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HOLIDAY COLONIES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN ITALIAN AND FRENCH EXPERIENCES

LE COLONIE VACANZA NELLA PRIMA METÀ DEL VENTESIMO SECOLO:
UNA COMPARAZIONE TRA LE ESPEREINZE ITALIANA E FRANCESE

Description of an ongoing research on holiday colonies, an important example of non-school education, present in many different national contexts. The comparison of the two Italian and French cases allows us to verify the differences and similarities of experiences in which pedagogical, political and institutional dimensions are intertwined. For the Italian case the essay also uses archive sources.

Descrizione di una ricerca in corso su un importante caso di educazione non scolastica, le colonie vacanza, presente in molti diversi contesti nazionali. La descrizione comparata dei due casi italiano e francese permette di verificare diversità e analogie di esperienze in cui dimensioni pedagogiche, politiche e istituzionali sono variamente intrecciate. Per il caso italiano il saggio utilizza anche fonti d'archivio.

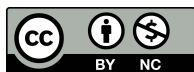
Key words: extra-school education; holiday colonies; Italy; France.

Parole chiave: educazione extrascolastica; colonie vacanza; Italia; Francia.

The reasons for a combination

Holiday camps for minors have long been a common, collective experience across Europe and North America – ever since the second half of the nineteenth century (Frabboni 1971, 107; Van Slyck 2006, XIX et seq). There are examples in France, Italy, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, United States (Rey-Herme 1954, 97 et seq.; 1955, 9) and with several potential approaches between different national realities, there is a risk of winding up with a kind of comparison that Barbieri defines as “random”: a comparison between objects and contexts that are completely alien to each other and almost exclusively connected by personal interest or the origins of the researchers involved (Barbieri 2013a, 22).

Among the numerous historical comparisons that are proposed to the researcher, there is one that appears decidedly coherent and noteworthy: between Italian holiday colonies and those present in neighboring France. The transalpine nation, on one hand, is widely portrayed as a natural comparison choice in terms of territorial contiguity and cultural affinity with Italy, while on the other hand it is a country in which the colonies have become increasingly widespread (Houssaye 1977, 5-6; 2009, 37-39; Lee-Downs 2009, 14) and where reflections conducted over a number of decades concerning these experiences have constantly proved consistent, rich and fruitful.



Taking this into consideration, it is sufficient here to recall the voluminous work of historical reconstruction carried out by Rey-Herme in the mid-twentieth century (1954, 1955, 1961), or the more recent texts by Houssaye (1977, 2003, 2009), Bataille and Levitre (2010), Bacou and Bataille (2012) and Bataille (2018) who, starting from an in-depth analysis of the evolutionary lines and the reasons behind this phenomenon from its origins to the present day, question the current pedagogical sense and the social standing today's colonies. Lee-Downs has instead reconstructed the secular history of holiday colonies as a privileged place for the upbringing and recreation of French working class children, most particularly in Parisian suburbs (2002 and 2009).

A clarification that in Italy there is no comparatively systematic historical and pedagogical literature, although there are numerous valuable works, such as thesis of Neri of 1967, characterized by a close concentration on the Italian and French contexts (*The colonies in Italy and in France and the action of the Cemea for the training of educational staff and their renewal*), Frabboni's words from 1971 (*Leisure time for children and holiday camps*), which reflected on the relationship between a child's free time and holiday colonies, describing the chief phases of the evolution of colonies in Italy. Imperative not to forget the most recent studies by Balducci (2005; 2007; 2011; 2013; 2016) which retrace the history of holiday colonies through architectures. There are also important works on the fascist colonies, such as the contribution of Mira (2016) which analyzes the actions of the *regime* aimed at gradually centralizing the management of all youth organizations, well aware of their propagandistic potential (Mira 2016, 141-148) and the work of Mucelli (2009) which focuses on the architectural language of the fascist colonies.

A further element in favor of the relevance of a comparison with France is the fact that in this country – something that will be recalled later – the concept of nature as an educative dimension has typically been elaborated to a greater extent; in France the link between medicine and pedagogy is also historically documented, something that has permeated Italian holiday colonies until after World War II.

The current contribution, which details a work still in its initial phases, only intends to provide a few possible paths towards a potential comparative study. It is a research that will likely produce fruitful results considering the utterly transversal nature of the holiday colony experiences.

As stated by Douki and Minard (2007, 10), going beyond the rigid division between states allows a historical research to capture all the phenomena that crosses frontiers: the segmentation made by borders tends to hide relationships decontextualizing objects from their roots, often transcending political boundaries.

In this regard, in order not to make the comparison “*blank*”, the fundamental method recall made by Palomba (2011, 40) is very important: it is necessary to pay attention to the individual contexts and to analyze in depth their peculiarities.

The historiographical reference for a study of holiday colonies is certainly the *Annales* school, that has conceived a historical study no longer oriented exclusively towards political events, but rather to the whole range of form of collective life (Braudel 1969, 22). From the *Annales* comes a story of educational materiality: a new sensibility

for the relationship between material life and education, until now neglected by the *histoire evenementielle* and the traditional history of pedagogy (Bellatalla 2016, 59; Covato 2016, 14).

