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The “Agony of the School” in Southern Italy in the Images of Italian Photojournalists, 1940s–1950s

The dissemination of a particular public image of rural schools – always the poorest and most disadvantaged schools – has frequently been used by the ruling classes or political parties to document the state of modernity or backwardness of the national school system, depending on their propaganda needs. Taking as its starting point the photo-reportages undertaken by Italian photojournalists and published in Italian magazines of different political orientations in the 1940s and 1950s, this essay provides an in-depth analysis of how the public image of these particular schools was manipulated, and used for propaganda purposes, through the circulation of photographs in newspapers and magazines.

1. Introduction

The photo-reportage commissioned by UNESCO on the campaign against illiteracy in Calabria – consisting of photographs taken by David Seymour¹ in 1950 in the schools of Roggiano Gravina, Cimino (a hamlet near San Marco Argentano), Saucchi (a hamlet near Bagaladi), and San Nicola da Crissa – was not the first to emphasize the dramatic conditions of public education in Southern Italy.²

After World War II – with the lifting of the taboo that had been placed on problems of the national education system by the Fascist regime³ – the public image of

1 The photographer was not randomly chosen. In 1949, UNESCO had published a book entitled *Children of Europe* with photographs by David Seymour. On commission by UNICEF, Seymour had traveled through Austria, Greece, Italy and Poland to document the postwar experiences of children across Europe. See Samuel Boussion, Mathias Gardet, and Martine Ruchat, “Bringing Everyone to Trogen: UNESCO and the Promotion of an International Model of Children’s Communities after World War II,” in *A History of UNESCO: Global Actions and Impacts*, ed. Poul Duedahl (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 99–115. On this issue, see also Carole Naggar, *Chim: Children of War* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2013); David Niget, “Pieds nus dans les ruines: le regard de Chim sur les enfants de la Guerre,” *Revue d’histoire de l’enfance irrégulière* 15 (2013): 143–45.

2 Photos taken from this reportage were used to illustrate the following articles: Carlo Levi, “Southern Italy Fights the Battle against Illiteracy,” *UNESCO Courier* 5, no. 3 (1952): 3–5; Antonio Cortese, “Youth Activities in Southern Italy,” *Fundamental and Adult Education* 10, no. 2 (1958): 59–61.

3 On the strict censorship imposed by the Fascist regime for propaganda purposes on the public image of rural schools in Southern Italy, see Juri Meda, “‘Invisible Schools’: The Public Image of

the school thankfully shook off its phony uniformity. On the one hand, depictions of school sought their inspiration in the modernist paradigm, reflecting the subordination of education to the “race for modernity” that was to become such a characteristic feature of the “economic boom” years; on the other hand, the press started once again to expose the most spectacular instances of dilapidated schools by publishing photographic reportages with more or less explicit political aims.

This trend was initiated by Umberto Zanotti Bianco, who in the 1920s conducted some photographic inquiries into the state of rural schools in Southern Italy on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (National Association for the Interests of Southern Italy). His novelistic report of his stay in December 1928 in Africo, a small mountain village on the slopes of the Aspromonte, was published in several installments, from May to August 1946, in the literary review *Il Ponte* (founded by Piero Calamandrei).⁴ Entitled *Tra la perduta gente (Africo)* (Among the lost people [Africo]), the serialized novel dwelt on the miserable living conditions afflicting the people of Africo, holed up in their hovels without heating or sanitary facilities, undernourished and beset by endemic sickness that had considerably boosted the local infant mortality rate. The novel devoted a great deal of space to the school:

This morning, before beginning my customary inquiry, I chose to visit the school. Favasuli accompanied me to meet the meek little teacher who runs the second and third elementary classes combined. She has a mere twenty-six students on her register, and of those, only twenty or so actually attend class. Given that it is impossible to teach children in the dilapidated shack with no floor and no windows in which I saw two mules tethered, the poor woman teaches in her bedroom, almost in the dark. “Only four students have paid for their reports,” she told me disconsolately. “I should send the others away ... but how can I? Poverty is truly widespread, as you will have noticed. I do not have the heart to do so ... The other day I sent a child home because he did not have a pen, in the hope that he would go and buy one. He has not been back since. Only four children have paid the five lire for the textbook ... I ordered it some time ago ... but nothing has arrived yet. You see ... we don't have any exercise books or pen nibs for poor children. Exercise books cost 25 cents each, while nibs cost three lire the pair ... who has that kind of money? I would be happy to pay but I barely have enough to get by on myself.” The first-year teacher, whom some passerby had called, peered in through the door. She is in exactly the same condition. She has fifteen students on her books, but none of them have paid for the report card. She has merged her first-year students with the only student in the fourth year of elementary school. I noted down everything they needed and I shall send it

Rural Schools in Southern Italy in Photographic Inquiries and Photo-Reportages (1925–1955),” *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 8 (2018): 347–96, accessed May 5, 2019, DOI: 10.5944/hme.8.2018.19204. This article was part of a special issue on “Fotografía, propaganda y educación” (Photography, propaganda, and education), edited by Francesca Comas Rubi and María del Mar Pozo Andrés.

⁴ Umberto Zanotti Bianco, “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – I,” *Il Ponte*, May 1946, 405–14; Umberto Zanotti Bianco, “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – II,” *Il Ponte*, June 1946, 509–19; Umberto Zanotti Bianco, “Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – III,” *Il Ponte*, July–August 1946, 642–48.

to them from Reggio, but in my heart I feel a sense of rebellion welling up. Are these poor wretches wrong to see the state simply in the guise of the taxman or the forest ranger? For twenty years these people have been living in conditions so degrading that anyone with a modicum of pride in humanity would blush for shame.⁵

Zanotti Bianco's widely acclaimed tale had the merit of focusing the public debate on the *questione meridionale*⁶ so long ignored by the Fascist regime, presenting its resolution as a necessary precondition for the social and economic growth of a country recently emerged from a devastating war. The pitiful state of education in the southern regions was placed once again at the very heart of this matter.

