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ARCANGELO GHILSERI AND THE SHORT MANUAL OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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***Abstract:** The paper focuses on the scientific activity of a little-known Italian geographer: Arcangelo Ghisleri (1855-1938). Ghisleri's training course and scientific-didactic improvement are thus briefly illustrated with the aim of clarifying how he developed his interest in geography. In his opinion, geography was able to restore a global vision of the world and was particularly formative in the school environment. For these reasons, one of his goals was to make learning easier in Italian schools, where he hoped that manuals written by Italian authors would be used and therefore suitable for an Italian audience and national study programs. In this sense, he wanted to be an example and the second part of the paper is dedicated to the examination of his manual: "A small manual of historical geography" (1889). Ghisleri intends to point out the close relationship between geography and history as the entire human story is always connected to the surrounding environment and the latter, therefore, is constantly modified. Ghisleri's text is of particular value for the clarity of presentation and the simplicity of the didactic setting*

***Key words:** Arcangelo Ghisleri, historical-geography, school manual*

1. ARCANGELO GHILSERI : THE MAN AND THE INTELLECTUAL

Arcangelo Ghisleri, scholar of geography and cartography, was one of the most illustrious figures of the early twentieth century in Italy. He was born in Persico, near Cremona, on September 5th, 1855 in a rural environment characterized by Catholic orthodoxy¹. His education developed thanks to a few intellectuals from Cremona and to his passion for historical and literary novels. Ghisleri put forward the idea that adults were part of a political system based on compromises, highlighting that the youth were those who could give a new lease of life to the nation thanks to their honesty. He aimed at establishing an alternative political party based on reforms; but in order for the youth to be involved in politics, they needed to be instructed. Therefore, Ghisleri committed

¹ See Benini, 1975; Maffei, 2007.

himself to educating and forming the new generations working as a journalist as well as a teacher.

He embraced the Positivism to achieve his objectives. Indeed, he believed that tuition should be provided by a secular system. Hence, despite his coming from a religious environment, his republican and democratic ideals led him to found “Association of freethinkers” and to participate in the International Congress held in Bruxelles in 1880 established to define the principle of the International Association of free thought. This association devised a method to freely express thoughts and, so, to freely act in every aspect of life. This method did not intend to reveal the truth, but to discover it by reasoning. In this way, in line with the Positivist culture, he valued the scientific method.

From 1884, Ghisleri devoted himself to teaching, obtaining his first position as a history and geography teacher at “Doni” lyceum in Matera. There, he had the opportunity to deepen his scientific knowledge as well as to focus on studying “his territory” in contrast to colonialism which was the object of study promoted by the armies and a commercial society.

Furthermore, the poverty he witnessed in South Italy strengthened his democratic and federalist ideals. In this scenario, he considered history and geography fundamental because they focus on the relationship between men and the environment. In particular, he regarded geography as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge of the historical events between a nation and its population (Berardi, 2015). He never forgot his experience even when he moved to North Italy. In fact, he obtained the transfer to Savona, where he founded the review “Cuore e critica”.

The review was firstly published on January 1st, 1887 in Savona with the aim of discussing about culture. It was him who published the review since he was the director of the episcopal typography “Miralta”. In the fall of 1888, Ghisleri left Savona to fill the position at the lyceum “Sarpi” in Bergamo. This was the most important part of his life, a part of life which was closely linked to geography. Even the newsroom moved to Bergamo. After a trip to Chicago in 1893 for the World’s fair, Ghisleri published “Emporium”, an illustrated monthly review about arts, literature, science with the insert “news from a colleague” including teaching updates and school problems. The review is a clear example of the important changes as well as the results achieved by typography between 1800-1900. In particular, it emphasises the spread both of photography as a new means of communication and of the photomechanical print which allowed the creation of pages including texts and images. Despite his hard journalistic activity, he continued to hold the position of philosophy and history teacher at the lyceum in Lugano between 1898-1901. Up until his death, in 1938, he continued to be committed both politically and editorially.

Therefore, he deserves particular attention thanks to his scientific and didactic commitment. If some scholar² re-evaluated Ghisleri works, several aspects and works must be examined. This paper aims at focusing on his manual of historical geography rather than just on his interests for geography.

2. SCIENTIFIC INTEREST FOR GEOGRAPHY

The necessity to improve his teaching knowledge led Ghisleri to study historical-geographical manuals but also numerous historical-geographical essays. He acquired a

² See Mangini, 1985; Micelli, 2008; Spagnoli, 2016.

good knowledge of geography as well as a dissatisfaction towards the current teaching practices and manuals. He used to consider his love for geography as “clandestine” (Casti, 2001). Why? He used to show his deep love for geography and share his belief concerning the importance of teaching it; but he used to conceal his being a geographer while he was discussing with the intellectuals of his age about the political and social problems of Italy. In his opinion, far from that of the other intellectuals, geography could provide a global vision of the world and give the necessary instruments to those who wanted to change it. In actual fact, geography could contribute to the social progress of the world. The problems he came across in his first years of teaching made him criticize the existing teaching practices, the books and teaching materials adopted in the Italian schools. Despite the availability of a manual suitable for its maps, the geographical manual drawn up by Italian scholar Hugues³, in schools teachers were keeping on using outdated German books such as the famous *Atlas of political and physical geography* of A. Stieler and H. Berghaus (1871-1875), and the essay of Kiepert⁴. In other words, 30 years after the Italian unification (1861), Italian school was still in a position of cultural servitude, because it was still under the influence of German manuals. At the same time, no geographer, gripped by a reverential fear of the German school, had attempted to propose an Italian book, written by an Italian, suitable for Italian readers and national school programmes.