After having briefly outlined the main issues related to the origin of the phenomenon of holiday camps in Italy and France, attention switches to four specific comparison aspects. First of all, the debate between *placement familial* (homestay) and hospitality in collective structures; secondly the relationship between colonies with nature; thirdly the transition from health-orientated colonies to those with educational intentions and finally the divergent, changing attitudes amongst the Italian and French holiday colonies during the period between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second, an era that coincides with the fascist dictatorship in Italy.

Holiday colonies: delving into a definition

Before beginning to analyse where the origins of colonies derive from, an attempt to adequately define the concept of these experiences is pertinent, even in the knowledge that these realities have had very specific declinations over different times across a number of territorial and social contexts.

Literature has defined the holiday colony as an institution that runs for a limited amount of time, that hosts, in its own seat, children coming from a different town or region (Neri 1967, 5; Frabboni 1971, 97). Besides these traits, the notion of a collective holiday, carried out while schools are closed, should also be evaluated (Laborde 1958, 346).

Regarding location, it should be noted that some colonies in France do not host children in a single specific structure but instead rely on the hospitality of local families – *placement familial* – (Rey-Herme 1955, 16; Lee-Downs 2002, 26 et seq.), in something that today could be called a sort of widespread colony.

Rounding off the definition, and talking objectives, the notion of the holiday colony comes about thanks to the organizers' desire to compensate for a lack of physical, social, moral, intellectual or spiritual fulfilment: although each organizer attributes a different weight to each of the objectives, the colony is conceived as a remedy for some kind of poverty.

The fix for these shortcomings sought by holiday colonies comes in the form of *en plein air*: open-air-based activities are constantly presented as an occasion for a reparative interruption of everyday life, but also as an opportunity for learning and development (Houssaye 2009, 28-29).

Origins in the industrial revolution

The development of holiday colonies is closely connected with the industrial development during the mid-nineteenth century and the phenomenon of urbanization

that ensued (Neri 1967, 9-14; Frabboni 1971, 103-109; Balducci 2005, 8; Bataille and Levitre 2010, 58-59; Balducci 2013, 71).

The arrival of large masses of workers into the cities in fact created overcrowding and hygienic deficiencies which, if on the one hand caused a spread of epidemic phenomena, on the other they brought out a new sensitivity towards the prevention and treatment of diseases that afflict the most disadvantaged sections of the population. Hygienist theories which came to the fore during the period hugely influenced the structure of cities: based on the acquired awareness of bacteria and microbes' impact on the development of diseases – which air and water are carriers of, numerous prophylactic practices spread, such as sewage systems, treatment of drinking water, campaigns to boost body hygiene, and the extension of internal areas to cities in order to promote air circulation (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 54).

If in the second half of the nineteenth century France, like the rest of Europe, remained a predominantly rural country, the intense process of urbanization that got underway in some centers contributed to transforming the life patterns of the entire population and not solely residents in cities. Peasant families who settled in urban areas maintain their ties with the context of their origins, returning to the countryside to spend a few restful days while children were sometimes sent to live with relatives in villages as part of the idea that it would provide a healthier upbringing (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 54).

Industrial development and the subsequent increase in urban population proved decisive in the transformation of cities' traditional landscapes which had their bucolic dimensions, up until still alive, taken away (Bataille, 2013) and, perhaps for the first time, a defined need emerged amongst the inhabitants for a way back to the natural world which was gradually becoming a distant fantasy.

Lee-Downs (2002, XIII) underlines how the holiday colony, as part of this process of progressive urbanization, can be considered one of the accompanying structures in the transition phase from a rural to an urban world: it, together with other realities such as the *jardins ouvriers* (Phlipponeau 1952, 200), allows the inhabitants of the countryside to “acclimatize” to the city and its operating models.

It is in this context that the activity of holiday camps take place, responsible for offering a sort of return to the countryside to children with few economic possibilities (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 53-54).

It is a period of time characterized by an intense debate on public health, as evidenced by the numerous international conferences held on medicine, hygiene, pedagogy. These often also concerned holiday colonies, although sometimes only tangentially (Rey-Herme 1954, 127-148).

The link between medicine and pedagogy was certainly unknown before: for example in seventeenth century Jean Héroard, doctor of the future Louis XIII, describes in his *Journal* the growth of the young prince, both from a clinical point of view and from that of his personality (Foisil 1987, 303); at the beginning of nineteenth century doctor Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, convinced of the possibility of educating the Aveyron child, predisposes a path of sensory education and annotates scrupulously the

physiological behaviors and cognitive progress of the young patient (Riva 1999, 112).

In this context, the holiday colonies respond in their first phase to strictly curative objectives, which have their scientific basis in the studies carried out in the eighteenth century by Brit Richard Russel on the therapeutic effects of the sea, works that contributed to the progressive spread of the culture of sea baths as a remedy for tuberculosis, scrofula and other diseases caused by poor living conditions amongst the poorer classes (Russell 1760, IV-V; Balducci 2007, 10). In 1796 the first structure for frail children was built on the coast of Margate, England; after this example, similar experiences are realized in the first half of the nineteenth century in France, Germany and Italy (Rey-Herme 1954, 65-66; Balducci 2016, 126).