Zanotti Bianco's crucial role in alerting public opinion is, however, unlikely to have been sufficient to shine the media spotlight on the distressing condition of schools in the inland regions of the South without the presence of three other factors: 1) the spread of photographic agencies specializing in news photography in the aftermath of the war, which in turn spawned the profession of photo-reporter and the growing use of the camera as a tool for social exposé; 2) the thirst for truth that swept a country accustomed over the previous twenty years to the idyllic depiction of reality fed to it by the Fascist regime's propaganda, which was undoubtedly reassuring but at the same time both monotonous and distorted; and 3) the extraordinary, nationwide success of richly illustrated news magazines that dealt with current events, lifestyle, and topical stories and that enjoyed a peak circulation of 4.5

5 "Stamane, prima di iniziare la mia solita inchiesta, ho voluto visitare la scuola. Favasuli mi ha accompagnato dalla mite maestra che dirige la seconda e terza elementare riunite. Non ha che ventisei iscritti di cui solo una ventina frequentano effettivamente le classi. Poiché non è possibile far scuola nella sconnessa baracca senza pavimento, senza finestre, ove ho visto stavano rinchiusa due mule, la poveretta insegna nella sua camera da letto, quasi al buio. 'Solo quattro alunni – mi dice con voce sconsolata – hanno pagato le pagelle. Dovrei mandar via gli altri... ma come fare? La miseria, come ha potuto constatare, è veramente generale. Non ne ho cuore... L'altro giorno ho rinviato un bimbo perché non aveva la penna, sperando che andasse a comperarla: non è più tornato. Quattro bimbi soltanto hanno versato le cinque lire per il libro di testo... È da tempo che l'ho commissionato... nulla è ancora giunto. Vede... manchiamo completamente di quaderni, di pennini per i poveri: i quaderni costano 25 centesimi, i pennini vanno a tre soldi due... chi ce li mette? Lo farei volentieri, ma ho appena quanto mi basta per tirare avanti.' La maestra di prima, che, avvisata da qualche passante, s'è affacciata all'uscio, è nelle identiche condizioni. Ha quindici iscritti, nessuno ha però voluto pagare la pagella: ha unito agli alunni di prima classe anche l'unico frequentante della quarta elementare. Ho preso nota di tutto il fabbisogno, che manderò da Reggio, ma un moto di ribellione mi agita il cuore. Hanno torto questi disgraziati a non vedere nello Stato che il fisco sotto veste d'esattore o di milite forestale? Da più di vent'anni questa popolazione vive in condizioni così degradanti da far arrossire di vergogna chi ha un po' di fierezza umana." Zanotti Bianco, "Tra la perduta gente (Africo) – II," 513–14. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

6 In Italian historiography, this term is used to describe the debate surrounding the reasons that were to lead to and, over time, aggravate the social and economic underdevelopment of the South in the wake of the Unification of Italy.

million copies a week from 1947 to 1952.⁷ As Uliano Lucas and Tatiana Agliani have pointed out:

It began with photos of the reconstruction, with pictures of life resuming in the big cities, of factories rebuilding and reopening, and of the long-hushed up backwardness of the South, documenting the major current events, the crime and love stories that Mussolini's Italy had hidden from the Italian people's gaze and that a people thirsting for knowledge and desperate to see the country's true circumstances demanded of this new press, of the morning and afternoon papers, of the weeklies that began to spread and increase in the space of a few years until, by the early fifties, they reached the highest number of such publications in Europe in proportion to its population.⁸

This complex pattern of concomitant causes in the immediate aftermath of the war led to a boom in photographic “exposés,” the very emblem of the country's newly rediscovered press freedom. Influenced by the Neorealist trend then very much in fashion in the film industry, the press sought to depict reality in a markedly realistic vein, without filters or interpretation getting in the way, and focusing in particular on the living conditions of the poorer classes. The schools in the South, whose age-old problems were once again in the public eye, were the perfect subject to portray.⁹

2. Tino Petrelli's Photo-Reportage on Africo (1948)

It was therefore not mere coincidence that prompted the Milan-based weekly *L'Europeo* to publish, in March 1948, a series of photographs of the Calabrian village

⁷ See Silvia Pizzetti, *I rotocalchi e la storia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1982), 22.

⁸ “Inizia con le foto della ricostruzione, con le immagini della vita che riprende nelle grandi città, del ricostituirsi delle fabbriche, dell'arretratezza a lungo taciuta del Meridione, con la documentazione dei grandi fatti d'attualità, di cronaca nera e rosa che l'Italia mussoliniana aveva nascosto allo sguardo degli italiani e che ora una popolazione assetata di sapere, desiderosa di vedere la vera realtà del Paese, richiede alla nascente stampa, ai quotidiani del mattino e del pomeriggio, ai settimanali che si vanno moltiplicando in pochi anni fino a raggiungere, nei primi anni Cinquanta, il numero maggiore in Europa in proporzione agli abitanti.” Uliano Lucas and Tatiana Agliani, “L'immagine fotografica, 1945–2000,” in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 20. L'immagine fotografica 1945–2000*, ed. Uliano Lucas (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 5, see especially the section entitled “La scoperta della fotografia realista nell'Italia del dopoguerra,” 4–19.

⁹ The most important teaching periodicals in the South began to carry their first inquiries into the theme at this very time; see Vincenzo Muro, “L'analfabetismo in Italia e la necessità di combatterlo,” *Scuola nostra: rivista quindicinale della scuola elementare del Mezzogiorno*, May 1, 1948, 3–4; “3.000 alunni in 16 aule!,” *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud*, December 10, 1948, 22; Nicolò Piccinni, “Il problema della scuola nel Mezzogiorno,” *Scuola nostra*, January 5, 1949, 1–2.

of Africo where time appeared to have stood still since 1928.¹⁰ The photographs, which are extraordinarily powerful in visual terms, were taken by the photographer Tino Petrelli,¹¹ a correspondent with the Publifoto Agency, to illustrate a multi-faceted inquiry into conditions in the South, promoted by Arrigo Benedetti and conducted by the journalist Tommaso Besozzi on *L'Europeo's* behalf. Petrelli's photographs were used to illustrate two articles: two shots taken inside the school in Africo accompanied an article on the Calabrian mystic Fortunata Evolo,¹² while another two pictures documenting the poor living conditions in the village houses, with men and animals living side by side, were published in an article on Africo itself.¹³ Anthropologist Vito Teti described the two photographs taken in the school in masterly fashion:

10 The weekly *L'Europeo* – founded by Arrigo Benedetti in 1945 and published by Editoriale Domus until 1953, when it was sold to Rizzoli – became famous for its adoption of an innovative graphic formula based on using the same format as daily newspapers, thus allowing it to host innovative graphic solutions and to have an extremely flexible layout.

11 Valentino (Tino) Petrelli (1922–2001) began to work for Vincenzo Carrese's photographic agency Publifoto in 1937, developing negatives and printing photographs. Carrese was the first person in the postwar era to intuit the potential of the new editorial market, and he transformed the agency into what would soon become the biggest supplier of photojournalism images to Italy's leading mastheads. Hired as a professional photographer, Petrelli became one of Carrese's closest assistants, producing numerous successful photographic reportages, for example, on Piazzale Loreto (1945), Africo (1948), and the Polesine flood (1951). For more information, see Italo Zannier, ed., *Tino Petrelli: fotogiornalismo in Italia* (Pordenone: Edizioni Concordia Sette, 1980).

