

Nativist Authoritarian Far-right Flirtations with Progressive Education: Exploring the Relationship in Interwar Switzerland

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Progressive education is generally thought to bear little commonality with authoritarianism and nativism. However, several studies show far-right governments and movements embracing progressive tenets. This article investigates the reasons behind this phenomenon by confronting the educational ideas of key far-right parties and educators in interwar German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. Our systematic analysis of texts produced by these actors suggests that they subscribed to progressivism not in spite of their political views, but precisely because it aligned with their authoritarian and nativist ideology. This finding calls for more scholarship exploring and theorising the relationship between political ideologies and (progressive) educational ideas and movements.

Progressive education is often considered to represent the epitome of a liberal, internationalist, and democratic way of conceiving education. Scholars, as well as progressive educators themselves, have typically framed visions of a scientifically based education that values children's individuality and activism as the antithesis to traditional society's and schooling's appreciation of conformism and unquestioned obedience. Research shows that, especially in the interwar period, leading progressive organisations such as the New Education Fellowship conceived of their educational commitment as a means for peace-building and «propaganda for democracy» (Fuchs, 2004, p. 780), and distanced themselves from fascism (Brehony, 2004; Haenggeli-Jenni, 2011; Jenkins, 2000). Indeed, the participation of fascist apologists at progressive conferences in the 1920s and 1930s provoked multiple controversies within the movement (Brehony, 2004). Hence, the progressive education movement and its ideas – internationally, and in their various national and linguistic variants – are generally thought to bear little commonality with, or even to be inimical to another opposition movement that profoundly shaped the early twentieth century: the far right.

However, in the last few decades some studies have questioned this perception. Recent historiographies show European fascist governments actually shared

educationally progressive claims and integrated them into their educational policies. Studies also evidence how several interwar far-right movements that did not seize power subscribed to educationally progressive postulates. Some even discuss cases of progressive activists who stood at the forefront of rightist struggles for nativist self-determination or authoritarian revolutions (see section 2). This literature indicates that the progressive movement's liberal, democratic, and internationalist aura did not render its ideas incompatible with nativist or racist, as well as authoritarian or totalitarian visions of society. Drawing on this basis, this article aims to advance the discussion on this relationship. To do so, we investigate how selected key representatives of the interwar Swiss far right received progressive education and its postulates. To move beyond the rhetorical *façade* and uncover the underlying (dis)continuities between these actors' political ideology and their educational ideas, we also ask: how did they combine the dimensions of nativist authoritarianism and progressive educational claims in their thinking?

We proceed as follows. The next section draws on political theory to classify and characterise the actors focused upon in the analysis. Based on this characterisation, the following section delineates a heuristic to study the underlying (dis)continuities between these actors' political and educational thoughts. The closing sections present the empirical analyses and the resultant conclusions.

The Far Right – and its Swiss Interwar Manifestations

According to studies on political ideologies, the late nineteenth century was the stage for a profound change in right-wing politics (Eatwell, 1992). Activists noted with growing alarm the spread of socialist ideology and the institutionalisation of mass electorates, which threatened to drastically reduce their vote share. To improve their appeal to the less wealthy, rightist parties realigned their programmes and ideology, giving birth to new ideological conformations. Eatwell (1992) calls them the *radical* and the *extreme* right.

These two ideological strands differ with regard to the intensity and framing of their claims. However, they are shown to draw on the same fundamental assumptions and can thus be characterised as the two poles of the new far-right end of the ideological spectrum (Eatwell, 1992; Mudde, 2000). Indeed, rejecting the conservatism of traditional nineteenth-century right-wing ideologies, both the extreme and radical right have aimed for a new type of society whose distinguishing characteristics are its nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism combines nationalism and xenophobia. Thus, on the one hand, the far right postulates that society is naturally subdivided into mutually incompatible nationalities, and that states should therefore only include and protect members of the native group (Mudde, 2000). Especially representatives of the extreme

right often embrace racist presuppositions, thus considering some nationalities to be biologically superior to others. Still, racism is not an essential feature of the far right's nativism, and differences between nationalities can also be couched in cultural (e.g., religious or linguistic) and non-hierarchical terms.