The development of the colonies is linked to industrialization for a further reason: on the back of a drive in medical research, in the second half of the nineteenth century the State began to regulate working laws concerning children, who until then were involved the textile and mining industries just like adults. France, at the end of the nineteenth century, discovered a new kind of interest in youth, considering that as the determining element of the strength of a nation. Children, who have become less numerous due to the decline in birth rates, acquired a position of greater importance in society becoming an asset to be treated well and invested in for the future. Thus youth became the period of learning, during which education replaced work (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 55).

In 1841 the first law limiting child labor was enacted in France (*Loi du 22 mars 1841 relative au travail des enfants employés dans les manufactures, usines ou ateliers*): it is the beginning of a path that will determine the progressive decrease in child labor and consequent increase in their free time (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 56).

The first legislative provision on the subject issued by the recently united Italy was the Law on the Work of Children n. 3657 of 11 February 1886, law “among the least severe”, as specified by the then Minister in the letter of presentation of the norm to the prefects and presidents of the chambers of commerce (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio 1886, 4); the provision established a minimum age of nine for the use of children in factories and ten in mines, while setting the maximum daily working limit for children under the age of twelve (*Legge sul lavoro dei fanciulli n. 3657*).

The progressive liberation of urban children from productive activity posed a new problem, concerning keeping busy swathes of boys in order to avoid the formation of pockets of delinquency. School, as well as an engine of progress for society, came to be considered a possible alternative to work: as well as a vector of progress in society, it is an agency designed to protect cities from the potential danger of unoccupied minors (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 56). In France, the laws of 1881 (*Loi du 16 juin 1881 établissant la gratuité absolue de l'enseignement primaire dans les écoles publiques*) and of 1882 (*Loi du 28 mars 1882 sur l'enseignement primaire obligatoire*), which make compulsory free education for those 6 to 13 years old, and with that took care additional time children found themselves with. No longer employed in factories, this in turn accelerated the application and extension of legislation on child labor.

In Italy, the Law of 15 July 1877 n. 3961, the so-called “Coppino Law”, raised the

compulsory education up to third elementary (Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, 30 luglio 1877, n. 177).

The additional years of compulsory education does not however deal with the on-going problem of the moral preservation of youth and the time spent outside the family, factory and school. This is the reason why new forms of a sort of collective participation of young people emerged, with the objective of ensuring each child grows healthily and adequate integrates themselves into society: holiday camps were amongst these initiatives. As Bataille and Levitre stated, they were the result of the evolution of the child's position in French society, of concern for their physical and moral health and the arrival of a time when children were freed from both work and school (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 56-57).

Deep roots: outdoor as an educating dimension

However, colonies also represent the continuation of a pedagogical reflection which considers the *en plein air* dimension and the journey as educational tools (Pau-Lessi 1990, 14).

With the aim of being succinct, a number of authors pointed towards the idea that the countryside is more congenial to the formation of the individual than the city, something already present in Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

This is one reason why I want to bring up Emile in the country, far from those miserable lacqueys, the most degraded of men except their masters; far from the vile morals of the town, whose gilded surface makes them seductive and contagious to children; while the vices of peasants, unadorned and in their naked grossness, are more fitted to repel than to seduce, when there is no motive for imitating them. In the village a tutor will have much more control over the things he wishes to show the child; his reputation, his words, his example, will have a weight they would never have in the town; he is of use to every one, so every one is eager to oblige him, to win his esteem, to appear before the disciple what the master would have him be; if vice is not corrected, public scandal is at least avoided, which is all that our present purpose requires. (Rousseau, 1762/1921, 58).

It is also worth recalling the importance that Friedrich Fröbel attaches to nature: in Kindergärten, the child is stimulated to take up the activity in an intuitive way, without the organic and programmatic form that schools typically propose, in a context where the environment becomes a sort of facilitator of peer relations (Cambi 2003, 204-205; Seveso 2004, 44-45).

Finally Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who considers education as a process that must follow nature, and sees this as intrinsic goodness of the human being, something that education should assist in setting free (Silber, 1965, 222).

Rey-Herme, in his important work on the French holiday colonies, identifies one of the most relevant elements that have laid the ground for the development of holiday colonies in the movement of progressive discovery of the *plein air*, achieved during the nineteenth century (Rey-Herme 1954, 79).

Regarding the educational dimension of the trip, in the first half of the nineteenth century Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846) came up with the idea of combining traveling with traditional methods of teaching, to mitigate the abstractness of the latter: in *Voyages en zig-zag* illustrated the advantages of life in the open air and of direct contact with nature, while highlighting the importance of sharing between children and adults (Töpffer 1825; Rey-Herme 1954, 23-42).

The origin of holiday colonies is intertwined with the *voyages scolaires*, which began to spread around 1870 and are also based on the educational value of the trip, on the study of nature and with an emphasis on life in the open air (Lagarge, 1980). Unlike the colonies, they constitute a sort of extension to the school year for the most deserving pupils, chosen exclusively on the basis of marks at school, without any criteria of precedence based on potentially difficult social or health conditions. The goal is to improve on, through excursions in the territory under the guidance of paid teachers, the knowledge acquired during the year (Rey-Herme 1954, 21).