12 Tommaso Besozzi, "L'errore del vescovo di Mileto: Da dieci anni la scienza studia Natuzza dei Morti ma per i calabresi essa è la donna del miracolo," *L'Europeo*, March 14, 1948, 8.

13 Tommaso Besozzi, "Troppe strette le strade per l'ombrello aperto. Il più disperato paese della Calabria," *L'Europeo*, March 21, 1948, 6. Among other things, the article stated that: "Ad Africo [...] non c'è acqua né luce elettrica; non ci sono botteghe, né locande; la gente mangia un pane color cioccolato, fatto di farina di lenticchie selvatiche; le abitazioni, tolte pochissime, sono di un locale solo e là vivono assieme uomini e bestie. Ad Africo esistono solo tre case provviste di latrina e ci sono solo tre persone che posseggono un ombrello. Ma, essendo le strade del paese troppo strette perché ci si possa aprire un ombrello, se ne debbono servire unicamente quando vanno a Bova o a Motticelle." (In Africo ... there is neither water nor electricity; there are neither shops nor inns; people eat chocolate-colored bread made of wild lentil flour; the houses, apart from a very few, have only one room and that is shared by people and animals alike. In Africo there are only three houses with lavatories, and only three people own an umbrella. But given that the village streets are too narrow to open an umbrella, they can only use them when they go to Bova or to Motticelle.) The article mentions Umberto Zanotti Bianco, calling him "Africo's great protector" ("grande protettore di Africo"), although it erroneously states that he "produced a courageous report which caused a huge stir" ("fece una relazione coraggiosa che sollevò molto scalpore") and resulted in his being sent into confinement; it is true that Zanotti Bianco was monitored by the Fascist police from 1928 – as we can see in his personal file, no. 55044, now held in the Casellario Politico Centrale (Central Political Records Office) at the Central State Archive in Rome – but he was not sent into confinement until 1941.

Six girls are seated at wooden desks, four facing the camera and four seen from the side. They are all busy poring over their primers, almost as though they were searching for something hidden, something deep. None of them are looking at the camera. They all seem to be mesmerized by figures and words; a girl in the second row appears to be looking at something she cannot quite grasp, while another wears a woolen headdress that allows her hair to peek out. The floorboards, out of kilter, tell us that we are in an old and destitute environment. A torn map of Calabria hangs on the back wall on the left of the shot. Two girls are barefoot as they try to warm their feet over two metal braziers containing ashes and charcoal set by the desks.¹⁴

Fig. 3.1 Valentino Petrelli, *Interior of the elementary school in Africo (1948)* © Archivio Publifoto Intesa Sanpaolo – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

¹⁴ “Tra i banchi di legno sono sedute sei bambine, quattro in posizione frontale rispetto al fotografo, due di fianco. Sono tutte intente e assortite sui loro sussidiari, quasi impegnate a cercare qualcosa di nascosto e di profondo. Nessuna guarda nell’obiettivo, tutte sembrano attratte dalle figure e dalla scrittura; una bimba in seconda fila sembra guardare qualcosa di imprevedibile. Un’altra ha sulla testa un copricapo di lana, che le lascia fuori i capelli. Le tavole divelte di legno fanno capire che siamo in un ambiente antico e precario. Appesa alla parete in fondo a sinistra dell’inquadratura, la carta geografica strappata della Calabria. Due delle bambine hanno i piedi scalzi, che tentano di rifugiarsi nei due bracieri di lamiera ai lati del banco nei quali si scorgono la cenere e la carbonella.” Vito Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi: memoria e storia dei paesi abbandonati* (Rome: Donzelli, 2004), 222.

Fig. 3.2 Valentino Petrelli, *Interior of the elementary school in Africo (1948)* © Archivio Publifoto Intesa Sanpaolo – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

It is worth noting here that the photographs of the pitiful state of the school in Africo were not published, as one might have expected, to illustrate the article on

the village itself but to accompany an article on a woman who frequently received in her home people from all over the world seeking news of their deceased loved ones or information regarding their ailments, a living witness to the survival of ancestral superstitions and beliefs in the backward culture of Southern Italy. The combination of words and pictures, once again no mere coincidence, implicitly prompted the reader to ask the question: How can the people of the South possibly catch up with the modern world if even their schools, the very beacon of civilization, are in such an appalling state? Through the visual strength of his images, Petrelli succeeded in bringing out the South's comprehensive condition of backwardness in his portrait of a school that not only fails in every possible way to meet the aesthetic paradigm of schools as a factor of modernization, but which reveals the serious underdevelopment and paralysis afflicting southern society as a whole. His "timeless scenes" evoked the past, not the present or the future. What we see does not tie in with the date we intuitively assign the picture on the basis of other, "objective" criteria (the framing and the definition of the image, the quality of the print, and so on). That is why these photographs so often disorient us. Petrelli's reportage shows his enormous capability for ethnographic exploration, which was crucial for a correct interpretation of the desolate scenes of daily life that he recorded in Africo.¹⁵

Yet these photographs also served a different purpose, which emerges from an analysis of the original captions published in *L'Europeo*. The caption to Figure 1 read: "There are no windows; the heating is whatever students can bring from home in the way of embers in an old basin. The problems of the South are legion, but the schools there embody them all. The problems were not resolved by the Fascist dictatorship and they will not be resolved by any other dictatorship but by the country concerning itself with the issue."¹⁶ The caption to Figure 2 appeared to continue the thread: "Now, on the eve of the elections, even the poverty of the people of Calabria is in danger of becoming an election campaign issue. The propagandists

¹⁵ Suffice it here to point out that, in those same years, numerous photographers recorded the scientific expeditions in the South conducted by Italian anthropologists such as Arturo Zavattini and Franco Pinna in the context of their demological and ethno-musicological research. On ethnographic photographs, see Diego Carpitella, "Franco Pinna e la fotografia etnografica in Italia," in Franco Pinna, *Viaggio nelle terre del silenzio: Fotografie di Franco Pinna* (Milan: Idea Editions, 1980), 4–11; Francesco Faeta, ed., *Arturo Zavattini fotografo in Lucania* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 2003); Francesco Faeta, *Fotografi e fotografie: Uno sguardo antropologico* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2006), especially the chapter entitled "Il sonno sotto le stelle: Arturo Zavattini, Ernesto de Martino, un paese lontano" (113–39).