On the other hand, the far right is characterised by its authoritarian attitudes (Eatwell, 1992; Mudde, 2000). It advocates a strictly ordered society, in which individual rights are limited, and state-authorities' power is reinforced. Again, different shades of authoritarianism co-exist within far-right ideology. The radical right's quest for order is illiberal, but does not oppose democracy, at least in a minimal definition. In this respect, it differs from the extreme right, whose representatives advocate violence and revolution in order to eliminate malevolent and fragmented democratic leaderships and install an authoritarian state.

In interwar Switzerland several movements conforming to this definition were active, which were located both on the radical and the extreme pole of the far-right spectrum. Still, we know little about them and their relations with education. Extant studies provide useful information for contextualising the actors whose views we investigate, but do not connect these actors' strategies, ideology, or activities to theoretical discussions on the far right, or on education.¹ Apart from our own work (Giudici & Ruoss, 2018; forthcoming), the few studies dedicated to far-right educational views we know of are limited to German-speaking Switzerland and focus on the career of particular educators who held leading ranks in interwar fascist organisations (Bucher, 2011; Gutmann, 2016; Näf, 2003).

However, to situate far-right actors and their ideas in a broader context, a focus on Switzerland comes with two crucial methodological advantages. First, interwar Switzerland was neither governed nor occupied by the far right. As argued by political scientists, parties and activists that are not in a position of power provide better cases for studying ideology, as it is possible to analyse their positions without having to consider how they might have been affected by institutional and strategic constraints (Kitschelt, 2017) – a problem noted by scholars of fascist Germany's and Italy's education policies (e.g., Leenders, 2001). On the other hand, because of Switzerland's multilingual and federalist setup, the Swiss interwar far right consisted of multiple, fairly independent organisations and activists located in different sub-states and language regions. This article aims to explore far-right views on the progressive education movement and its main postulates.² The Swiss context thus allows us to investigate whether and how these views changed according to the local political and cultural contexts. In this study, we narrow our focus to actors located in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. These two language regions are particularly interesting since their educational and political elites held close ties to countries which, in 1922/4 (Italy) and 1933 (Germany), transformed into menacing, fully-fledged fascist regimes. To account for potential organisational differences within the far right, for each language region, we investigate both a prominent far-right pedagogue,

as well as the main far-right organisations. Teresa Bontempi and Alfred Zander, the two educationalists at the centre of our analysis, were chosen because they represent different strands of far-right thought, while also being active in the progressive education network.

Teresa Bontempi (1883-1968) was a Swiss primary school teacher and kindergarten-inspector in the Italian-speaking constituency of Ticino. In 1908, she met Maria Montessori at a congress in Milan. Profoundly impressed, she kept in touch with Montessori and became one of the most well-known propagators of her method in Switzerland. She published extensively on the topic, organised training courses for teachers, and convinced Ticino's government to align its kindergarten policy with Montessori's guidelines (Baumann, 2007; Codioli, 1999; Sahlfeld & Vanini, 2018). In 1911, Bontempi also established a journal called *L'Adula*, which became a powerful mouthpiece for progressive education, hosting Italian progressive luminaries such as Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (*Adula*, 1920, 9/20).