The *colonies scolaires*, created and run by Edmond Cottinet since 1883, are quite different. Unlike the *voyages scolaires*, they are oriented exclusively to keep children away from harmful weather and the boredom of city summers, giving them the opportunity to spend time elsewhere, amidst a context of “freedom, happiness and health” (Rey-Herme 1955, 23). Children, selected by a doctor, are brought together in small groups coordinated by a volunteer teacher and are hosted in country schools left vacant during the holidays; here they are accustomed to strict personal hygiene, but a particular emphasis is handed to the *en plein air* dimension, as Cottinet himself reported:

The walks are the big deal: they have replaced the whole school. And there, what new pedagogy is happening ... It's Nature that holds the class. We listen to the lectures of the fields and the woods, the lessons of the coward and the donkey, the singing of all the birds. We eat the fish we caught; we make herbaria; we follow the animals to the farm, to the fair, and to the slaughterhouse; we accompany the grain of the van to the mill [...]. (cited in Neri, 1967, pp. 179-180).

There is a certain pertinence in the fact that, in the same period in which the first holiday colonies came about, the New Schools spread across Europe and North America, experiments which preceded the development of activism and hunger to affirm the need to ensure the child is free from the constraints of family and school education, in order so it can manifest its primary inclinations.¹ Education must be practiced not only through intellectual activities, but also by proposing varied experiences, such as those of a manual nature, thus respecting the “global” nature of the child, which never separates thought and practical action (Duval 2002, 81). The instances of change also take into consideration the location of the school, with the aim being to move away from the artificial and constrictive environment of the city, in

¹ Among the most important European experiences of “new schools” there is Abbotsholme, created in 1889 by Cecil Reddie in England and Château-des-Roches, organized in 1899 by Edmond Demolins in France (Demolins 1906, 227-240; Duval 2006, 63-75).

order to encourage learning while in direct contact with the natural environment to which the child is spontaneously attracted.

In 1921 the Bureau International des Ecoles Nouvelles, directed by Adolphe Ferrière (1879-1960), establishes in Thirty Points the characteristics that a school must present in order to merit the qualification of “new school”.

Among them are:

[...]

2. The new school is an internship. [...]

3. The new school is located in the countryside but it is desirable - especially for intellectual and artistic culture - the proximity of a city.

[...]

4. Students form groups of 10-12 individuals each and live in separate houses [...]

9. Natural gymnastics.

10. Travel and camping.

[...]

13. Teaching is based on facts and experiences and the acquisition of knowledge results from personal observations.

[...]

15. Teaching is based on spontaneous interests.

[...].

(cited in De Bartolomeis 1976, 102-103)

The points here mentioned coincide with some of the chief characteristics of holiday colonies: the residential character (“internship”), the location in a natural environment, the enhancement of the body aspect (“natural gymnastics”) and the use of travel and camping activities that recall intimacy with the environment and evoke reflections on a place far from life’s typical scenery.

This coincidence is not a casual one and demonstrates that colony can be considered to some extent as a preview of the New Schools and activism: it suggests possible alternatives to a certain verbal and abstract way of doing school; the colony is in a certain sense, as defined by Houssayé (2003, 177-178), the fruit, the embodiment of activism, in constant criticism of the notional school of the time.

A mention of the first colony: Bion’s experience in Switzerland

The first colony is traditionally considered the one formulated in Zurich by pastor Hermann Walter Bion in 1876 (*Ferienkolonie*): sixty-eight children between the ages of nine and twelve, identified as socially disadvantaged and in precarious health conditions, spent a holiday in the countryside with farmers’ families and, since 1880, in an hotel, reinvigorating a body and spirit weakened by the unhealthy city climate (Rey-Herme, 1954, 83-96, Pau-Lessi 1990, 19-20, Houssaye 2009, 17). The aim? To keep children away from their daily environment and allow them to experience simple, essential living conditions for two weeks: overnight stays in granaries or with local

families, walks, river swims, team games (Fuchs 2017, 603).

According to Bion, the aim of education in colony should be based upon the lines of developing and directing all the dispositions and the faculties of the child, both physical and spiritual. It must awaken and cultivate all the faculties, the strength and health of the body and the spirit, the energy of thought, will and action (Rey-Herme, 1954, 84).

Each group has its own physiognomy, largely dependent on the attitudes of the adult of reference: one presents an almost military discipline, another a freedom even in basic activities such as the wake-up time or morning prayer. One group is dedicated to large excursions, another has rest as the number one priority; Bion accepts all kinds of activities, provided that the purpose of health and education is achieved (Rey-Herme, 1954, 84).

Bion's proposal is emblematic: it encompasses both a health and educational tension and also shows a rapid evolution from the familial placement to the collective structure.

The *Ferienkolonie* stimulates us to reflect on the different kind of transfert that took place from the Swiss experience and to question how Bion's idea was reworked in France and in Italy, probably even bringing out, in a perhaps new perspective, the different cultural paradigms that characterize the Italian and French world (Espagne 1994, 116).