¹⁶ "Mancano le finestre, il riscaldamento è quello che gli scolari si procurano portandosi da casa qualche brace in un vecchio catino. Il problema del Mezzogiorno ha vari aspetti, ma quello delle scuole li assomma tutti. Non lo risolse la dittatura fascista, non lo potrà risolvere un'altra dittatura, ma l'interessamento del Paese." Besozzi, "L'errore del vescovo di Mileto," 8.

are coming up from the plains, seeking to rouse men and women whose brains are weakened by need.”¹⁷

It's clear from these captions that the photographic “exposés” were being used as a subtle form of propaganda by a secular, liberal weekly whose three basic political aims were: 1) to denounce the *débâcle* of the Fascist regime which, for all its myriad proclamations, had failed to ease the viselike grip of illiteracy that continued to hold the South in a stranglehold; 2) to implicitly condemn the cynicism of communist propaganda-mongers prepared to speculate in the ancient poverty of these people “whose brains were weakened by poverty” in order to garner the votes required to govern (the “other dictatorship” incapable of resolving the problem was the pro-Soviet dictatorship which, according to the anti-communist rhetoric, would come into power if the Left won the election)¹⁸; and 3) to subliminally present to the public opinion the potential consequences of a suspension of the Marshall Plan announced by the U.S. government in the event of a Communist win in the general election called for April 18, 1948, a few days after the photographs' publication.

3. The “Impossible Schools” of Federico Patellani (1952)

Another photojournalism campaign probing the state of schools in the South was published by the photographer Federico Patellani¹⁹ in the weekly magazine *Epoca*

¹⁷ “Ora alla vigilia delle elezioni anche la miseria delle popolazioni calabresi rischia di diventare un motivo elettorale. Dalla pianura salgono i propagandisti che cercano di destare uomini e donne intontiti dal bisogno”; *ibid.*

¹⁸ On January 20, 1945, the people of Africo attacked the local *carabinieri* station, forcing the officers present to seek refuge in the cellar and only releasing them after disarming them; following this episode, Socialist Party and Communist Party branches and a left-wing trade union seat were set up in the village. For more information on this episode, see Vito Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2014), 225–26.

¹⁹ Federico Patellani (1911–1977), a photographer, began to work exclusively for the weekly *Tempo* in 1946, profoundly renewing the way readers were informed thanks to what he called “photo-texts,” which consisted in extensive photographic coverage with long captions that he penned himself, totally overturning the hierarchical relationship between text and image. He ceased working for *Tempo* in 1952 and founded Pat Photo Pictures, becoming a freelancer and availing himself of the cooperation of numerous photographers. See Federico Patellani, *Federico Patellani: documenti e notizie raccolti in trent'anni di viaggio nel Sud* (Milan: Editphoto, 1977); Kitti Bolognesi and Giovanna Calvenzi, eds., *Federico Patellani: fotografie e cinema 1943–1960* (Prato: Archivio Fotografico Toscana – Regione Toscana, 2005); Kitti Bolognesi and Giovanna Calvenzi, eds., *Federico Patellani: professione fotoreporter* (Cinisello Balsamo: Museo della fotografia contemporanea – Silvana Editoriale, 2015).

in June 1952.²⁰ At the time, Patellani was involved in producing a sweeping report on the South of Italy entitled “Italia Magica”²¹ for the weekly magazine *Tempo*, which was owned by the same publishing group.²² As had been the case with Petrelli’s reportage, the combination of the author’s ethnographic interests and documentary intentions molded the perspective from which the report looks at the situation in schools, except that in Patellani’s case the idea of the social exposé is central to his purpose and his pictures are not subservient to political ends. In the *Epoca* article, Patellani wrote:

You have to visit the region to grasp the seriousness of the school problem in certain areas of the South, a problem that the rhetoricians have kept hidden away in the cupboard for decades. In some villages children have to travel over ten kilometers on foot to get to school. And their schools are almost invariably situated in windowless corridors, former stables and cowsheds or agricultural tool sheds where the only opening is the door. The photographs published here describe these incredible scenarios better than any words ever could. Often, close by the erstwhile stable there is a functioning cowshed and the teacher’s words are permanently underscored by the lowing of cattle, or even the grunting of pigs. In one small village in Calabria I actually saw a classroom through which a cow and her calf had to pass in order to reach their pasture, because the classroom had only a plank wall separating it from the cowshed. When the calf was not in the meadow, he was particularly restless and noisy, smashing away at the planks with his horns and his snout, so the classroom contained in effect not just the teacher and his students but the teacher, his students, and a calf. In winter, huge clouds of steam would issue from the animal’s mouth and, quite frankly, that didn’t help to make the air any

20 Federico Patellani, “Le scuole impossibili: scantinati, antiche stalle, corridoi senza finestre sono diventati aule; in qualche classe mancano i banchi, gli sgabelli e perfino il gesso per scrivere sulla lavagna,” *Epoca*, June 28, 1952, 44–48. The illustrated weekly *Epoca*, founded by Alberto Mondadori in 1950 and published until 1997, stood out for its unique graphic layout making abundant use of glossy paper and of photographic reportage.

21 The “Italia Magica” reportage began with the article “Le streghe di Benevento hanno paura dei fari,” *Tempo*, April 12, 1952, 18, which stated: “*Tempo* inizia con questo fototesto la pubblicazione di una serie di servizi che Federico Patellani ha realizzato andando a zonzo per l’Italia senza una meta precisa, ma ascoltando tutti i discorsi, interrogando la gente più semplice e troppo lontana dai beni che la civiltà offre ai popoli più fortunati; alla ricerca di leggende, personaggi e situazioni che racchiudono ancora in sé un po’ di quella magia che il progresso non è riuscito a estinguere.” (With this illustrated article *Tempo* is launching the publication of a series of reportages that Federico Patellani has produced by wandering around Italy without any particular aim but simply listening to what people have to say, seeking the opinions of the simple people too far removed from the benefits that civilization offers the more fortunate among us, in search of legends, personalities, and situations that still contain a little of that magic that progress has not managed to snuff out.) The series ended with the article: “Si vince il gallo se si conosce la Traviata,” *Tempo*, July 12, 1952, 30–31.

