

Eden K. McLean. Mussolini's Children: Race and Elementary Education in Fascist Italy

Matteo Brera

Volume 42, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088998ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/qi.v42i1.38385>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brera, M. (2021). Review of [Eden K. McLean. *Mussolini's Children: Race and Elementary Education in Fascist Italy*]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 42(1), 307–309. <https://doi.org/10.33137/qi.v42i1.38385>

imaginative discipline when we debate on and defend the place of the humanities within human learning.

FRANCESCO BRENNÀ
Towson University

Eden K. McLean. *Mussolini's Children: Race and Elementary Education in Fascist Italy*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 320. ISBN 9781496206428.

Studying conjointly the “state-mandated youth culture” (2) and the concepts of race and biopolitics to examine the spreading of Fascist racial theories, *Mussolini's Children* attempts to show how Italian Fascism used pedagogy to shape “new generations of a strengthened Italian race” (17). Drawing on textbooks, notebooks, and pedagogical journals, Eden K. McLean provides a comprehensive picture of the elementary education system of the regime and its evolution during the Duce's vicennial dictatorship, 1922 to 1940.

The originality and relevance of McLean's book for the study of Fascism and the shaping of the Italian racial identity rests in the argument that the fascist state used pedagogy and education as “its primary tools [...] to establish and impart discourses of racial identity and biopower” (24). Although this is a fascinating perspective, at the end of the book the reader is left wondering whether elementary education indeed played such a prominent role in the shaping of Fascism's racial policies that culminated in the Racial Laws of 1938.

The first section, titled “Defining Fascist Power and Identity, 1922–29,” describes the revamping of the Italian educational system by neoidealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile and pedagogist Giuseppe Lombardo Radice. The extent to which the pair introduced a pedagogy aiming to create “models of the Italian race who could fulfil the demands of the fascist state” (25), thus seconding its racial ideals, is debatable. Indeed, the statement that Gentile's language and pedagogical principles “would prove valuable frameworks within which Mussolini's racial project would develop and thrive” (25) would best be supported by analyzing the lively debate on language, education, and national identity that informed at least the first three years of the thirties.

McLean correctly notes that the learning model embraced by Gentile was based on a standardized curriculum rooted in the unifying concept of *italianità* that found its defining traits in the Italian language, shared geographies and history, and overarching values such as obedience and discipline. Nevertheless, *italianità* as conceived by Gentile on the heels of the post-Risorgimento ideals informing the liberal state can hardly be assimilated to the modern ideas of race and racism, namely the privileging of certain categories of people over others based on ancestrally inherited differences.

In the second part of the book, “Fascistizing the Nation and Race, 1929–34,” McLean describes the fascistization of the Italian educational system to further the establishment of the dictatorship. Centralizing efforts by Mussolini were evident in the transformation of the Ministry of Public Instruction into the Ministry of National Education and the boost given to the state-mandated publication of national textbooks, fully aligned with Fascist ideals. The study of such a vast documentary body merits further examination as far as the demonstration of the ties between elementary education and the growth of racist policies in Fascist Italy are concerned. McLean rightly points out how in textbooks the rhetorical pattern revolves consistently around *romanità* and its connections to modern Italian history, the cult of the “heroes” of Italian literature and history, and the increased presence of such terms as *razza* and *stirpe*. McLean argues that such imagery and linguistic presences reveal the more nationalistic and racially connoted ideology of the Fascist regime by the mid-1930s, when fascist clubs and associations intensified their collaboration with the schools to shape a youth that would “embody the ideals of *italianità* and fulfill the supposed destiny of the race and the fatherland” (89).

In the third part, “Resurrecting the Roman Empire, 1934–38,” McLean argues that while elementary textbooks continued to be based on the same rhetorical themes, increased emphasis was placed on “Fascist goals for autarky, irredentism, and colonialism” and on Italy’s imperial ambitions as well as the hostility coming from foreign powers (141–42) to create within Italians both a “siege mentality” and an “imperial consciousness” (169). At the same time — McLean notes — the concept of *italianità* became increasingly exclusive and was used to denote differences between Italians and ‘the others.’

Finally, “Ensuring the Empire’s Immortality, 1938–40,” describes the radicalization of the educational system after the enactment of Giuseppe Bottai’s school charter of 1939, which gendered and modified a curriculum still largely

informed, at least regarding its rhetorical fabric, “by language and imagery from throughout the 1920s and 1930s” (205).

Mussolini's Children is a welcome addition to the existing scholarly production on Fascist elementary education and pedagogical policies. However, whether the idea of *italianità* embraced by the regime in the early 1920s to cement nationalism might be regarded as the germ of discrimination leading to the fully fledged racist norms promoted by Fascism in the second half of the thirties remains an open question. Especially because, as McLean concedes, fascist rhetoric was based on themes that had been a *leitmotif* in Italian culture well before 1922 and were essentially relics of the Risorgimento heroics. Consequently, the assimilation of the rhetoric of *italianità* with a racist spirit lying in wait seems to be the least convincing aspect of this otherwise engaging study of the interrelation of education and racial awareness in Fascist Italy, a topic that would benefit from a renewed and robust critical attention.

MATTEO BRERA

University of Western Ontario

Russell J. A. Kilbourn. *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style.* New York: Wallflower Press, 2020. Pp. 264. ISBN 9780231189934.

Kilbourn's book is part of Wallflower Press's *Directors' Cuts*, a series focusing on key contemporary international filmmakers. Across eight chapters and a coda, aside from the introduction and conclusion, Kilbourn deals mainly with Sorrentino's films (from *L'uomo in più* in 2001 to *Loro* in 2018) and first major television run (*The Young Pope*, 2016). The book is intended for “nonspecialist film lovers” (xxi) to whom Kilbourn aims to introduce Sorrentino and his work.

Counter to accusations of a superficial commitment to style on Sorrentino's part, the overall aim of Kilbourn's research is to highlight the filmmaker's *impegno*. He advances an idea that this can be seen in Sorrentino's “intensified continuity style” (xxvi), which, in his detailed analyses of scenes and/or aspects, identifies the wide-ranging application of codes and genres in a post-classical cinematic sense.

Adopting a “schizoid agenda” (xix), Kilbourn seeks neither to kill off the auteur altogether nor to sidestep the influence of the socio-cultural and/or the historical on the filmmaker. He acknowledges a continuum between artistic