

Sandra Chistolini, *I Sistemi Educativi nel Sud del Mondo. Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente* (Educational Systems in the South, the Mediterranean and the Middle East), Roma, Editrice Universitaria di Roma – La Goliardica, Roma, 180 pp, 1997, ISBN 88-8066-163-9 (pbk)

Handling this skinny book, I am reminded of the book review section of a cultural journal that has been quite influential in Italy during the sixties and seventies, *Quaderni Piacentini*. It carried the headline *Da leggere; da non leggere* (*To be read, to be avoided*).

If the title raises expectations: *Educational Systems in the South of the World*, perplexities begin to develop when looking at the size (180 pages, just slightly bigger than those of this journal). Here comes the second line of the title to limit the scope to *Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Going through the introduction, we learn that the current volume is one of a series that will later cover: “*Africa, Asia, Central and Southern Americas, Australia and Oceania*”.

Let me remark that “*South of the World*” is first of all a geographical notion. As such it can only refer to the Southern hemisphere. Not a single country located South of the Equator is examined here. The title is therefore inappropriate.

The expression is often used, however – and indeed mostly – as a metaphor opposed to a “North” that means “developed” countries (industrialised, well off, rich...). To be clear and synthetic: the OECD countries, the list of which includes Australia and New Zealand: all but “Northern”, belonging to Oceania as much as Fiji, Tuvalu, Vanuatu... The list includes Japan, that I’ve always known to be an Asian country.

Let’s leave it now, and focus on the subtitle. Around the Mediterranean proper there are 23 states (political units that are internationally recognised), plus two micro-states not bordering it but very close to it, plus one that is not internationally recognised. (Why should we not include in the Mediterranean area its protuberance, the Black Sea? This would add another half a dozen states bordering its waters). Confining ourselves to the Mediterranean proper, we find that less than half the countries are examined. Why? The author informs the reader that two previous books have dealt with the 12 (at the time) EU countries and another with 20 other countries of the “*North of the World*” i.e. (quote) “*EFTA, Canada, USA, CMEA*”. By using acronyms the author clearly shows she is not referring to geographical notions. Why not use UNESCO criteria, then, to divide the world into regions? Does she know that the European regions would include the US, Canada and Israel? Does she know that there is no “*Middle East*” region? Has she heard of the Arab League, and of ALECSO?

The very notion of “*Middle East*” is all but clear cut (starting from the name itself, that often takes the form of “Near East” to refer more or less to the same area).

Looking at the list of countries chosen, the expression “Arab States” would have been less inappropriate, though Iran does not belong, however Islamic it is. (It is also true that the Berbers of Maghreb would be entitled to object to the habit of calling their countries “Arab”. All conventions are conventional, after all).

Let’s now go deeper into the book.

Among the 21 countries considered, four are presented with a closer look under the bombastic title *Four countries under the microscope*. (If the “microscopic” scrutiny can only produce an average of 20 pages per country, biblio-references included, what sort of tool a decent analysis would require?) A *shared multiethnic educational tradition*. Given that the author is here referring to Egypt, Israel, Tunisia and Turkey, the subtitle is puzzling, to say the least. Provided the same tradition is shared by the four countries (an assumption that would be hard to prove), why not include Cyprus, Malta, Morocco, Lebanon, Yemen... in the same set?

The presentation of each country begins with a “*Historical sketch*”. From these notes I’ve learned a lot! I have learnt, among other things, that during the Gulf war of 1991 Syria was, along with Egypt, a stronghold of the anti-Saddam coalition (p. 27, line 9). That the same year 1991 saw (p. 41, line 2 of the 3rd paragraph) “*the recognition of the State of Israel by the United Nations*” (who was Mr Netanyahu representing on 42nd street New York, in the eighties, then?) and later (September 1993): “*the mutual and official recognition of the State of Israel and the State of Palestine confederated with Jordan*” (sic!!!). Further on (p. 41, lines 4, 5, 6 of the 3rd paragraph) the reader can learn that “*During the 30 years of the British mandate the Jewish community organizes its own educational system, side by side with the Arab school system, as an answer to the partition of Palestine into two independent states.*” (Can anybody help me? So far, naive as I am, I had always regarded the notion of “independent state” as conflicting with that of “mandate” – remember Namibia before the independence, among others? –). I also thought I had understood that Palestinian “unrest” (to put it mildly) started with the Arab refusal to accept the partition into two independent states proposed by the UN half a century ago (November 1947). About Turkey I learned (p 86, 1st paragraph) that “*The attempt of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807) and Mahmoud II (1808-1839) did not succeed in restraining the crash of the Empire (1738-1914)*” . Did anybody ever hear of a crash lasting almost 70,000 days? No doubt there would be excellent reasons to sketch the history of the Ottoman empire as a background to contemporary Turkey. Yet the country as such has only been in existence since the end of World War I, and as a Republic since October 1923.

There would be no point in wasting further energy and time to list the pleasantries galore that we meet in this small book. Academe likes talking about scholarship. Scholarship? Should a student submit a report of this kind, s/he would face a clear rejection (or, in case of examination, a neat F). The ambition of the book being that of belonging to the field of Comparative Education (of which the author is lecturer), a question arises: what is Comparative Education? Should it not show at least the attempt of understanding the reasons behind the differences among things compared, a little bit beyond bare "description"?

Going back to my starting point and remembering *Quaderni Piacentini* the verdict is clear: *To be avoided*.

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