22 This illustrated weekly – founded by Alberto Mondadori in 1939 and sold to Aldo Palazzi in 1946 – took its inspiration from the U.S. weekly *Life* and set out to compete with *Oggi*, the weekly published by its competitor Rizzoli. It was the first Italian color magazine to assign equal importance to journalists and photographers, and indeed all its photographs bore the name of the photographer at the bottom in the same way that its written articles bore the name of the author.

pur. Yet neither the calf nor the teacher and his students seemed bothered by each other's presence. (Unfortunately, the scene was also witnessed by a British journalist who was conducting the same inquiry as me).²³

Fig. 3.3 Federico Patellani, *Interior of the elementary school in Jotta (1952)* © Studio Federico Patellani – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

23 “Bisogna venire da queste parti per intendere la gravità del problema scolastico in certe zone del Sud; un problema tenuto nel dimenticatoio, per decenni, da tanti e tanti retori. In certi paesi i bambini devono percorrere, a piedi, oltre dieci chilometri per raggiungere la scuola. Questa, quasi sempre, è situata in un corridoio senza finestre, o in una antica stalla, o in un locale destinato agli attrezzi agricoli, senz’altra apertura che la porta. Le fotografie che qui pubblichiamo commentano meglio di qualsiasi parola quegli incredibili scenari. Spesso, vicino all’antica stalla, c’è una stalla ancora in efficienza e le parole dell’insegnante risultano perennemente commentate dai muggiti delle mucche e dai grugniti dei porci. In un paesino della Calabria m’è accaduto addirittura di vedere un’aula attraverso la quale doveva passare, per andare al pascolo, la mucca col vitellino. Infatti l’aula era divisa dalla stalla solo per mezzo di un assito. Quando non era al pascolo, il vitellino si dimostrava particolarmente inquieto, e faceva un gran fracasso tirando cornate e musate contro la paratia. Con questo metodo era riuscito a spostare due tavole per infilarsi il muso. Così, in quell’aula, non c’erano soltanto gli scolari e il maestro: ma gli scolari, il maestro e un vitellino. D’inverno, dalla bocca della bestia uscivano ondate di vapore e non si può dire che l’aria ne godesse. Ma né l’uno né gli altri sembravano disturbati dalla reciproca presenza. (Queste cose, purtroppo, furono viste e annotate anche da un giornalista inglese che faceva la mia medesima inchiesta).” Patellani, “Le scuole impossibili,” 45.

Fig. 3.4 Federico Patellani, *Exterior of the elementary school in Jotta (1952)* © Studio Federico Patellani – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

Patellani went on to depict the situation he had encountered in the rural schools in Jotta and Ghiandaro, two small suburbs of San Marco Argentano in the province of Cosenza: In Jotta, “the desks were so huge that the students, even clambering up onto their strawless chairs, could barely get their chins up over the top of them,”²⁴ while in Ghiandaro “the desks in the elementary school’s second-year classrooms were so small that the children could hardly sit at them and had to squeeze to fit in,”²⁵ because they were a donation from a north Italian kindergarten. He concluded:

Very little has been done for the children that go to school in certain areas of the South. It is with a hint of remorse that we think of the numerous pompous public buildings in the big cities (the railway stations with their Assyrian and Babylonian columns, the marble-clad model cities, and the mausoleum-like post offices) when we see the classrooms in Jotta, Ghiandaro, Matera, and countless other villages in Calabria, Basilicata, and Puglia: these villages where the children grow up at impossible desks, endlessly repeating the school year until they are old enough to go to work and relegate school to their memory: a memory of straw and

²⁴ “I banchi erano così giganteschi che i bambini, arrampicati sopra le seggiole spagliate, potevano a malapena arrivarci col mento.” Ibid., 45.

²⁵ “Nelle aule di seconda elementare i banchi sono talmente minuscoli che i bambini quasi non c’entrano e devono schiacciarsi dentro.” Ibid., 46.

crumbling plaster falling from the ceiling. ... In short, this journey to the region of improbable schools has prompted me to conclude that in certain regions everything still remains to be done. ... Without exaggerating, one can say that many decades have been completely wasted in a large number of villages in the South.²⁶

The article was accompanied by five photographs that Patellani had taken in the classrooms of the rural school in Jotta and another three he had taken at Ghian-daro.²⁷

The shots have the same visual force today as they did back then – and as the photographs of Africo taken by Petrelli four years earlier. But while *L'Europeo* used Petrelli's shots, as we have seen, for ideological purposes in the heated electoral campaign then taking place, Patellani used his camera to record the pitiful state of rural schools in the South (exemplified by the two Calabrian villages) not only to draw the public's attention to the problem but also to point a finger at the Fascist regime for long hiding the shameful state of school buildings in the South and for wasting public money on the erection of monumental buildings whose sole purpose was pompous self-glorification.²⁸ The exclusion of the South from the public debate for over a decade in the wake of the media directives issued by Benito Mussolini's press attaché in 1931²⁹ and the regime's fictitious claim to have resolved the *questione meridionale* helped to ensure that “many decades ha[d] been completely wasted” in countless villages in the South. Once again the images told of a backward society behind the times, certainly not of the modernity that the rest of the country in search of redemption, of a second chance, was so busy chasing after. Yet even as Patellani published his exposé, and however aware he might have been of

26 “Si è fatto ben poco per i bambini che vanno a scuola in certe zone del Sud. È con un punto di rimorso che si pensa a tanti pomposi edifici pubblici delle grandi città (alle stazioni ferroviarie con i colonnati assiro-babilonesi, alle marmoree città-esposizioni, ed ai mausolei postelegrafonici), vedendo le aule di Jotta, di Ghiandaro, di Matera e degli altri innumerevoli paesi calabresi, lucani e pugliesi. Questi paesi dove i bambini crescono su banchi impossibili, ripetendo le classi fino a che giunge l'ora di andare a lavorare e di mettere la scuola tra i ricordi. Un ricordo di fili di paglia e di calcinacci che cadono dal soffitto. [...] Insomma questo viaggio nella regione delle scuole inverosimili mi ha condotto a concludere che in certe zone tutto è da fare. [...] Senza esagerare si può dire che in tante località del Sud sono andati completamente perduti parecchi decenni.” Ibid., 46–47.

27 Only three of these photographs are reproduced in this article (figs. 3, 4, and 5). The entire reportage, now in the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea (Museum of Contemporary Photography) in Cinisello Balsamo, consisted of over thirty photographs.

28 On this topic, see the work of Bruno Tobia, especially “*Salve o popolo d'eroi...: la monumentalità fascista nelle fotografie dell'Istituto Luce* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2002).