L'Adula's rise to fame was however due to its profoundly nativist and unwaveringly pro-Italian stance. Bontempi and the team behind the *L'Adula* journal believed Switzerland's Italian-speaking population to be profoundly different, ethnically and culturally, from the German- and French-speaking Swiss. This conviction was not uncommon in Ticino at the time (Giudici, 2019; Masoni, 2019). However, Bontempi and *Adula* went further in that they affirmed that, to protect its organic Italian-ness, Ticino should distance itself from Switzerland and strengthen its cultural as well as political ties with Italy. They did not retract their position after 1922/4, thus implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – backing Italy's fascist government, and its cultural policies in particular (Bonalmi, 1970). The *Adula*-group considered itself a cultural agent rather than a party. Yet, by extending its pro-Italian stance from the educational and cultural to the political sphere, it became politically controversial. After years of contestation, in 1935, the Swiss authorities accused the journal of irredentism, shutting it down. Bontempi was charged with high treason and imprisoned. After serving her sentence, she was given asylum in Italy in 1936. While the extent to which the educator herself actually sympathised with Fascism is debated (Codioli, 1999), her profound nativism and her authoritarian-leaning attitudes put her at the radical end of the far-right political spectrum.

Our second protagonist, *Alfred Zander* (1905-1997) also started as a primary school teacher. He worked in different progressive and special needs schools, before taking up his studies in 1928. In Geneva and Zurich he was taught by luminaries of interwar progressivism such as Bovet and Piaget, as well as Lipps and Stettbacher (Zander, 1930). He acquired a PhD in education in 1930 with a thesis on Pestalozzi. Zander was well established within the Swiss progressive education community of the time. He participated in the activities organised by the international and Swiss progressive community and published on the topic in Switzerland's main pedagogic journals. While working at the *Pestalozz-*

zibei *Neuhof*, he collaborated with progressive educator Otto Baumgartner to implement experimental classes, while in Hof-Oberkirch he worked closely with Hermann Tobler, the first president of the Swiss section of the New Education Fellowship. He acknowledges them both in his dissertation thesis (Zander, 1930).

At the same time, Zander also was a prominent far-right activist. He co-lead the German-speaking fascist party *Nationale Front* as well as its youth organisation *Nationale Jugend* (Gutmann, 2016; Näf, 2003). This political engagement cost him his academic career and, in 1934, he became a full-time political campaigner. His unwavering support for German National-Socialism made him controversial even within his own party, which he ultimately left in 1938 to found the even more extremist *Bund treuer Eidgenossen nationalsozialistischer Weltanschauung*. In 1939, Zander was sentenced to prison for having passed intelligence to the German regime and, after his release in 1940, he left Switzerland to join the *Waffen-SS*. After the war, Zander resumed work as a teacher in German progressive schools. Due to his engagement for the international fascist revolution, Zander clearly represents the extreme, anti-democratic and racist end of the far-right spectrum.

Our analysis focuses on Zander's and Bontempi's ideas, as articulated in the articles and books they authored in the interwar period – the heyday of the far right so far. We also used archival data from the University of Zurich (Zander) and Ticino's Department of Education (Bontempi) to reconstruct their career and educational engagement, while reports compiled by the police and secret services served to refine our understanding of their political activism.

Bontempi and Zander are two single representatives of a complex political movement and ideology. To relate their position to that of the main representatives of the far-right ideological milieu, our analysis also covers the most successful far-right parties in Italian- and German-speaking Switzerland at the time: the *Lega Nazionale* and the *Nationale Front*. Both founded in 1933, these parties' electoral success remained modest (Bianchi, 1989; Wolf, 1969). Still, they were the main carriers of a far-right, anti-democratic and authoritarian ideology at the time. The *Lega* wanted to supersede parliamentarianism and install a «totalitarian state, superior by natural right to all parties and factions» (*Idea nazionale*, 1933, 1/2) to represent Ticino's Italian-ness and Swiss-ness «which is determined by blood, language, and culture» (*Idea nazionale*, 1934, 2/35). The *Front* declared itself as fighting for an «authoritarian democracy» (*Front*, 1934, 2/154) and a «healthy and strong *Volksgemeinschaft* of all native Swiss people» (*Eiserne Besen*, 1933, 2/23). Both *Lega* and *Front* published their own newspapers and periodicals (*Idea nazionale*, *Eiserne Besen*, *Front*), which we searched systematically for ideas and positions concerning education. As mentioned before, Zander was affiliated to the *Nationale Front*, which he temporarily co-lead. On the other hand, despite ideological affinities, Bontempi was not a member of the *Lega*, whose stance for Swiss unity and independence she opposed.

