Foreign Pupils, Bad Citizens

The Public Construction of Difference in a Roman School

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(translated by Jennifer Radice)

A precise quantification of the presence of foreigners seems to be one of the main worries of Italian political institutions. "How many are they?" is a common question even in public schools. The Ministry of Education considers it extremely important to set apart Italian pupils from those "of non-Italian citizenship" independently of their actual linguistic competence and their level of socioeconomic integration (Minerismo 2011a, 2011b). This quantitative attitude certainly derives from the "blood" principle of Italian citizenship, according to which one is Italian or foreign based on the nationality of one's parents, notwithstanding one's place of birth (i.e., the jus sanguinis principle). Yet the deeper reason for this fixation on numbers also relates to a more widespread social anxiety toward foreignness felt by ordinary Italians, caused by a very rapid demographic change still underway. After a century of emigration, Italy became a receiving country during the 1970s (Calomino 2004) without being socially and politically ready for this unexpected turn. The number of incoming migrants has only accelerated since the turn of the millennium. Facing an unanticipated growing foreign presence, Italian institutions set in motion a numbering strategy which is readily understandable, since the objective enumeration of sheer numbers constitutes a "minority" as a politically controllable entity and reinforces the status of the "majority" that is in charge of counting (Appadurai 2006).

This defensive attitude has been mirrored by Italian legislation, which has tied immigration with securitization by positing an almost necessarily positive correlation between the numbers of foreigners and the defined social danger. Local incidents and contextual situations have been reconfigured (Herzfeld 1997, 2003)
to the institutional and national level through their numerical dimension. Starting from the assumption that foreigners are indeed a social problem, quantification has been presented not only as a possible analytical tool, but sometimes as the real solution: Count them, and you will be able to limit them.

But how does this occur in practice? In the case presented here, it will be shown that the negative social connotation associated with a primary school on the outskirts of Rome was first "ethnically" in numerical terms and then transformed into a question of national identity, via the efforts of powerful interests and institutions: the "local moms," worried about their children's schooling; the school's various management teams; the regional directors of education; the local councilor for public education; a member of the Italian parliament; and, finally, the minister for public education. The thread connecting these individuals was formed first by the borough itself (with which all of them had a personal connection, except for the minister) and second by a series of personal links of acquaintance and friendship that constituted a channel of communication. Once this channel between the local and institutional level was established, it was very difficult for alternative versions to reach any public space; they were relegated to the margins and regarded as utopian or indeed mendacious portrayals.

An III Starred School

The number of pupils without Italian citizenship in Italian schools has increased steadily in the last decade and recently reached the level of 25 percent of the total number of pupils (Miur-Isinus 2014), although clearly these statistics synthesize completely different situations: Some schools have almost no foreign pupils while others have a very visible multiethnic presence. In the Torpignattara district, in Rome's eastern periphery, the Carlo Piscacane school is famous for the fact that more than 80 percent of pupils are technically foreigners, as they do not have an Italian passport, even though the great majority were born in Italy or arrived there before they were of school age and thus speak Italian just as well as children of the same age who are native speakers. In short, we are talking about a school attended for the most part by bilingual children whose parents are immigrants, and where the number of Italian pupils is much lower than the national average and than the presence of Italians in the district. The Carlo Piscacane school currently has 400 pupils, of whom 155 are foreigners and only 25 are Italian, divided among nine classes, two in each year except for year 2, which is unique for reasons that we shall see shortly.

How can it be that no other primary school in the district has ever had more than 30 percent of pupils per class with a foreign passport, while at the Carlo Piscacane school, the same figure in the last decade has never fallen below 80 percent? To answer this question, we need to start with an observation that few people have made in facing up to the "peculiarity" of the Piscacane school, namely the words of Maria Grazia Casola, a teacher at the school:

I personally think that what should arouse our concern at Piscacane school is not the presence of foreign children that is absolutely predictable, they live round here, all of them are our neighbors so naturally they come to this school. What should arouse our concern, but does not... is the fact that the Italian families have gone away, indeed the Italians are saying, send our children to that school? We'd rather take them to another school by car in the morning.