29 These directives included, among other things, to check if reports and articles are “useful or harmful for Italy and the Regime” (point 2), to eliminate “alarmist, pessimistic, catastrophic or depressing news” (point 4), and to avoid giving “the rest of the world an impression of serious poverty, which does not exist” (point 5). See Riccardo Cassero, *Le veline del Duce: come il fascismo controllava la stampa* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 2004), 10–11.

the emotional impact of his photographs capable of describing “these incredible scenarios better than any words ever could,” it is interesting that he also mentions the inquiry simultaneously conducted by a British journalist who saw and noted down the same impressions and who would thus shame Italy’s national education system in the eyes of the world.³⁰ Patellani’s desire to expose thus had to overcome a natural sense of modesty, aimed at protecting – against all evidence – the public image of an institution such as the school whose crucial role in the country’s modernization was universally recognized.

Fig. 3.5 Federico Patellani, *Interior of the elementary school in Jotta* (1952) © Studio Federico Patellani – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

³⁰ It was not possible to identify this journalist. It could not have been David Seymour, however, as he carried out his reportage in 1950.

Fig. 3.6 Federico Patellani, *Interior of the elementary school in Ghiandaro (1952)* © Studio Federico Patellani – Lombardy Region/Museum of Contemporary Photography, Milan–Cinisello Balsamo.

The “impossible schools” of Jotta and Ghiandaro caused a huge public stir nationwide and sparked a new wave of inquiries into the state of education in the country’s southern regions. It is interesting to note that, even in these inquiries conducted by ministry officials and educationalists, photographic documentation began to be widely used. We can see examples of this in the articles published by Gustavo Sessa on rural buildings in the South (which includes a photograph of the rural school in Vallazze, a suburb of Cercemaggiore in Molise, and a 19th-century etching by Antonio Piccinni entitled *Scoletta rurale*)³¹ and by Luigi Volpicelli on the “agony of the school” in the South (which includes two photographs, one of them taken by Giovan Battista Poletto a few years earlier; see fig. 7).³² The following year the hygienist Giuseppe Sangiorgi – adopting the motto coined by Patellani based on a phrase uttered by a teacher in the district of Matera³³ – published an article in a

³¹ Gustavo Sessa, “La casa della scuola,” *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud*, May 1952, 23–25.

³² Luigi Volpicelli, “Il martirio della scuola nel Mezzogiorno,” *Il Mezzogiorno: rassegna della vita e dei problemi del Sud*, November 1952, 12–14.

³³ Patellani, “Le scuole impossibili,” 44. The teacher’s original words were: “Per Carlo Levi Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. Ma per noi Cristo si è fermato a Matera” (According to Carlo Levi, Christ stopped at Eboli. But in our view Christ stopped at Matera.) Here, he refers to Carlo Levi’s autobiographical

well-known medical journal under the title “Cristo si è fermato a Jotta” (Christ stopped at Jotta).³⁴ There, he praised the inquiry sponsored by *Epoca* on the grounds that it had “touched the most sensitive fibers of our heart” and proposed that every Rotary Club in Italy should “adopt a small rural school, on condition that it is in as poor a state as the school in Jotta.”³⁵ Patellani’s article was still being held up as a visual testimony of the appalling conditions of the rural schools in the region in 1954, in a section on health and hygiene in Calabria in a national report by the Italian Commission for the Study of Underdeveloped Areas.³⁶ The echo of the agony of the school in Calabria was to persist until as late as 1963, right in the middle of the so-called “economic boom,” when the Touring Club magazine published an article by the journalist Franco Abruzzo on the pitiful state of schools in Calabria, illustrating it with a hard-hitting series of FEMIA photographs showing students in the elementary school in San Nicola, in the province of Reggio Calabria, sitting barefoot at rickety old wooden desks (fig. 8).³⁷

Fig. 3.7 Giovan Battista Poletto, *Interior of an elementary school in an unknown locality* (1950?)
© Municipal Archive of Turin, fund “Gazzetta del Popolo,” fototeca 1, cartella 77, busta 5230.

novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), a masterpiece of Italian Neorealism published by Einaudi in 1945.

34 Giuseppe Sangiorgi, “Cristo si è fermato a Jotta,” *Athena: rassegna mensile di biologia, clinica e terapia* 19, no. 12 (1953): 393–95.

35 *Ibid.*, 394. The article was taken from a report delivered to the Rotary Club in Bari on March 24, 1953.

36 Francesco Serra and Mario Misasi, “La Calabria,” in *Atti del Congresso internazionale di studio sul problema delle aree arretrate* (Milano, 10–15 ottobre 1954), vol. 1: *Rapporto della commissione italiana di studio sulle aree arretrate italiane*, ed. Centro nazionale di prevenzione e difesa sociale (Milan: Giuffrè, 1954), 891–979; see especially the section entitled “Condizioni culturali” (974–76).

37 See Franco Abruzzo, “Calabria senza scuole,” *Le Vie d’Italia*, April 1963, 437–48.

Fig. 3.8 Interior of the elementary school in San Nicola (1963), reproduced from *Le Vie d'Italia*, April 1963, 443.

4. The Politically Engaged Photo-Reportages of Ando Gilardi, 1954–1957

We have seen how the photographic reportage undertaken by Tino Petrelli in 1948 had been used for propaganda purposes by the liberal-leaning weekly *L'Europeo* both to denounce the failures of the Fascist regime and to condemn the Communists for their cynical attempt to exploit the long-standing misery of southern peasants as part of their attack on the social and economic policies of the new Christian Democratic government. In fact, the photographic historian Martina Caruso recently underlined how in those years the photographic reportage became a visual propaganda tool used equally by liberal-leaning illustrated magazines, such as *L'Europeo*,

Il Mondo, *Epoca*, and *Tempo*, and Communist ones, such as *Politecnico*, *Vie Nuove*, *Noi Donne*, and *Il Lavoro*.³⁸

This is particularly true when we consider that, in the postwar period, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI), which historically had had its political base in the most industrialized northern regions, started a wide-ranging and in-depth investigation into the *questione meridionale*, supporting the peasant movement's campaign for the occupation and redistribution of uncultivated land owned by the large landowning families.³⁹ The most committed intellectual in this campaign was Mario Alicata, regional secretary of the Communist Party in Calabria. He was also a member of the board of the Comitato nazionale per la rinascita del Mezzogiorno (National Committee for the Revival of the South), constituted by PCI in 1947, which in 1950 promoted an inquiry into the working conditions of the southern population that was subsequently published in the communist weekly *La Voce del Mezzogiorno*.⁴⁰ From this moment on, the attention paid by the Communist press to the moral and material living conditions in the southern regions and in particular to the scourge of illiteracy grew apace.