Progressive Education, Nativism, and Authoritarianism – Conceptualising the Relationship

Studies of progressive education normally start by emphasising the movement's heterogeneity. Despite the analytical blurredness, scholars have however described some common denominators between the various associations, personalities, and ideologies typically classified as educationally progressive (e.g., Haenggeli-Jenni, 2011; Hofstetter, 2004; Oelkers, 2005). These descriptions normally distance educational progressivism from nativist and authoritarian ideologies, as do the few studies on Swiss fascist educationalists. One such example is Näf's work (2003) on Alfred Zander. Therein, the historian sees no connection between Zander's political and educational activism. Analogously, for Gutmann (2016), Zander's participation in an international network dedicated to improving humanity, such as progressive education, contributed to him turning to fascism – another ideology yearning to socially engineer new humans. The empirical evidence supporting this claim seems rather scarce, especially as participation in the very same progressive networks did not make most other educators particularly prone to fascism. More importantly, Gutmann does not even consider the question of why, vice versa, as a fascist agitator, Zander valued and advocated educationally progressive ideas. Yet, several studies have noticed some compatibility between interwar far-right ideologies and educational progressivism. According to our reading, they can be categorised into two dimensions: the issue of knowledge and the curriculum, and the educator-pupil relationship.

Dimension of Knowledge and the Curriculum

One parallel often mentioned between the far right and progressivism is their shared critique of schooling's alleged intellectualism. The educational appreciation for physical activity, manual labour and aesthetic experiences, as well as the advocacy for involving children in more active educational experiences, is one main characteristic of progressive education in its various manifestations (Haenggeli-Jenni, 2011; Oelkers, 2005). Similar ideas informed the educational programmes of interwar far-right governments and movements. Fascist governments' education policies are generally shown to attribute little importance to children's intellectual instruction. Meanwhile, the relative importance of physical education, the arts, and labour-oriented activities was increased in German (Nagel, 2012; Rülcker & Oelkers, 1998) and Italian (Cambi, 2003; Marazzi, 2000) schools after the fascist takeovers.

In Italy, for instance, Mussolini's government actively sought the collaboration of progressive educators such as Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice and Maria Montessori in shaping its early education policy. While these figures subsequently turned away from the regime – for different reasons –, and the policy to which they had contributed underwent several modifications, the fascist regime never challenged them or their pedagogic orientation on political grounds

(Allemann-Ghionda, 1999; Leenders, 2001; Marazzi, 2000). Work- and community-enhancing educational activities remained a centrepiece of subsequent Fascist ministries' reforms (Cambi, 2003).

As hypothesised by Allemann-Ghionda (1999), this cooperation might have been partly strategic and due to the prominence of progressive ideas among the pedagogic elite on whose expertise the early fascist regime had to rely to formulate a coherent educational policy. However, focussing on Montessori's relationship with fascism, Leenders (2001) finds compelling evidence that fascist ideologues' reliance on progressivism was also ideologically driven. Progressive education's emphasis on monitoring and activating children to mould their character dovetailed well with the fascist ideal of a (male) citizen, whose activism for the community was driven by his genuine belief in the regime's moral value.

Studies focussing on far-right organisations rather than governments show similar findings. Accordingly, the educational activities of parties such as the British Union of Fascists (Cutting, 2016; Fisher & Fisher, 2009), or fascist(-leaning) youth organisations such as the *Sudetendeutsche Jugendgemeinschaft* (Kasper, forthcoming) consisted mainly of the organisation of summer camps and physical exercise outdoors. The policy proposals put forward by these and other groups also show some striking similarities to progressive preferences for active educational experiences that involved pupils' immediate surroundings and brought communities' expressions, arts, and dialects into the centre of the curriculum (Green & Cormack, 2008; Van Ruyskensvelde & Depaep, forthcoming).