Apart from the above-mentioned considerations linked to a legitimate patriotic fervour and pride, there were other didactical necessities which arose during his years of teaching.

All these reasons persuaded him to create a manual from scratch, a manual which could give the right importance to those Italian locations unfairly forgotten by the German atlas and their Italian copies; a manual which did not consider Italy as a geographical continuation of Germany. It was not only a problem of geographical representation but of contents as well. This new manual was supposed to help Italians get acquainted with their nation and recall the most significant places of their history. Therefore, he could not rely only on foreign authors. According to Ghisleri opinion, Italians should recapture their past and start knowing it in details. For this reason, he put forward the challenging idea of a book: *Short Manual of Historical Geography*.

3. THE CREATION OF THE “SHORT MANUAL OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY”

The occasion to create the manual arose on 24th October, 1888 when a decree, enacted by Paolo Boselli, the current Minister of Public Education, imposed an hour of historical geography in every lyceum. A manual was not available yet because such a subject was new, so the only alternative was to use a foreign coursebook despite all the problems that it may create. Ghisleri proposed to the editor Gaffuri in Bergamo to write a new one at his own expenses. The manual was to be divided into several instalments, every of which was to be printed and published in line with the school programmes. Ghisleri hoped that teachers, reassured by the punctuality of the shipping, would opt for this manual. As Maffei (2012) pointed out, the manual was an overnight success because it was conceptually innovative and rich of data which had meticulously been collected by

³ L. Hugues, *Nozioni di geografia matematica ad uso degli istituti tecnici*, Torino, Loescher, 1891.

⁴ H. Kiepert, *A Manual of Ancient Geography*, Macmillan and Co, 1881.

the author. The book was firstly divided into attachments, and subsequently into two volumes for its second edition in 1890.

In the introduction Ghisleri clarified the objective of the manual: combining scientific reliability with didactic usefulness through simple explanations. He believed that school books should be understandable and useful even for those who did not go to school anymore. In the introduction he informed his readers that his aim was to clarify the relationship between inorganic and organic phenomena, namely the relationship between the Earth surface and human communities, so between the land and the moral and civil development of men. Therefore, according to his point of view, history and geography had a close relationship. He maintained that geography and its teaching cannot be separated from history because every historic event is connected to the territory which, in turn, is shaped by history.

The first instalment, divided into three chapters, centred around Europe in 475 AC, soon after the fall of the Roman Empire, with two other paragraphs concerning “important places” and the Barbarian kingdoms. The second instalment, published in November 1888, included an interesting paragraph regarding the ancient geographic and cartographic conceptions. It ended with two paragraphs about “The empire of Charlemagne and his successors” and the Islamic World and the Byzantine Empire. In early February of the following year, other two instalments, ranging from the end of Historical Geography of Middle age to the discovery of America and the beginning of Modern age, were published. In 1888, Ghisleri and Gaffuri decided to include the first four instalments in one volume. In the first months of the following year, the other 4 instalments of the second part were published. They centred around Modern and Contemporary ages. The first was of about forty pages divided into three chapters ranging from the Discovery of America (1492) to the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

As with the previous instalments, Ghisleri included a paragraph on “important places” where he masterfully and easily explained how geographic discoveries broadened the knowledge of the world. In March 1889, he published the second part about all the historical events up until the Treaty of Aachen (1748). In this part he included a whole paragraph on the colonies ruled by Europeans between the XVII and XVIII centuries. In the end, he finished the manual with the publishing of the remaining instalments. In the end of the fifth chapter, concerning overseas colonies, there are a few pages devoted to the great explorations occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Ghisleri added, at the end of the tenth chapter, a paragraph about “Geographic knowledge” where he mentioned the latest explorations occurred in the XIX century. He highlighted how such explorations, encouraged by the long peace that Europe found with the Congress of Vienna, were different from the previous ones.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Short Manual of Historical Geography* was such a success that a new edition, revised and with supplements, was published in 1890. The new edition was due to some criticism he received, and to the updated school programmes. However, the result was astonishing because never before had anyone tried to create something like that. There are several positive elements in Ghisleri’s manual. Firstly, he precisely included Italian places that had always been neglected by German atlas and manuals. Hence, Italians had the opportunity to get to know their territory. Secondly, his scientific commitment was corroborated by an expository clarity and the simplicity of his educational method that

made it easy and clear to transmit geographic concepts. On the whole, Ghisleri aimed at emphasising the close relationship between history and geography because historical events mingle with the surrounding environment which, in turn, is shaped by history.

The first review to the manual appeared in the “*Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*” in April 1889 by Vittore Bellio, professor of Geography at the University of Pavia⁵. His review was hostile. Bellio accused Ghisleri of copying a lot of information from the volume by Cesare Cantù edited by Pomba in Turin in 1845⁶. Ghisleri rejected such accusations by writing to the director of the society on 16th May 1889. He highlighted the collective approach of his book, emphasising how science is nothing but the result of the work done by more than one person: Cantù’s book itself, in Ghisleri’s opinion, drew on previous different authors. All things considered, criticism did not discourage Ghisleri who, actually, was planning a second book for schools, an historical-geography atlas.

He had and has the merit of having written a historical-geographic text who gave credit to Italy in an important period of its history that of its unification, occurred a few years earlier, in 1861. His manual is something written by a school teacher for school teachers, something that highlights how hands-on experience is essential for the creation of a school text.

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⁵ The controversy between Bellio and Ghisleri is documented by Maffei 2012.

⁶ The title of the volume was “Documenti di Storia Universale - Geografia”.

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