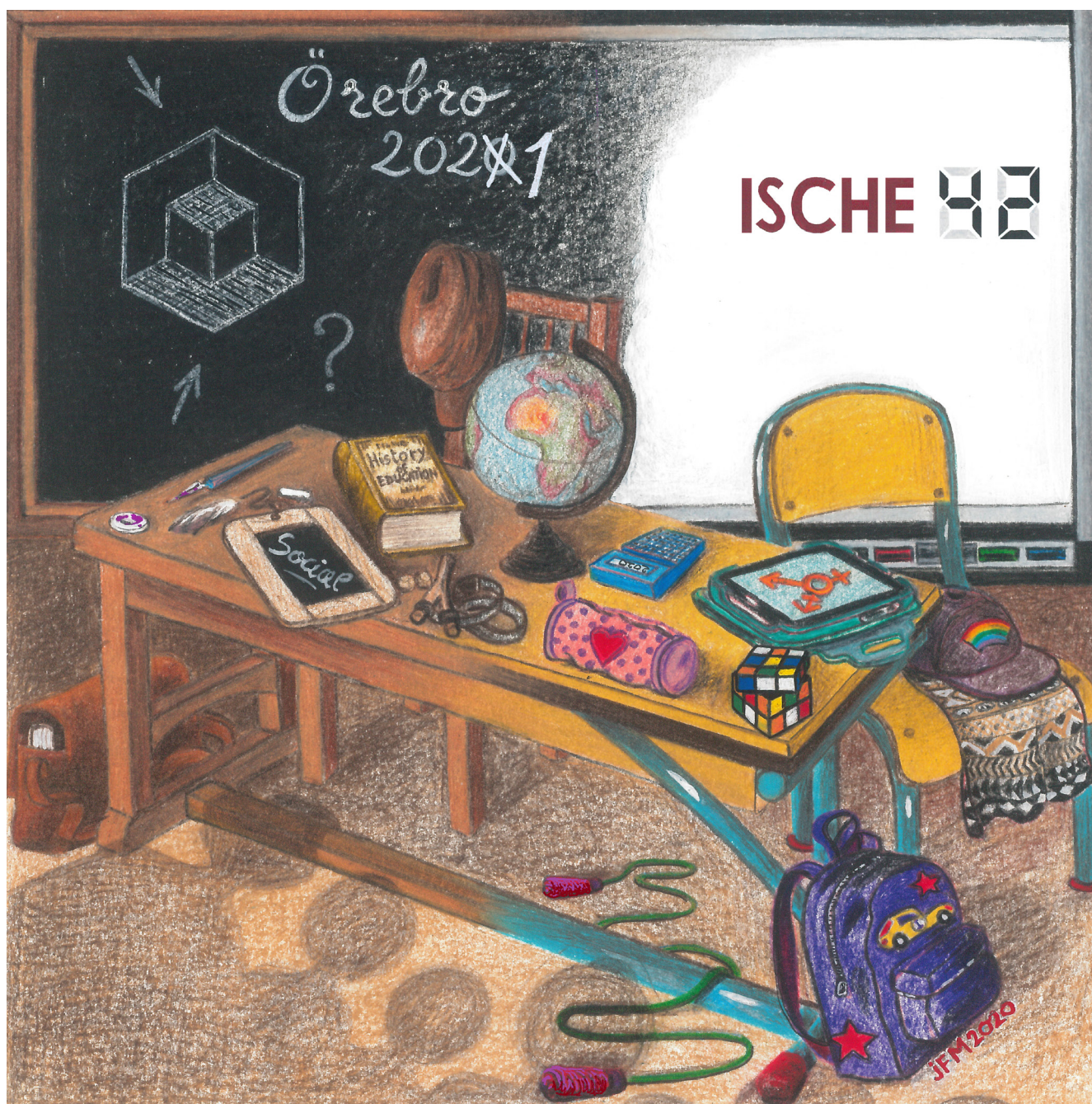




ISCHE 42

LOOKING FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

Rethinking the Social in the History of Education

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The right of children to an Outdoor Education in the pages of the Journal "La Coltura Popolare" (1911 – 1930)

