, the suggestion passed without trouble – not written in any official document – of adopting the ratio of two hours of teaching for history and one hour for geography. Enrica Bienna and Rita Bortone stress the fact that in all the ministry documents the term Geohistory appears once only, but the hypothesis of a Geohistory syllabus that unites the two subjects can to many seem like a solution to the problems posed by the new timetables and the single mark. And therefore Geohistory immediately came into the lexicon and the didactic perspective of the school (Bienna and Bortone, 2014).

The publishers also have a certain responsibility in this further devaluation of the subject, entrusting the drafting of geographical texts or the geographical part for example to history experts when the two subjects are combined in one single book⁶. It seems truly misleading for

example that a school manual on geography declares – confusing the primary objective of the subject as being aimed at interdisciplinary links, even if justified – that it has been designed “to propose a new course allowing teachers to get pupils to study geography in parallel with history”. Not by chance is the fact underlined in the same manual that the aspects of regional geography are given priority, with particular reference to the areas in which the ancient and early medieval civilisations were born, from the Middle East to Egypt to Italy and continental Europe (Cotroneo, 2011).

In another geography manual, it is highlighted that geography in the biennium is “a subject that the new national guidelines and new timetable distribution quantitatively compress and integrate in the coverage of the history programmes”. It is taken for granted that the reduction in hours which treats history and geography in equal measure following the Gelmini reform, in practice must weigh exclusively on geography (Brusa and Impellizzeri, 2012).

Geography is generally even more penalised when both subjects are included in a single volume. The aims are immediately clarified in a text when it is written that history is integrated with a geography section. Moreover, the number of pages dedicated to the two subjects bears witness to the existing imbalance: in the first volume 375 pages are dedicated to history and only 60 to geography; in the second volume 300 to history and once again only 60 to geography (Bettalli and Castronovo, 2015). While macroscopic for the disproportion shown, this example does not represent an isolated case in school books.

In some cases there are borderline examples as in the text in which it is explicitly stated: “The history course is proposed in a new edition enriched with a geography section, in order to develop the historical-geographical skills and to reach the objectives expected at the end of the first secondary school biennium” (Brancati, Pagliarani and Motta, 2014).

⁶ By way of example, see the texts edited by G.B. Palumbo; La Nuova Italia; DeAgostini.

4. Possible proposals and conceivable solutions

The realisation of an overall reform project should represent the best opportunity to streamline all the potentialities existing in the school world and to coordinate the different subjects, directing them towards common objectives by means of interdisciplinary didactic strategies. Single measures, following the reform aimed at eliminating distortions and shortcomings, are harder to implement, also because they could alter the overall balance of the reform structure, above all when it tends to be inflexible.

Nonetheless, in some cases – for geography for example – some kind of remedy is both urgent and indispensable. In a move towards an amendment, the first modification would be to bring back the specific mark for geography, also because it is easy to implement. It would be a first step for the rehabilitation of the subject which would somehow involve teachers and students.

In the present Liceo framework the quantitative and qualitative aspects would be examined also with respect to the different courses, which could see the teaching of geography differentiated in its total number of hours (quantity) and its contents and objectives (quality). With regard to this, a number of specific situations can be mentioned – like those to be found in the Human Sciences Liceo or in the Artistic Liceo (“Architecture and Environment option”) and Linguistic one – which would deserve an additional geographical study load, explicitly including specific professional geographic knowledge and objectives.

In the Human Sciences Liceo the geographical competences are mentioned in the PECUP in quite a detailed manner, where it says that its high school graduate “is able to: use philosophical, historical-geographical and scientific perspectives in the study of interdependences between international, national, local and personal phenomena; knows how to identify the link existing between cultural, economic and social phenomena and the political institutions both in relation to the national and European dimension and the global one”.

In the Artistic Liceo, the option “Architecture and Environment” the school leaver should

moreover be able to: be aware of the relationship existing between the project and the historical, social, environmental context and the specificity of the area in which it is collocated.

Lastly, in the Linguistic Liceo it would be useful for the school leavers to have proper knowledge of the area and population of the countries whose language they are studying.

As far as concerns the association between history and geography, the joint course formula could be a good solution if there was some sort of continuity to it all during the five-year Liceo course, without asymmetries, and if it were open to a real integration. At present however there seem to be huge obstacles in this sense starting from a degree of resistance on the part of many school and university teachers. With regard to university, the academic scientific-subject sectors must also be considered; for example, all ancient history (including the Greek and Roman one) is included in the archaeological group, clearly differentiated from the historical one (from medieval to contemporary history).