It is no mere coincidence that Petrelli's photographs – four years after they were published in *L'Europeo* – were used once again by the Communist monthly *Noi Donne*, which pointedly stated that they had been published earlier for propaganda purposes by a bourgeois magazine that did not even bother to address the reality of the schools and the issues of illiteracy or of under-age labor by which the Popular Front set such store.⁴¹ The Communist party in fact rallied its various media around this issue. The most effective portraits of southern school conditions were the photo-reportages undertaken by photographer Ando Gilardi for the illustrated weekly magazine of the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL),⁴² *Il Lavoro*, between 1954 and 1956.⁴³ Gilardi had already denounced the conditions in Italian

38 Martina Caruso, *Italian Humanist Photography from Fascism to the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 94; in particular, see the chapter "Christ Stopped at Eboli: an Anthropology of the South" and the section "The Politics of Miseria and the Communist Debate" (94–98).

39 On this issue in particular, see Sidney G. Tarrow, *Peasant Communism in Southern Italy* (London: Yale University Press, 1967); Antonello Mattone, "Partito comunista e contadini nel Mezzogiorno," *Studi Storici* 14, no. 4 (1973): 941–52; Vincenzo Mauro, *Lotte dei contadini in Calabria: testimonianze sulle lotte dei braccianti negli anni 1944–1954* (Milan: Sapere, 1973).

40 *La Voce del Mezzogiorno*, January 15, 1952. Mario Alicata, "La cultura meridionale," *Rinascita*, October 1949, 438–42; Mario Alicata, "Il meridionalismo non si può fermare ad Eboli," *Cronache Meridionali*, September 1954, 585–603.

41 "Bambini italiani 1952," *Noi Donne*, April 20, 1952, 6–7.

42 The CGIL was a left-wing national trade union, strongly influenced by the Communist Party.

43 Ando Gilardi (1921–2012) started working as a professional photographer in 1945. He worked as a journalist and photo-reporter, first for the newspaper *L'Unità* and later for the magazines *Il Lavoro* and *Vie Nuove*, all published by the Italian Communist Party. During the fifties and sixties, he collaborated with the anthropologists Ernesto de Martino and Diego Carpitella by undertaking ethno-

schools in a series of articles entitled “Inchiesta sulla donna italiana” (Inquiry into the Italian woman), published in *Il Lavoro* in 1954. As part of this series, he wrote an article in which he condemned the problem of girls leaving school prematurely, accompanying it with a photograph of the entrance to a girls’ school housed in a dilapidated prefabricated wooden hut on the outskirts of Rome. He wrote:

If we could enter the houses of the students who have lost their way, from elementary school onwards, we will see that time and again they are the daughters of the unemployed and of peasants, and in general of poor workers. Year after year, the daughters of workers and employees, and even those of many craftsmen and professionals, abandon their studies. With a few rare exceptions, only those belonging to the upper classes are saved from this cruel selection made exclusively on the basis of economic considerations.⁴⁴

Gilardi had dealt with school and childhood before, as Calabria correspondent of *Il Lavoro*. In fact, he was appointed to carry out a report on the Calabrian town of Melissa, on the Sila plateau, where, on October 29, 1949, the police had opened fire on a crowd of the poor and dispossessed who had occupied large landed estates, killing three young people and injuring fifteen.

The massacre of Melissa, which followed that of Portella della Ginestra on May 1, 1947, and foreshadowed that which took place in Torremaggiore on November 29, 1949, had national resonance, triggering a wave of indignation throughout the country. As a result, the Communist Party and the CGIL invested a lot of resources in documenting in detail what had happened, in order to point up the responsibilities of the police and the government. In 1949 the film director Carlo Lizzani directed the cinematographic inquiry *Nel Mezzogiorno qualcosa è cambiato* (Something has changed in the South), written by Mario Alicata and produced by the film production company Libertas Film. Documenting the extensive efforts made by the labor and peasant movements for the social and economic development of the

graphic photo-reportages on popular traditions in the southern regions. In the following years he devoted his energies to photographic research and to the history of photography, publishing various books, most notably *Storia sociale della fotografia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976). In 1979 he founded the group Foto/gram, composed of teachers and students, who promoted innovative courses on the use of photography in teaching in Italian schools. For more information, see Ando Gilardi, *Olive e buloni: lavoro contadino e operaio nell'Italia del dopoguerra, 1950–1962*, ed. Fabrizio Urettini (Milan: Edizioni Fototeca Storica nazionale, 2009); Daniela Giordi, ed., *Ando Gilardi reporter: Italia 1950–1962* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2019).

⁴⁴ “Se noi potessimo entrare nella casa delle scolare che si sono perse per via, dalla prima elementare in su, vedremo che di volta in volta trattasi di figlie di disoccupati, di contadini e in genere di lavoratori poverissimi e poveri. Abbandonano poi gli studi, di anno in anno, le figlie degli operai e degli impiegati e persino quelle di molte categorie artigianali e professionali. Tranne rarissime eccezioni, da questa crudele selezione che ubbidisce esclusivamente a un principio economico, si salvano solo le appartenenti alle categorie agiate e ricche.” Ando Gilardi, “Soltanto una su cento,” *Il Lavoro*, February 21, 1954, 2–3.

southern regions and the work carried out by the Assise per la rinascita del Mezzogiorno (Assembly for the Revival of Southern Italy), the film concluded with footage of a political demonstration in Melissa.⁴⁵

This commitment on the part of the Communist Party and the left-wing trade unions continued over the following years. In the summer of 1954, *Il Lavoro* decided to commemorate the death of the three young protesters five years earlier and to denounce the state of economic destitution in which the rural population of the South continued to live. During his stay in Calabria, Gilardi was also able to document the poor sanitary conditions of the shantytown known as “Shangai” in Crotona, the main Calabrian industrial center on the Ionian coast, whose barefoot and filthy children evoked those portrayed by Petrelli in the school of Africo. Gilardi took a few shots of the crumbling “after-school” facility made of wooden boards and metal sheets in the village where the families of the workers of the Montecatini chemical plants lived.⁴⁶ Next, he travelled into the interior, to Melissa, and started to prepare his report, which was to be published in the October 31, 1954, issue.