The reasons for the lack of Italian pupils are complex some may be linked to Italy's legal system, others derive more from the local context. Before we set the Piscacane story in the social context of the district, let us take a brief look at the legal framework for teaching the second generation of immigrants.

Immigrant pupils in Europe have an overall lower school performance than do native pupils. Immigrant pupils drop out or have to repeat a year more frequently and, in secondary school, are concentrated in lower-level institutions (Riccardi 2008). This distance between newcomers and natives lessens in the second generation—pupils born of foreign parents who received their entire "secondary socialization" (primary school attendance and formation of a group of peers) in the receiving country—who score in between the two previous groups in their educational achievement (Di Bartolomeo 2011).

This also holds true for Italy, with the addition of some special features relating to the Italian legal system. Although the rights of foreign minors are formally safeguarded by Italian legislation (which requires compulsory schooling for all minors notwithstanding their residency status, the possibility to enroll at any time of the year, and the right of pupils not to be in a class with an excessively high number of children), these principles often do not lay down clear instructions for their implementation (Lledófost and Diaz 2008). At a consequence, schools know quite well what they are supposed to offer in terms of rights for their pupils, yet they do not know how to fulfill these legal expectations (Riccardi 2008, 453) and "teachers, especially head teachers, are increasingly worried about the practical applicability of the legislative provisions" (Giraudon 2011, 452). In this context of uncertainty concerning the application of regulations in practice, the minor case of the Piscacane school has risen from the working-class suburbs of Rome to the national level.

Up until the 1980s, most inhabitants of Torpignattara were laborers, clerical workers, and shopkeepers. Rapid urbanization in the postwar period led to a worsening of social conditions in the whole of Rome, with consequences that were most evident in the suburbs. From the 1980s onward, an image of local crime, linked to prostitution and an increase in drug-dealing, began to be associated with Torpignattara; the general perception was that most criminal activity took place around Via della Martanella (see also Brocchelini, chapter 5), where the Piscacane school is situated.

Before 1985, Piscacane, built in 1988, was the only school in the district, but the very rapid growth in the number of children enrolled (these were the years of
school when the time came to enroll their children in infant and then primary school.

Piscane's notoriety was interpreted by many Italian families as the consequence of the incident: "ethnic diversity," provoking Italians to distance themselves further. Having started as a school for (Italian) problem families, Piscane ended up by being the immigrants' school without losing its negative image—indeed seeing it reinforced.

But while the number of Italian children was steadily falling, the immigrants in the district continued to send their children to Piscane, and it was this unbalanced ratio between Italians and foreigners that at the end of 2007 prompted a group of parents to form a committee that was self-styled—without any irony—as Moms for Integration. The entrenched inadequacy of Piscane was interpreted by the committee as a direct consequence of the presence of immigrants. At the political level, this was argued as having been caused by the excessively left-wing policies of the school's management and some of the teachers. After years in which the gossiping and negative judgments had been expressed in whispers between individuals, Piscane was now being attacked publicly.

This politicized interpretation soon aroused institutional interest. The first person to make himself publicly heard was Fabio Rampelli, a member of Parliament belonging to the PDL (Il Popolo della Liberta', Italy's main center-right party). He had a long history of right-wing political activism in Rome and was a leading light from the 1980s in the Fratelli della Giustizia (the youth section of the then Movimento Sociale Italiano) in Cilea Oppio. There Rampelli had come to know the Marsilio family, two boys and a girl, who lived a few steps from Marranella. The four of them formed a friendship that was to lead Laura Marsilio to be elected several times from 1993 onward as a local councillor in the sixth borough (the Torpignattara municipio), a position that enabled her to get to know the district and its residents very well (particularly her brother Marco was elected to the first municipio, in the center). After being elected regional councillor in Lazio, Rampelli entered Parliament with Marco Marsilio in 2006, and he was elected again in 2008, this time forming part of the majority coalition, thanks to the Italian right's victory under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, who appointed the young lawyer Mariastella Gelmini (PDL) as minister for Public Education. But Fabio Rampelli's new parliamentary role by no means led him to forget his old companions and their many political battles. When after many years, the left lost control of Rome in the municipal elections of May 2008, the new mayor Gianni Alemanno (who had a political background similar to that of Rampelli) invited Laura Marsilio to join his team and made her the city councillor for education and schools.