In the triennium the hours of geography could carry out an important role of cultural education, with an in-depth study of the economic and political aspects in particular, the knowledge of which is today strategic in facing the challenges of globalisation and international relations, on a European scale for example or with respect to the polycentric framework of the Mediterranean that involves Italy more and more. By way of example some relevant topics can be mentioned in which geographical issues and reasoning could interweave with the historical discourse: climatic changes; landscapes; resources, the economy and the role of technology, the socio-economic, cultural and political impact of the migration phenomenon, cultural diversities and the social and economic inequalities on various scales, globalisation.

Instead, in the present situation there is the risk of a real general drift for a badly understood Geohistory which, with its foreseeable failure, could easily lead to the definitive abandoning of a serious project for the integrated teaching of the two subjects. They should be saved from the irrelevance in which they are at present limited with respect to the potential that they could express in the education process of citizens (education to compare and to understand the

complexity and interdependence of phenomena), starting from the issues of the world examined from different points of view, with methodological and research diversities. I fully agree with Cristiano Giorda in his article published in the magazine of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers: “The geohistorical approach must therefore be considered as an epistemological and methodological approach of historical research, open to interdisciplinary synthesis but belonging to history, an historical narration that pays great attention to the role of the environment, localisation and regional relations” (Giorda, 2012, pp. 14-15).

Should the line of integration between history and geography be pursued it would be necessary to change the specific learning objectives, which in the present *National guidelines* for history are based on a chronological structure, while for geography they are based on the regional approach, even though with an interesting renewal towards thematic aspects. In fact, on the one hand it is not easy to profitably carry forward a common proposal to integrate knowledge and objectives, and on the other the proposal for a Geohistory is favoured, made up of a non-amalgamated mixture of history filled with references to the environment and an insufficient geography with regional historical summaries, as can be seen in a number of school books, which are included in the “History and Geography” manual sheets, with the clear aim of focussing on the origin of geographical phenomena like ‘The silk road’ and ‘The end of the Sumerian civilisation’ (online presentation of the volume by: Marisaldi, Dinucci, Pellegrini, 2012).

Only a complete rethinking of the syllabus around issues and important questions, from the local to the global scale, could allow history and geography to build skills and relevant knowledge, also in the light of the educational goals of the two subjects. As far as concerns geography, there is the example of the education to territory, a theoretical-methodological perspective developed by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers with the aim of reappraising the dimension of places and the features of the territory within education, particularly towards the topics of sustainability, interculture and citizenship.

References

1. Bettalli M. and Castronovo V., *Atlantide. Corso di storia e geografia per il primo biennio*, Milan, La Nuova Italia, RCS, 2015.
2. Bienna E. and Bortone R., “La Geostoria nel biennio dei licei”, *Scuola e Amministrazione*, 5, 2014, <http://www.scuolaeamministrazione.it/it/la-geostoria-nel-biennio-dei-licei/>.
3. Brancati A., Pagliarani T. and Motta P., *Dialogo con la storia e la geografia*, Milan, La Nuova Italia, RCS, 2014.
4. Brusa A. and Impellizzeri F., *Terra e tempo. Manuale di geografia interdisciplinare*, Palermo-Florence, G.B. Palumbo, 2012.
5. Cotroneo D., *Territori e radici. Atlante corso di geografia per il biennio*, Milan, Sansoni per la Scuola, 2011.
6. De Vecchis G., *Imparando a comprendere il mondo. Ragionamenti per una storia dell'educazione geografica*, Rome, Kappa, 1999.
7. De Vecchis G., *Didattica della geografia. Teoria e prassi*, Turin, Utet Università, 2011.
8. Dewey J., *Democracy and Education*, New York, Macmillan, 1916.
9. Dewey J., *The public and its problems*, New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1927.
10. Errera C., “La geografia nella scuola italiana” *Proceedings of the X Congresso Geografico Italiano* (Milan, 6-15 September 1927), Milan, Capriolo e Massimino, 1927.
11. Gentile G., *La riforma della scuola in Italia*, Milan-Rome, Treves-Treccani-Tumminelli, 1932.
12. Giorda C., “Così vicine, così lontane, storia e geografia di fronte a un percorso comune nei curricoli scolastici”, *Ambiente Società Territorio*, 2, 2012, pp. 12-18.
13. Giorda C., “Geostoria, big history, big geography. Prospettive della geografia tra ricerca e didattica”, *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, 3, 2013, pp. 241-254.
14. Marisaldi L., Dinucci M. and Pellegrini C., *Storia e Geografia*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2012.
15. Marta M. and Morri R., “Chi difende la geografia? I sottoscrittori dell'appello” in De Vecchis G. (Ed.), *A scuola senza geografia*, Rome, Carocci, 2011, pp. 67-91.