Gilardi took numerous photos inside the small elementary school of the town, portraying boys and girls of different ages following the teacher’s lessons from their desks. These photographs, housed today in Gilardi’s photo archive, have never been published, however.⁴⁷ Instead, the article in *Il Lavoro* was accompanied by a single photo, which became very famous, depicting a row of schoolchildren sitting on a bench greeting the photographer with clenched fists (fig. 9). The caption to this photo read: “Their parents taught them this greeting when the INCOM came: to save them from the shame of lending their image to the propaganda of the ruling classes. They always repeat it in front of any camera.”⁴⁸ It was Gilardi himself who further explained the reasons for that greeting:

Once, after the massacre, at the time of the occupation of the uncultivated lands, the cameramen of the *Settimana INCOM* went up to Melissa to shoot a propaganda film. People gathered to discuss the best way to avoid being exploited, even from afar, by government propaganda. Various ways were suggested, some spirited; in the end they found a peaceful solution: whenever someone’s photo was taken, he should immediately raise his arm in greeting with a clenched fist. Mothers taught this rebellious gesture even to their children, and nobody forgot it. Even today in Melissa you just have to point the camera to provoke the raising of a lot of

⁴⁵ This docufilm is housed within the audiovisual fund of the Italian Communist Party at the Archivio audiovisivo del movimento operaio e democratico (Audiovisual Archive of the Democratic and Labor Movement) in Rome.

⁴⁶ The photos taken in Crotona were not published in *Il Lavoro* but are housed in the Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi (Ando Gilardi National Historical Photo Library) in Milan.

⁴⁷ Ten of these photos were found in the Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi in Milan.

⁴⁸ “Gli insegnarono questo saluto quando venne la INCOM: per salvarli dall’onta di prestare la loro immagine alla propaganda dei padroni. Lo ripetono immancabilmente davanti a qualsiasi obbiettivo.” Ando Gilardi, “Melissa 1954,” *Il Lavoro*, October 31, 1954, 7–9.

clenched fists. To have normal photos, you have to go around accompanied by someone local: “This is a comrade,” your local guide will explain to the children and they immediately return to their games or pose normally.⁴⁹

Fig. 3.9 Ando Gilardi, *The schoolchildren of Melissa raise their fists in greeting* (1954) © Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi, Milan.

⁴⁹ “Una volta, dopo l’eccidio, al tempo della distribuzione delle terre, salirono a Melissa gli operatori della *Settimana INCOM* per girare un documentario di propaganda. La gente si riunì per discutere il modo migliore per evitare di servire, anche indirettamente, alla propaganda governativa. Vari modi, alcuni spicciativi, vennero suggeriti, poi trovarono una soluzione pacifica: ogni qualvolta la macchina da presa era diretta verso qualcuno, subito egli alzava il braccio salutando a pugno chiuso. Anche ai bambini le madri insegnarono il gesto ribelle, e nessuno più lo ha dimenticato, e a Melissa ancor oggi basta puntare la macchina fotografica per provocare il saluto a pugno chiuso. Per avere fotografie normali, bisogna andare in giro accompagnati da qualcuno: ‘C’è un compagno’ spiega l’accompagnatore ai bambini e allora essi ritornano ai loro giochi, o si mettono in posa normalmente.” Gilardi, “Melissa 1954,” 8. The *Settimana INCOM* was an Italian newsreel, distributed weekly in cinemas from 1946 to 1965 by the film production company INCOM (Industria Corti Metraggi Milano). It is not clear to which newsreel Gilardi refers. In the LUCE Institute’s Archive, which acquired the INCOM trademark in 1967 and today preserves its archive, was found a short film entitled *Minister Segni a Melissa* (5’), which does not indicate the film production company or the date of filming (code: D063206). Moreover, the archives also includes episode no. 412 of the *Settimana INCOM* of 8 March 1950, directed by Stefano Canzio, which is entirely dedicated to Calabria, again without any direct reference to Melissa. A noteworthy scene in the film shows several students walking to school on a country lane, with the voice-over saying: “We will extirpate all of the weeds also in illiteracy: the road is open, we need to improve it” (13.00’–13.03’).

Fig. 3.10 Ando Gilardi, *Goffredo Fofi's after-school in Palermo* (1956) © Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi, Milan.

In the following years, the children of Melissa, with their school satchels under their arms and their raised fists, became the emblem of the southern peasant movement, which had suffered fierce police repression in this very Calabrian town. Ando Gilardi would return a few years later to photograph schoolchildren as part of the journalistic inquiry “Indagine nel Mezzogiorno” (Survey in the South). Published once again in the illustrated weekly of the CGIL, it led him to visit the poor children’s “after-school” facility founded by the teacher Goffredo Fofi at Cortile Scalilla in Palermo.⁵⁰ Fofi in 1955 had been dismissed from Partinico for dealing with the

⁵⁰ Goffredo Fofi (born 1937) in 1955 went to Partinico, where Danilo Dolci was promoting non-violent struggles against the mafia and for workers’ rights through the so-called *scioperi a rovescio*

problem of popular education without prefectural authorization,⁵¹ and without earning a salary but enlisting the support of Lucio Lombardo Radice⁵² – who dedicated an editorial to him in the PCI's official organ, *L'Unità*⁵³ – Fofi then founded his after-school in Palermo. Gilardi took numerous photos of the improvised classrooms full of dirty children wearing tattered clothes, and his images gave extraordinarily powerful testimony to the fight against illiteracy conducted by a single Communist teacher with few resources.⁵⁴ Only one of these shots, however, was to be published in the third installment of the “Indagine nel Mezzogiorno”: it depicts a child struggling to read with the help of Fofi's wife, Michela, while two other children, seated at the same large table, are doing their homework (fig. 10).⁵⁵ This shot constituted an effective metaphor for the terrible difficulties faced by poor and working-class children on the path of emancipation from the centuries-old ignorance in which the popular classes had been held and documented the first practices of democratic and cooperative education that were spreading through Italy as part of the growth of the Modern School Movement.

(literally “backward strikes”); in the following years Fofi continued to be committed to popular education in the most depressed areas of Southern Italy.

51 The prefectures – today also known as Territorial Government Offices – are the Ministry of the Interior's agencies representing the central government in each province.

52 Lucio Lombardo Radice (1916–1982), son of Giuseppe Lombardo Radice (an educationalist who had introduced the principles of the Modern School Movement in Italy since the 1920s), inherited his father's interest in school issues and founded the journal *Riforma della Scuola*, which quickly became the leading organ of progressive education. He was also a leader of the Italian Communist Party.

53 L. Lombardo Radice, “Reato d'alfabeto,” *L'Unità*, February 8, 1956, 2. The article was also reproduced in Adolfo Battaglia, ed., *Dibattito sulla scuola* (Bari: Laterza, 1956), 290.

54 Fifteen of these photos were found in the Fototeca Storica Nazionale Ando Gilardi in Milan.

55 Ando Gilardi, “A te: ti affitti?,” *Il Lavoro*, April 14, 1957, 4–5.