The very strong political ties between Member of Parliament Rampelli and the Marsilio family, on the one hand, and between Laura Marsilio and the sixth
municipio (where the Piscacane school is located), on the other, thus constituted the individual connections that caused the Piscacane question to "take on new life" and to become a national cause célèbre: The local "problem" turned into a matter to be dealt with through appropriate legislation of the Italian state facing the issue of integrating foreigners into its social fabric. Let us examine the main stages of this process and its ramifications.

From Neighborhood School to Political Drama

The matter flared up before Christmas 2007, when some of the mothers opposed the preparation of a cardboard Nativity scene conceived as a "global village," an initiative that required the children's parents to make a contribution in accordance with their own cultural traditions so as to celebrate an occasion that would exclude nobody, certainly not the non-Christians. On 22 December, Rampelli issued a press release in which he expressed regret at not having been allowed to visit the school in person to check how many people the term "some of the mothers" referred to. He then added, somewhat contradictorily:

During my inspection I established that at least 76 percent of the school roll consists of foreign pupils of the Muslim faith, that in one class there are 18 foreign children and only one Italian, that many Italian families have been forced to leave after suffering discrimination against our identity and against the Catholic faith, to the point where there have been instances of linguistic regression. The parents are in despair because their children are frightened by the completely veiled women who bring the Bangladeshi children to school (Rampelli 2002).

But the attack on Piscacane started for real only about a year later, when Laura Marsilio was city councillor for education and Fabio Rampelli was in Parliament as a majority member of the Culture Committee, together with the Mayor for Education Gelmini, who belonged to the same party (PD). While awaiting the enrolments for the 2009/2010 school year, the parents of thirteen Italian children in the final year of the infant school at Piscacane unanimously decided for the first time, with a clear "political" intention, not to enroll their children in the primary school in the same complex, and the thirteen children were instead enrolled in other schools. Their motives were that there were too many foreign children at Piscacane; the consequence was that the prophecy fulfilled itself, and in 2009/2010 the school, instead of having two entry classes—each of which would have had about ten foreign and six or seven Italian pupils—had just one with eighteen pupils, all of them foreign.

By now, the problem had been brought into focus; there were not too few Italian children at Piscacane but too many foreign ones. Thus instead of finding a way of making the school more attractive to Italian parents, tempting them to enroll their children at Piscacane, and thus increasing the number of pupils with an Italian passport, the opposite solution was proposed: put a cap of 30 percent on the number of foreign children in each individual class.

This objective was pursued at the same time by Rampelli—who declared on 5 February 2009 that "it is necessary to establish a reference point, a maximum percentage of foreign children in each class" (Rampelli 2009)—and by the councilor Marsilio, who on the same day summoned the representatives of the sixth borough, Department XI (the regional education office for Lazio), and the primary schools of the sixth municipio with the intention of jointly signing a "network agreement" that would put a definite and quantified limit on the presence of foreign children in school classes. But the agreement, thanks to the joint efforts of school principals and local left-wing politicians, was signed, actually steered toward the opposite solution, with a recommendation that Italian parents in particular should be incentivized to enroll their children in neighborhood schools, given that (as noted by Giannmario Palmieri, chairman of the sixth municipio):

The municipality has received a request to fulfil the requirement for a more balanced composition of Italian and non-Italian pupils in our schools. Precisely because of the great importance of the contents of the agreement the Sixth Municipio, supported by the great majority of head teachers of scholastic institutions, has rejected the inclusion into the agreement of an upper limit on the presence of non-Italian children... (Attiure a Roma 2009, emphasis added)