The origins in France and Italy. Familial placement and internship: two different approaches

In France, in 1881, Pastor Théophile Lorriaux and his wife Susanne, inspired by Bion's initiative, organized the *Colonie Trois Semaine* in the Oise district, and in its second year involved seventy-nine boys and girls aged between three and sixteen. Like the other examples that will follow, in this first phase Lorriaux's experience is based initially on the *placement familial* (family placement), which consists in sending the children in groups of two to four to local families, sometimes located in several contiguous villages. These families are carefully selected and constantly supervised by the organisation's inspectors via periodic visits. This type of colony implies the absence of a blanket regulation: every child follows the host family's rhythm of life, who, in turn, undertakes to integrate and not to oblige the child to do any agricultural work: the child can thus devote themselves to the activities that outdoor life offers, participating in the games and excursions organized by the organisation's members for the children hosted in the same village (Rey-Herme 1954, 167 et seq.; 1955, 16-17; Lee -Downs 2002, 20 et seq.).

The *placement familial* is the subject of a lively debate in France: on the one hand there are the difficulties in guaranteeing an adequate amount of serenity, sufficient hygiene conditions and the acceptable food quality for all the children; on the other hand, the radical diversity of this solution compared to the scholastic organization is

highly appreciated, something that instead multitudes of children might somehow reminisce further down the line (Rey-Herme 1955, 16-17).

The *placement familial* is, for example, the formula chosen with a certain level of conviction by the colony of Chaussée de Maine, in order to offer children a true family environment, guarantee them a condition of greater freedom than what a collective institution can offer, and finally to present more sustainable costs (Lee-Downs 2002, 26).

The homestay has indeed undoubted advantages when analysed from an economical and organizational point of view: it bears very low costs and is agile in managing the variations in the number of participants, especially when compared to a more demanding and expensive collective structure (Lee-Downs 2002, 27).

For what concerns Italy, in the first half of the nineteenth century some Tuscan hospitals organized branch offices in seaside resorts where they sent small groups of children in need of care (Rey-Herme 1954, 65-66; Neri 1967, 13).

The first examples of colony franked by the character of a hospital section can be traced back to Giuseppe Barellai's experiences, a Florentine doctor who in 1856 organized an *Ospizio Marino* (Marine Hospice) for poor scrofulous children in Viareggio (Neri 1967, 15-31; Talenti 2017, 2).

The *Ospizi Marini* spread rapidly in Italy, thanks to the support of numerous benefactors: groups of philanthropists who brought together doctors, aristocrats and exponents of the then rising industrial bourgeoisie (Talenti 2017, 4). It is an organizational process that is often described by the protagonists as full of logistical and economic difficulties, and their ability to pull them off a success of almost epic proportions (Crotti and Mariani 1891, 1-3).

The action of the various philanthropic organizations was united by a populist and charitable approach and by purely ethical-sanitary intentions (Frabboni 1971, 104).

In 1881 the *Statuto dell'Opera Pia per la Cura Climatica Gratuita ai Fanciulli Gracili* (Statute of the Opera Pia for Free Climatic Care for the Gracili Children) was approved in Milan, with the aim of sending poor and fragile children of the city's primary schools to mountainous areas (De Cristoforis 1885, 3-4). By the first edition, two colonies had already been organized, hosting sixty children. In the following years the number of participants grew exponentially, reaching up to two hundred in 1888 (Forti Messina, 2003).

The goal declared by the president, doctor Malachia De Cristoforis, was to prevent the diseases that afflict the children of the poorest classes. This was to be achieved by following scrupulous hygiene rules and properly alternating walks, songs, patriotic and moral tales, and adequate rest periods (Forti Messina 2003, 109).

The beneficial results are expressed in strictly medical terms, through an analytical presentation of the data concerning increase in weight, height, muscle strength and blood values (Tibaldi 1906, 10-15). De Cristoforis is moreover a convinced and authoritative asserter of the medical-scientific approach, based on rigorous measurements to detect and compare the effects of colonies on children's health. In one of his speeches at the First International Congress of the Colonies de vacances in Zurich in 1888, during which he became one of the five members of the Permanent Council

(Forti Messina, 2003), the Italian doctor insisted on this: he condemned the absence of a uniform measurement criteria for all countries and the lack of possibility to ensure a thorough compilation of valid statistics. He also expressed his hopes of seeing a plurality of parameters across all school children and proposed the creation of a commission for the development of measurement equipment and shared forms in order to align results (Rey Herme 1954, 142).

One of the first topics of discussion within the Opera Pia concerns the choice between *placement familial* and internship, a debate that as we have seen is present in the French context too. Doctor Alberto Tibaldi, in his *Relazione per il Congresso Nazionale per la lotta sociale contro la tubercolosi* (Report for the National Congress for the social struggle against tuberculosis), stressed that the large-scale structure of the Italian agricultural system and the consequent conditions of poverty of the peasants made the *placement familial* impractical; he concluded that the “boarding school” (internship) type had undoubted advantages: it allowed a simpler and more uniform surveillance, facilitated the rigorous application of the hygiene and food standards, permitted the correct management of the rhythms of the day and promoted education «to the good, to beauty», to «correctness in conversing», to «courtesy in the ways» and above all to «hygiene in the person», by trained personnel (Tibaldi 1906, 6-8).