The Educational Relationship Dimension

Drawing on the assumption of childhood as a stage of development in its own right, progressive educators de-emphasised the need for a hierarchical and authoritative educator-pupil relationship. Consequently, it was believed that co-operation should generally replace instruction in educational settings (Link, 2012). Teachers should primarily observe children and provide them with an environment that supports their unfolding and development, rather than intervenes and directs it (Hofstetter, 2004). At first sight, this attitude might seem at cross-purposes with the interwar far right's authoritarian stance. However, there is evidence to the contrary. Studies on Italy, for example, have noted the attraction Montessori's idea of limiting the teacher's role to that of a scientific observant and provider of a supportive environment exerted on the fascist leadership (Leenders, 2001; Marazzi, 2000). They theorise this attraction referring to Montessori's firm belief that, with her method, children could be enabled to discipline and regulate themselves from an early age.

The next sections further this theorisation, taking the curriculum and the educational relationship dimensions as a point of departure to investigate Swiss interwar far-right parties' and protagonists' perceptions of progressive education.

Far-right Parties' Views on Progressive Education: Open Rejection and Covert Correspondences

The two parties whose publications we studied, *Front* and *Lega*, agreed that education was a key means to consolidate the authoritarian, nativist, and monistic community they envisioned, which German-speakers called the *Volks-gemeinschaft*. While neither managed to present a comprehensive and coherent programme for such a community-oriented education, their publications explicitly state that progressive education should have no place in it. As argued by the *Lega*, progressive child-centeredness was «weakening that sense of order and discipline to which the pupil has to be accustomed from the very first years» (*Idea nazionale*, 1936, 4/27). For the *Front*, progressivism's excessive regard for children's individual personality made it «an unsuitable means to overcome the current disintegration and build a strong community in its stead» (*Front*, 1935, 3/176). Nonetheless, beyond such declarative statements, if we look at the actual policies and ideas these parties defended, parallels to educational progressivism emerge.

Concerning the curriculum dimension, *Front* and *Lega* regularly condemned the «one-sided intellectual education in schools» (*Front*, 1935, 3/175). Based on a vehemently relativistic stance, both parties considered the emphasis on disciplinary, intellectual knowledge in curricula as reflecting egomaniac intellectual policy-makers' self-perception as «pinnacles of humankind» (*Front*, 1934, 4/44). This hubris, they argued, came with deleterious consequences. By suggesting intellectual knowledge to be more valuable than the practical and emotional wisdom of the common people, curricula were leading ordinary pupils to aspire to higher education and intellectual professions they were not predisposed to, thus producing «shifts in functions and activities that might have dangerous repercussions in the social body» (*Idea nazionale*, 1936, 4/27). Additionally, an education based primarily on intellectual knowledge would shape cold and rational individuals with no shared morality, and for whom «passion and dedication become senseless and ridiculous» (*Front*, 1935, 3/175). A curriculum designed to form children's intellect was thus not appropriate to build a *Volks-gemeinschaft*.

Instead, the parties advocated a curriculum with a double purpose: first, to shape pupils' character and moral values and, second, to prepare them for the concrete tasks their profession and community required. Specific proposals differed. The *Front* approvingly discussed propositions aimed at improving the character-building and community-enhancing effect of schooling by introducing additional national languages and dialects into the curriculum (*Front*, 1934, 2/251; *Front*, 1937, 5/104). In the same vein, the *Lega* wanted the subjects of history and civics to focus more on enthusing children for national events making them proud of their heritage (e.g., *Idea nazionale*, 1934, 4/2). Several

articles in their journal praise handicraft and agriculture. They argue that such active subjects not only trained pupils' vocational skills, but also awakened their «love for the soil and their pride of working in the field» (*Idea nazionale*, 1936, 6/26), helping them to gain pleasure from performing the work most of them were naturally predisposed to do. Additionally, letting youngsters from different backgrounds work collaboratively on practical tasks against the backdrop of the Swiss natural landscape, was expected to develop the kind of camaraderie, solidarity, and national pride that united a community.