Some weeks later on 17 March, Rampelli harshly criticized the network agreement: "The maximum quota was not approved, owing to its boycoting in the sixth municipio and by certain head teachers." According to his reading of the facts, the ever-smaller number of Italian children enrolled in the primary school was attributable not to previous causes or the provocatively ant-immigrant attitude of the Mords for Integration committee, but to the management of the school: "It is the failure of a presumed utopian and stupid model arbitrarily imposed on citizens by a presumptuous and ideologized school board. There are two possible explanations if only 12 children are enrolled at Piscacane with only 2 Italian children: incompetence or malice" (Rampelli 2009).

But by now it was clear that a local solution was no longer possible. The Piscacane issue would have to be resolved by bringing in the most weighty institutional hierarchies, and the task of galvanizing the minister became more urgent. During that same month of March, the news that some mothers had asked permission to move their "Italian" children from Piscacane to other schools had "forced Minister Gelmini to announce a cap on the number of foreign children in schools, fixed at 30 percent" (Roma Today 2009).

Indeed, the next move was the involvement of the government with a decision taken in the Committee for Culture, Science, and Education on 3 April 2009. Rampelli was the first signatory of this resolution, which obliged the government to introduce "a maximum quota of 30 percent for foreign pupils" as soon as
the stage of considering the new generation of immigrants to be integrated from the cultural, not merely the linguistic, point of view and therefore we should not regard birthplace as a decisive factor (Rampelli 2009).

By making such a rigid distinction between linguistic integration that is, competence at native level) and cultural integration, Rampelli seems to dismiss any possibility of identifying a specific group of second-generation students, not "completely" Italian nor even superior to the new arrivals. Or rather, lumping together all foreigners on the basis of their passports, without any regard for their linguistic competence, reveals a political ideology that is scarcely aimed at facilitating integration. It is surprising to find that this legalistic position was confirmed by the Ministry of Education which, in a research project commissioned by the Ministry of Education which, in a research project (Rampelli 2009), classified the "pupils with non-Italian citizenship" in schools by calculating their attendance record and scholastic achievement without making any distinction between the performance of the second generation and that of the new arrivals, as is normally done in research projects of this kind (Corsetti 2008; Di Bartolomeo 2011).

Pressure on the minister continued not only at institutional level, but also from below. On 7 September 2009, Flora Arcangeli, the spokesperson for the Morsa for Integration committee expressed her disappointment to the press: "Minister Gelmini promised to put a cap on the number of foreign children in school classes, but nothing whatever has come of it" (Il Tempo 2009). On that occasion, Ms. Arcangeli also made an embarrassing statement that gave away the depth of her prejudice against the foreign pupils and their families.

Given the prevalence of influenza A, we have a further concern: until last year, no health certificates were requested from foreign children who came back to school after travelling to their country of origin. We hope that attention will now be paid to this at least (Il Tempo 2009).

The next day, 8 September, Rampelli made another reference to the Pisciniano school and to the "Utopian fantasies" of the school's management and asked the minister to impose a cap of 10 percent: "I hope at this juncture that Minister Gelmini will issue as soon as possible a ministerial circular on the introduction of a 10 percent cap on foreign children" (Rampelli 2009). This request was reasserted a few days later on September 14: "The first day of term at Carlo Pisciniano school in Rome has served to sanctify the objective of our proposals on the introduction of a cap of 30 percent on foreign children" (Rampelli 2009).

Once again, the only solution put forward foresaw a cut in the number of foreign children, not a move to increase enrollments of Italian children. All this pressure yielded results and finally on 18 January 2010, Minister Gelmini issued Ministerial Circular No. 4, "Indications and recommendations for the integra-
nation of non-Italian pupils.” As was to be expected, the new text bore no formal trace of its entirely fortuitous genesis, but City Councilor Laura Marsilio frankly admitted that she had played a central part in its making: “Look, I knew it by heart because it was I who wrote virtually all of the circular, side by side with the minister” (Marsilio 2011).