Unlike what happened in France in the same period, the collective structure was the form clearly prevalent in Italy; De Cristoforis, on the occasion of the aforementioned First International Congress, argued that in his country the *placement familial* is decidedly inadvisable: in Italy there were in fact only rich owners who refused to welcome «dirty and battered» children; alternatively, there were only the poor villagers, who would propose their guests a life even less glamorous than the one in the city (Rey-Herme 1954, 142).

Starting from the 1930s, the collective structure also became prevalent in France, coinciding with the predominance of the educational perspective: the collective form made it possible to create a functional organisation when taking into consideration pedagogical objectives (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 87-88), allowing it to adequately safeguard the values proposed to children.

The link between colonies and nature

In spite of the prevailing emphasis traditionally placed on the hygienic and sanitary aspect, in the first half of the twentieth century there are documents that underline experiences of open air and discovery of the territory.

This is particularly evident in France; two texts are here proposed as example: the first one refers to a colony of the Catholic Patronage of Oise, created in 1910 in the heart of the Forest of Compiègne.

The text reflects the value attributed to the child’s direct contact with nature and territory, which becomes a destination for excursions, the background of games and physical activities, but also the object of historical learning:

Life in the colony is most agreeable, most varied. [...]

After treasure hunt in the woods, after climbing Mount Saint-Marc, we make some interesting trip to the scenic spots of our beautiful forest. We simulate maneuvers, we run, we play, we go to Mount Saint-Pierre and there, the leader of the colony can do on site a lesson in history. The young colonists learn that it is here, on this land they tread, that Caesar's legions encamped on the eve of crushing the companions of Correus, the last defenders of Gallic freedom (Patronage de l'Oise, 1911, 87).

The second text is that of Eugène Plantet, published in 1905:

The majority [...] only know the neighborhood where they live; for them the world is reduced to two or three streets where they play, where they do mischiefs... Suddenly, they are transported among fields and woods. Their eager eyes contemplate this nature; this magnificent spectacle moves them, enchants them, instructs them; they exchange their impressions. And then teachers and mistresses give them, in familiar conversations, real lessons of things. All our masters are unanimous in pointing out this moralizing influence. In short, this collective stay develops in the anemics the spirit of initiative as good feelings. (Plantet, 1905, 56-57)

However, in Italy rare examples of attention to the natural element are also retrievable, a sensitivity that up until this moment had not been taken into consideration by the literature.

It is apt here to remember an initiative that began in Milan in 1888, the *Colonie climatiche autunnali per fanciulli e fanciulle* ("Autumnal climate colonies for boys and girls"), which obtained the support of the dell'Opera Pia per la Cura Climatica Gratuita ai Fanciulli Gracili of the aforementioned De Cristoforis; the ostensible objective of this new organization was to offer healthy children, in need of reinvigoration, a «pleasant and healthy stay» and above all a «healthy and moral environment, an education and educational environment»; the organizers promised to «entertain» the children, ensuring they were not idle and the consequent moral corruption that came with it (Crotti e Mariani 1891, 1-4).

The precise description of the outdoor activities that were offered is a point of interest: two walks a day, free playtime in the garden, «a little study, swimming, boat trips, singing, gymnastics and dance»; every fifteen days full-day mountain tours were also provided (Crotti e Mariani 1891, 4).

Equally suggestive for the scholar is the *Diario delle operazioni* ("Diary of operations") of the climatic colony of Maresio, which in 1901 housed the boys of the *Orfanotrofio Maschile di Milano* (Orphanage for boys of Milan); in a sort of daily synoptic table, the supervisor recorded the weather and activities carried out with the guests. Almost every day long walks are taken in the immediate surroundings but even in more distant places. These were sometimes accompanied by dips in the river Adda:

Second round - 1901 - July August

July 28 - atmospheric conditions: discreet - walking in the pinewood under Montevicchia - at 3 pm bath

[...]

August - 7 - nice but windy weather conditions - walk in the woods near Maresso - I didn't let [children] swim for too much wind

[...]

Third round - from 28 August to 27 September 1901

August - 29 - atmospheric conditions: beautiful - Walk: the older ones Missaglia - Missagliola - Contra - Maresso. The younger ones in the woods [...]²

Nature, for the organizers of these experiences, was very likely a mere instrumental or background element compared to the physiological and health dimension; the relationship of the Italian holiday colonies with the environment appears to be not yet analyzed in depth: an accurate study of the sources could probably reveal an attention to the *en plein air* element comparable to the one documented and analyzed from the French research.

The transition from health to pedagogical goals: disparities between Italy and France

In France colonies, although founded on a basic medical approach, since the beginning present a variety of approaches that are reflected in the organizational choices and are directly linked to the cultural and religious references of the owners (Lee-Downs 2009, 16-17).

First of all there is a social-health trend, typical of the initiatives carried out by Protestants, which placed the colonies against the excessively intellectualist approach of the school (Houssaye 2009, 17-22).

We then uncovered a more scholastic approach, typical of the secular colonies, which can be considered an evolution of the *voyages scolaires* (Houssaye 2009, 22 et seq.).