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In the early 20th century in Italy and in Europe there was a very lively debate about the need for an outdoor education for boys and girls. This concern was linked to the more general sensitivity to the issue of the protection of children's rights: many associations, movements, thinkers underlined, in fact, how boys and girls should have enjoyed the right to health, education, healthy and dignified growth. This was also the context in which the personalities, organisations and movements present in the dynamic reality of Milan at the beginning of the century moved. Among these, the Società Umanitaria (Humanitarian Society) stood out, referring to ideals of equity and social justice and aiming, among other things, to promote various initiatives for children and adolescents: in fact, it took an active part in the debate on teacher training and the reform of children's institutions; it played a fundamental role in the propagation of the Montessori method in Milan and at national level; it set up shelters and promoted training courses for disadvantaged children, and much more.

The Società Umanitaria also disseminated original and lively reflections on the right to outdoor education, both because this theme was a fundamental part of the Montessori proposal supported by the aforementioned Società, and because more generally it responded to the ideals promoted by this organisation and based on attention to a healthy life, on education in nature, and on the recovery of juvenile discomfort through contact with the natural environment. For this reason, the Società Umanitaria initiated important innovative experiences centred on outdoor education and contact with the natural environment, and participated intensively in the debate on education to and in nature.

This contribution, therefore, aims to investigate the role played by the Società Umanitaria in the diffusion of a culture of the right to outdoor and natural education, analysing the issues of the magazine "La Coltura Popolare" - currently conserved in the Historical Archive of the Società Umanitaria, in Milan - through which it is possible to reconstruct both the initiatives carried out and the reflections promoted in this field. This is a still unexplored research path, which brings to the attention of scholars a magazine that offered important listening spaces - at Italian and European level - for the most innovative pedagogical experiments and the most stimulating and significant reflections of the time.

Historico-pedagogical research has long since revealed the potential of the study of popular or specialist journals for the reconstruction of educational practices and/or pedagogical theories and models in the perspective of a social history of education; these sources help scholars to highlight the propagation of ideals, the dissemination of practices, the interconnection between practices within educational institutions and social and cultural phenomena, the reconstruction of the comparison between different pedagogical ideas and their repercussions at a popular level.

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“How Pupils should be Educated”:the Development of Democratic Education and the New Decree Movement in the May Fourth Era

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The 1912-1913 Decree on education (renzi-guichou xuezhi) proved to be problematic at practical level in China. Therefore, many people, especially grassroots educators and intellectuals, appealed to reform the educational system. This urge for reform started in 1915 and culminated in 1919-1922. As a result, the 1922 Decree (renxu xuezhi) was promulgated. It is commonly accepted that the 1922 Decree is child-centred and more democratic than other decrees in Chinese history and that the making of the decree was bottom-up, in which “the nongovernmental” played the most important role. The New Decree Movement, taking place between the promulgation of a draft decree in 1921 and the enacting of the 1922 Decree, refers to several tidal waves of discussing and commenting in the press and educational organizations for improving the draft decree. Encouraging “the nongovernmental” to participate in educational reform, the movement is considered a crucial contribution to the 1922 Decree.

The educational reform in the May Fourth Era, especially the 1922 Decree, has attracted much scholarly attention; however, seldom did scholars explore the New Decree Movement in-depth. A closer investigation of the movement will not only contribute to understand the pursuit and practice of democratic education in modern China, but also be inspirational for educational development at present. Focusing on child-centeredness, this study investigates the New Decree Movement and discusses the development of democratic education in the May Fourth Era by analysing discourses in the press and the practice of democratic decision-making in educational organizations. To this end, historical sources in the press (e.g. jiaoyu zazhi, shibao) and historical records of educational organizations (e.g. jiangsusheng jiaoyuhui) are selected and analysed.

Firstly, this study depicts how child-centred education became a focal point of the educational reform in the May Fourth Era and highlights the New Decree Movement was an integral part in the making of the 1922 Decree. It then analyses discourses in the press and clarifies different groups' opinions on the draft decree. Finally, taking Jiangsu Educational Association as an example, it explores the practice of democratic decision-making in educational organizations by investigating how participants were selected and organized for commenting on the draft decree and to what extent their voices were heard and manifested in decision-making.

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