Once the objective of imposing an obligatory cap on foreign children had been achieved, one of Councilor Laura Marsilio’s last public acts was the inauguration of the 2010/2011 school year. On 10 September, she arrived at the Pisacane school and publicly restated her conviction that “the children of immigrants born in Italy are not Italians” and therefore it was right for them to be regarded as foreigners (Corriere Roma 2010). Even though the declaration aroused much controversy, it was in complete accordance with the government’s commitment of 1 April 2009 not to make any distinction between “foreigners,” who were all considered to be equally “inadequate.” Rampelli made another public statement on 17 September, starting once again with the Pisacane but ending up by speaking of citizenship and its sense, defining the latter as “a true presumption of superiority and thus a racist attitude.” To oblige someone who was born in Italy to disown the roots of his own family and to foist on him a definition of “Italian” was a clear example of racism (Rampelli 2009b).

With this statement, the reconfiguring of the Pisacane affair was complete: a school abandoned by dozens of people from the lower middle class in Rome’s periphery and attended largely by immigrants’ children becomes a symbol of how to belong to the Italian nation, or a nation in general. According to the picture that emerges from this affair, one does not “belong” because one shares learnt values, principles, and cultural attitudes; one must belong where those values, principles, and attitudes are inherited, transmitted by the blood line. A primary school has become the basis for formulating a very general principle of belonging for ethnic reasons, as opposed to any civic citizenship. Constrained between obliging someone to belong and forbidding someone to belong, this principle neglects one of the basic dimensions of Western liberal identity: the possibility of choosing where one wants to belong.

Another Pisacane?
The old stereotype of the district that portrayed the “Maranella school” as a source of potential peril for respectable people has acquired a new lease of life from the presence of foreign pupils: the other (now the ethnic other) is lying in ambush and wants to replace us, to take our place. In consequence, the ministerial circular of 1 January 2010, although it did not sanction the breaking-up of the classes at Pisacane—given that most of the foreign children speak Italian as their mother tongue—certainly legitimizes (from the cultural perspective) some practices that are now established in the institutional “filter” that prevents the enrollment of foreign children in certain schools. Even if the circular did not apply in the case of Pisacane, it certainly helped to give legitimacy to the negative views concerning the school.

Once entrenched at the institutional level, the prejudice against Pisacane can spread elsewhere, reinforced and legitimized in its public expression through petty day-to-day bureaucracy. This, more than any circular, directive, or formal act creates Pisacane’s segregation and the fact that it is a “case.” For example, a mother tells the story of a significant episode in another local school in the same neighborhood. A little girl born in Italy, the daughter of an Italian mother and an Arabic-speaking father and thus with a recognizable foreign surname, was informally refused admission to that school on the grounds that there were no longer any places; she had to resort to Pisacane. On the same day, an Italian girl who lived in the same building and had an Italian first name and surname was accepted in the very same school.

But there are many anecdotes along these lines. An Italian mother had offered to help a foreign mother who had just arrived in Rome and wanted to enroll her daughter in the infant school. The Italian mother thought that Pisacane would be a good choice:

First I went to speak to the teachers, because my request was outside the normal time of year. The teachers told me: We have no problem with this, but you must go to the borough’s office. So I went to the office and the woman there said to me: “But why do you want to enroll your friend’s daughter at Pisacane school? Don’t you know that it’s the school for foreigners? Why not enroll her in another infant school?” She took it for granted that I, an Italian, did not have a Lebanese friend and obviously thought that the child to be enrolled was Italian. A further incident told me by the people involved further underlines how stereotypes are produced. Someone who works in the education office spoke to a teacher at Pisacane, emphasizing the fact that “well-off parents and intelligent immigrants who paid their taxes sent their children to the Deedella school, whereas no Italians went to Pisacane because the immigrants enrolled there came from disorderly families who were in trouble with the law.” It will be noted that the old conception of the school for “the riffraff” is superimposed with almost exact precision on the newer one of the school “for foreigners.”

