BOOK REVIEW


Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism: From Florence to Jerusalem and New York is, in my opinion, one of the most thoughtful books by Patrizia Guarnieri, a professor of contemporary history at the University of Florence, and known in Italy for his writings on the history of psychiatry and the human sciences.

The work was inspired by the life of Renata Calabresi (1899–1995), one of the first Italian women to graduate with a doctoral degree in psychology with a dissertation entitled “Determining the psychic present.” The work was also inspired by Enzo Bonaventura (1891–1948), a general and applied psychologist. Both were students of the Florentine school of psychology, founded by Francesco De Sarlo (1864–1937). De Sarlo, one of the first exponents of Italian psychology, was a Lucanian “emigrant” in Florence and an extremely interesting character. In 1903, in Florence, he founded an institute of experimental psychology that was often remembered as the first independent school of psychology established in an Italian public university. De Sarlo was not an experimentalist; he was devoted to theoretical psychology and was the only Italian psychologist capable of opposing the Neo-idealism of Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), the defenders of a psychology ancillary to philosophy.

Calabresi was born in Ferrara and received her Ph.D. from the University of Florence in 1923. She collaborated with the Rosselli Brothers in one of the early juvenile Italian antifascist groups (Non Mollare!—Never give up!). Before the promulgation of the fascist racial laws (1938), she was an untenured professor of psychology at the University La Sapienza of Rome (1931–1938). Renata Calabresi was Jewish and, owing to the racial laws, left Italy and took refuge in the United States. Here, she worked as a clinical psychologist at many important institutions (New School for Social Research, Hunter College, Veterans Administration, Rorschach Institute, APA, etc.) until her retirement in 1969. On the other hand, Bonaventura, also Jewish, was an experimental psychologist interested in developmental psychology, applied psychology, and psychoanalysis. He was predestined to become the heir to De Sarlo and to direct the Institute of Psychology in Florence. However, due to the enactment of fascist racial laws in 1938, he was forced to take refuge in Jerusalem, where he died during the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Guarnieri’s book is, therefore, ideally divided into two parts: The first part comments on relations between Florentine scholars, Italian philosophers, and experimental psychologists; and the second part analyzes the stories regarding the forced emigration of the Jewish pupils of De Sarlo, who were exiled. The book considers the “crisis” of psychology during the rule of fascism from the point of view of the “peripheral” place of Italian psychology, as compared to the centrality of Rome and Milan before World War II.

In the second chapter, Neo-idealism and the “Cinderella of the Sciences,” Guarnieri reconstructs the controversy between De Sarlo, Croce, Gentile, and experimentalists, especially Sante De Sanctis (1862–1935) and Agostino Gemelli (1818–1959). Guarnieri features De Sarlo as a “victim of fascist-idealistic clash” (p. 46), which his fellow psychologists did not counteract (Gentile was a powerful fascist minister of education). The book then highlights
the way that psychologists other than De Sarlo employed a condescending strategy toward Neo-idealism, which proved ineffective in resisting the development of psychology during the fascist era.

We learn that De Sarlo was a doctor who taught philosophy and psychology, was influenced by Franz Brentano (1838–1917), and had points of view that differed from Wundtian psychology. Although he was a theoretical philosopher, his thinking was unorthodox as compared to the Italian Neo-Kantian and Hegelian philosophical traditions. Thus, De Sarlo did not seem (to psychologists) to be in line with the mainstream European traditions of research; this was true also from clinical and experimental points of view, and regarding his applied psychology. Perhaps he was too theoretical for psychologists and too experimental for philosophers (see also Cordeschi & Mecacci, 1978; Lombardo & Foschi, 1997). However, he raised a number of promising young scholars who were active in both theoretical and empirical psychology (e.g., Aliotta, Bonaventura, and Calabresi).

As for the accusation of “agnosticism” towards Neo-idealism, which was present in more points of the first part of the book, professed by the other psychologists, in particular De Sanctis (p. 25), it must be emphasized that different aims actually motivated other psychologists, aside from De Sarlo, in their local context. For example, Guarnieri notes that in 1922, Gentile was invited by De Sanctis to officiate the civil wedding of his daughter Amalia, as if he were a close friend (p. 46, note 12). This was not surprising because, in the early twenties, De Sanctis and Luigi Credaro (1860–1939), the educator and former powerful minister of education, were thought to have the support of Gentile concerning the teaching of psychology in an improved and refinanced project of Credaro’s Pedagogical School (Scuola Pedagogica) that was in crisis. De Sanctis and Credaro’s psychological and pedagogical projects failed in 1923, and Gentile closed the Pedagogical School that, in the same building, also housed the Laboratory of Psychology of the University of Rome (see Foschi, 2015).

At several points in the book, Guarnieri also highlights that Italian psychology was underdeveloped by Neo-idealism and fascism, and that the appeasement of the majority of the psychologists to the regime was not helpful. Actually, during the rule of fascism, Italian psychology was resized (see also Cimino & Foschi, 2012); however, the crisis did not affect everyone in the same manner. In fact, in the 1930s, father Agostino Gemelli created a thriving research center in Milan and, unlike other Italian psychologists, increased its power due to his collaboration with fascism, which was protected by the powerful shield of the Catholic Church. In this sense, it was recently shown that Gemelli was indeed the most prolific author in the PsycInfo database in the 1930s (Green, 2015; see also Foschi, Giannone, & Giuliani, 2013; Pasqualini, 2016).

In my opinion, despite critical points in the first part of the book, the second part is much more interesting and original, and tells an exemplary story regarding the vicissitudes of science in a totalitarian regime. In detail, the author reconstructs the Italian and international relations and networks that supported Jewish researchers who were persecuted by Nazism and fascism (e.g., Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, London), focusing on the personal stories of Bonaventura and Calabresi.

REFERENCES


Green, C. D. (2015). Publish and perish: Psychology’s most prolific authors are not always the ones we remember. Manuscript submitted for publication.


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