Finally, there is an educational orientation, applicable to Catholic organizations (*Patronages*): here the colony is seen as the extension and completion – in the summer time –, of the Christian formation received by children during the rest of the year. The groups were led by young seminarians and the activities, alternating between moments of prayer and leisure, had evangelization as their main objective. These realizations, predominantly oriented towards the educational aspect declined in the Christian sense, did not include the formula of the *placement familial*, which would imply the delegation of the transmission of values to often poorly prepared families (Houssaye 2009, 24 et seq.).

Houssaye recalls how these French Catholic colonies had as a precursor, the experiences conducted in Italy by Don Bosco who, as early as 1848, started to informally organize groups, bringing them to the Turin countryside, with the aim of boosting their wellbeing, rewarding the most deserving and above all preventing the idleness which defined the summer holidays from negatively impacting the education of young

² Archivio Fondazione Stellite Martinit, Milano, Busta 209, Om Dir.

people. It is, according to Houssaye, a formula that at the same time foresaw the characteristics of the *voyages scolaires* and the Catholic type of holiday colonies. As of 1855, the initiative became more structured, a real “semi-sedentary” and “semi-itinerant” colony: children spent the first ten days in a country house and then, for the next fifteen days, dedicated themselves to a long excursion taking place in villages across the region with the aim of uncovering activities related to animation and evangelization (Houssaye 2009, 27-28).

Objectives concerning wellbeing remained extremely pertinent in France until the First World War: at the beginning of the twentieth century the colonies were in fact considered one of the main elements of prevention and treatment of tuberculosis in childhood, resulting in their medical function being further strengthened. Despite this, at the end of the First World War, the medical purposes were gradually relegated into second place: the need to welcome the numerous children affected by the conflict diminished the importance of the prophylactic and health issues. This is also due to the fact that the financiers, both public and private, such as municipalities, educational funds and professional organizations who were very active at that time in supporting the colonies favored social or educational goals rather than health-care (Houssaye 2009, 30).

Since the 1930s, health-care colonies in France began to almost completely disappear, thanks in part to a more effective management of tuberculosis.

The pedagogical goal thus became the element that drove the colonies’ existence. However, there was little alignment in the overall goals: the Protestant organizers emphasized the recreational aspect, focusing on independence and freedom of initiative as ways to educate; Catholics, on the other hand, pointed towards discipline and obedience (Houssaye 2009, 30-31, Bataille and Levitre 2010, 72-75, Bataille 2018, 16).

A decisive contribution to this transition was given, in the 1930s, by the Ceméa (*Centres d’entraînement aux méthodes d’éducation active*). It was founded in 1937 by Gisèle de Failly, someone who organized internships for teaching active methods to educators and managers of the colonies and whose declared objective was to abandon the sanitary approach in favor of an educational dimension (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 85).

Ceméa’s activities later arrived in Italy, after the Second World War. With their arrival the extracurricular education, freed from the regime’s propaganda-related tasks began to reconsider its purpose.

The influence of scouting was just as important in France. It was a concept which inspired division into teams and all that came with it, and the introduction of uniforms and sorts of tests to be overcome (Houssaye 2009, 42). The Scout movement meant a more conscious approach to the *en plein air* element, as a context to stimulate the child to solve contingent problems, leading them to establish a balanced and respectful relationship with nature (Massa 1977, 82).

Scouting in Italy can be traced back to 1910, and when fascism conquered, scoutism began to be perceived with a level of suspicion by the regime. The latter aimed to entirely incorporate the extracurricular sphere into the Balilla National Opera: by the end of the 1920s all scout activities ceased (Barbieri 2013b, 32). The Scout movement

had no footing to impose any significant influence on the Italian holiday colonies which, now centralized in the regime's hands in turn transformed their approach.

In the aftermath of the First World War, no transition similar to the French one came about in Italy: holiday camps remained linked to a basic wellbeing approach (Manzia 1958, 11) but which intended to teach to children the founding principles of the nation, with the focus less on their liberation and more on their homologation in the community of citizens functional to the system (Farri 1987, 8).

This, in spite of well known schools oriented to an outdoor education and on concrete experience, are also present in Italy, such as Rinnovata in Milan, initiative started in 1911 by Giuseppina Pizzigoni (Zuccoli 2010, 57-63).

According to Frabboni, despite being oriented towards curative objectives, Italian holiday colonies revealed two different coexistent tendencies: on one hand the work of caring for the physical dimensions of the child, on the other hand the progressive action aimed at standardizing its personality to a hierarchy of ethico-social values. This last process has constituted an impoverishment of the educational dimension if education is considered as an experience of democratic, affective, intellectual or aesthetic life and has resulted in an approval that has repressed individual freedom of initiative and bound to obedience to adult hierarchies (Frabboni 1971, 105-108).

An approach that ensures the holiday colonies were in a certain sense already prepared for the transformation into regime's propaganda instruments, meaning a passage that was therefore not excessively traumatic.

Fascism, immediately after the conquest of power, began a period of reform amongst welfare agencies aimed at fully replacing the charity with public assistance and progressively centralizing the management of the entire social sphere (Inaudi 2008, 19 et seq.). All this in order to make the most out of the pervasive propaganda and bend the individual social and beneficial initiatives to the regime's own homologating interests.