The “Pisacane affair” has evolved from this discrimination expressed by small gestures, words that are barely weighted, and shared “common sense.” It is on the basis of this common sense that the wind of political debate has been able to blow strongly, legitimizing an interpretation of the school to the point of making it predominant. The general sense that emerges from all this is clear: for many of the residents in the district, especially those who need to demonstrate their respectability in contrast to the disreputable Torpignattara district, there
are dangerous types prowling around Piscacane who could endanger collective well-being and who, it is feared, will displace the present inhabitants. Foreigners are perceived as an alternative to us, a close-knit group that confronts us with an "either-or" situation.

And yet, seen from the perspective of the teachers and the small number of Italian parents who still send their children to Piscacane, that school could offer an opportunity of enrichment for all. These people instead regard the Italian-Foreign couple as a "both-and" situation. That is to say, they see in the multiethnic groupings in Piscacane a wealth of opportunity, the chance to expand the horizon of our concept of humanity, the other as an alternative for us. In this binary opposition, the school may be seen as either a ghetto or an oasis (Benadusi 2002). The teachers in particular seem to be aware that teaching at Piscacane is an opportunity for growth for them. The original text read for in the "network agreement" of 5 February 2009 went in that direction of addressing Italians so that they would recognize the value of multiculturalism—only then to be symbolically defeated by Ministerial Circular No. 2.

Thus the teachers' vision of Piscacane school as a space for dialogue, mutual enrichment, and collective civic growth for Italians and foreigners, a vision that is put into practice daily, remains suspended and invisible. This vision finds no space of its own to evolve: it remains confined to the local context of those who share it because there are still no official channels to encourage it and give it publicity. And yet, it is a concept that could have its own appeal not only for Rome but for the whole of Italy, a country that has not yet found a way to come to terms at the symbolic level with its recent role as a country of immigration, after having been a country of emigrants for over a century.

In the light of these final considerations, I would like to end this chapter with an amusing story: I will tell it without further comment, as it seems to me to summarize perfectly the cultural space that could be opened up in a school of this kind, a space that the Italian children of the neighborhood unfortunately do not yet have the opportunity to experience to the full.

In the fourth year class of a primary school, the teacher proposes an exercise of reciprocal description. One at a time, the children come to the teacher's desk and their classmates try to recite their main features. The purpose of the exercise, as intended by the teacher, is for them to discuss openly the difference between one classmate and another, inviting them to think about it and to express their doubts.

It is the turn of S, a very Roman son of Filipino parents.

"What is S. like?" asks the teacher.

"He has very thick black hair."

"He has olive skin."

"He is thin and has very white teeth."

G (an Italian girl) adds: "He has almond eyes."

The teacher takes advantage of the fact that G. has identified an "ethnic" feature to try to speak about the relationship between physical and cultural diversity and to explain it: "Why does S. have almond eyes? See if you can tell me, G."

Her answer seems odd to those Italian adults who have grown up in a uniform cultural environment, but it expresses practically a new way of seeing that could be created only in a context such as that of Piscacane school.

"Because he's always laughing!"

Notes

1. These statements by the teachers and teaching staff at Piscacane school were made in various informal conversations and collected in the course of two discussions recorded on 11 April and 14 May 2001 in the vicinity of the school.

2. The Martinelli Law in 1911, the Dini Government's Decree Law from 1999, the Tuscany-Naples Law in 1997, the Ponzi Law in 2002, and the "immunity for teachers" in 2003 gave a complete amnesty to over 1,000,000 immigrants without official residence permits (IDACS, 2001).

3. Given the temporary nature of this episode, I was asked to maintain the anonymity of the persons concerned.

4. Again, in reporting these judgments I am maintaining the anonymity of my interlocutors.

5. I have taken the juxtaposition of alternative and alternative for us from Clifford Geertz (1986).

References