In 1931 the *Ente Opere Assistenziali* (Institute of charitable organisations) were set up. Widespread diffusion is planned across the national territory, closely linked to the fascist party's provincial federations. They are entrusted with the task of reorganizing the infantile climate colonies in order to manage their activities in a more organic and rational way. This was testimony to the attention paid by the regime towards the education of young people, so to build a society increasingly obedient in front of Fascist principles (Inaudi 2008, 62 et seq.).

Fascism brought about a new phase in the history of the Italian holiday colonies which, having become «pedagogical machines» (Balducci 2013, 72-73) with strong symbolic and evocative features, isolated from the territorial context unlike those during the previous period, assumed a new explicit task of indoctrinating children to the nationalistic principles of the regime, a blueprint which foresaw the State prevailing on the rights of the individual.

At the center of the day in the colony, however, there are still the healthy activities, such as sun exposure and baths in the sea (Balducci 2016, 145).

This signalled the beginning of a phase in Italy where holiday colonies were carefully planned by the regime, starting from their architectural structure and also in-

cluding large and always collective living spaces, celebratory places such as an open space for raising the flag and areas of *bonifica* («reclamation»), in which newly arrived children «deposited their own clothes to wear those of the colony» and «are inscribed and dispatched to the various teams» (Melis 1939, 151-155).

The militarist wind between Italy and France

In France there was no similar centralization of the management of extracurricular education that affected Italy during that period; according to the literature, it is however possible to hypothesize the transalpine country had not been exempt from the new orientations coming from Italy, in particular from the point of view of the constructive style of the buildings for holiday colonies.

Due to scarce financial resources, up until the 1930s French holiday colonies were not able to shoulder the cost of creating new buildings: when it was not possible to re-use existing structures, the only way to develop new ones was to resort to 'light', touch-up architecture, often organized according to the layout of the pavilions, to reduce the risk of fires or illnesses (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 101).

Subsequently, specific constructions began to come to fruition with larger reception capacities. The aforementioned transition from health objectives to educational ones was accompanied by an increase in the size of the structures. The colonies created in Italy under the aegis of the fascist regime are a suggestive source of inspiration in this architectural transformation (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 100).

French architects' curiosity for the Italian reality was evidenced by the numerous articles which appeared in those years in specialized magazines concerning the Italian fascist colonies. Bataille and Levitre cite the article published in the magazine *L'architecture aujourd'hui* of 1939 by Italian architect Gino Levi-Montalcini: according to the authors, there is common ground between the direction the French colonies are starting to follow in that period:

Summer camps: simple and healthy life of organized communities of boys and girls, well-being disdainful of the false claims of the rich and freed from the concerns of the poor; camaraderie exempt from all bourgeois preoccupation, as from the rigor of a discipline too severe; a diet controlled by the care of the preventive medicine, but quite remote from the prescriptions of life of some hospital or sanatorium; an existence devoted to the exercises of the body or of the character, if not to the lessons of sport or instruction; parenthesis, joyfully open, where gaiety cannot degenerate into license, or rest resolve itself into laziness; feast of friendship between young comrades and health in the middle of nature. (Levi-Montalcini 1939, cited in Bataille and Levitre 2010, 110).

In the period between the two world wars, a military-type approach was witnessed also in France: although not widespread nor comprehensive, there are a few relevant examples, including the presence of flag-raising rites, uniforms and parades. As recalled by Bataille and Levitre (2010, 99), it was an approach already present at the

beginning of the twentieth century - something that emerged from the *Guide pratique des colonies de vacances* (Practical guide to the holiday colonies) compiled in 1907 of abbot Lavarenne, pioneer of the Catholic colonies of the diocese of Lyon.

Reading the text of the *Guide*, proposed by Rey-Herme in the documentary apparatus published in support of his full-bodied work, we see how Lavarenne explicitly suggests adopting a military-type organization, useful in facilitating activities within the group, including excursions and the management of meals: it foresees gathering children in sections, patrols, brigades, phalanxes, with the creation of degrees, to be used as an instrument to evaluate the most deserving and obedient ones (Lavarde 1907, quoted in Rey-Herme 1954, Pièces annexes, 28-29).

Bataille and Levitre hypothesize a link – still to be explored – between this new militaristic spirit, probable legacy of the recently-ended First World War and the dictatorial regimes in vogue in that period across Germany and Italy. This martial inspiration can be seen as a reason for the increase in interest in the structures with greater capacities (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 99).

However, it should be noted that if the buildings built in France in this period were similar to those in Italy, with the presence of flagpoles, the constructions – unlike those of the fascist regime – were not planned with the express aim of impressing the visitor with their majestic nature (Bataille and Levitre 2010, 111).

Conclusions

The few topics of comparison proposed here, in themselves deserving of further investigations already in progress, indicate possible lines of research: for example, an analysis of the different ways of presenting and narrating the experiences of colonies to the French and Italian public, a comparison between the criteria for choosing places where establish colonies or, furthermore, the reconstruction of the professional history of the colonies educators.

Before following these and other threads that link the world of holiday colonies of Italy and France, it will first of all be necessary to reinforce Italian research on this subject, which, especially for the period before Fascism, is still worthy of depth explorations.

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