The two parties seldom explicitly related their ideas about the curriculum to educational progressivism. However, they did repeatedly engage with progressive understandings of the educational relationship, whose disregard for discipline and authority they thoroughly disapproved of. Outside schooling, the parties called for a strong government that, as a representative of the *Volksgemeinschaft's* organic values and culture, could guide and sanction it. Within schooling, it was felt that the teacher should represent the community and enforce its «disciplinary, ethical, and moral principles» (*Idea nazionale*, 1936, 6/27). Teachers, articles state, could not live up to their role if they did not dare «to use punishment out of fear of harming pupils' individuality» (*Front* 1935, 3/176), or if they planned «schooling under the aspect of joyful activities» (*Idea nazionale*, 1936, 6/27). The establishment of educational authority and discipline was thought to be essential, since, as argued in the *Front* (1936, 4/225), an undisciplined pupil would unfailingly turn into an undisciplined citizen.

Despite favouring strict discipline and hierarchy within classrooms, both parties show a curious infatuation with some unstructured and self-organised forms of extracurricular learning. The *Front* praised the educational value of its youth organisation precisely because it was self-organised and had «arisen out of every community's eternally fresh source of force: the youth» (*Front*, 1933, 1/29). Many articles also express admiration for the high educational value of scouting (e.g., *Idea nazionale* 1936, 9; *Front* 1936, 4/269). What they find particularly admirable is that the organisation did not oblige members to follow its rules. Rather, children were asked to pledge allegiance if they identified with scouting's ideology, and then to self-monitor and regularly ask themselves whether they were fulfilling their pledge. Therefore, like team sports, scouting was considered as providing an ideal educational environment in which children simulated integrating into a community of solidarity, putting its well-being before their own. Even though, or precisely because it involved a more authoritarian and disciplined setting, schooling could not achieve the same effect.

To summarise, like progressive educators, *Front* and *Lega* were critical of traditional schooling, whose structured academic environment they felt to be unsuited to educating the new generation they were looking for. They wanted schooling to intervene as little as possible in what they saw as society's organic predetermined order. Education was meant to draw on and foster individuals' organic predispositions, not to change them. Still, both parties rhetorically

distanced themselves from educational progressivism. This was not the case for the two educators focussed in the next section, who explicitly combined progressive ideas with their political engagements.

Progressive Methods for Nativism and Authoritarianism – Bontempi and Zander

Teresa Bontempi's political and cultural activism was informed by her profoundly nativist beliefs about Ticino's Italian identity – which she understood as a matter of ethnicity and culture. Her pedagogic activism, on the other hand, drew on her appreciation of educational progressivism, and Montessori's teachings in particular. When criticising traditional schooling and proposing alternatives, she combined these two perspectives, arguing that «what first seemed [...] a problem of pure psychology and abstract education, has become [...] a problem of culture and soul» (*Adula*, 1921, 10/22).

Consequently, in her discussion of the curriculum, Bontempi combined nativist views with Montessori's progressive guidelines, which she wished to be used not only in kindergartens but also in schooling more generally (Sahlfeld & Vanini, 2018). The educator constantly criticised curricula's intellectualism – which she accused of transforming children «into an empty talking mechanism» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/32). She argued the current emphasis on disciplinary knowledge was misguided, both because it was not based on «a scientific study of human individuality» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/32) and because it did not align with Ticino's ethnic nature and the «sentimental elements that are the prerogatives of Latin blood» (*Adula*, 1935, 24/10). Thus, Bontempi wanted schooling to focus on «educating the heart and soul of our people» (*Adula* 1935, 24/10) and «awaken his [the child's] spiritual interest in things» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/34). She called for privileging self-initiated and -regulated activities, as well as vocational, local, and subjective (i.e., emotionally appealing) knowledge, over direct instruction and objective (i.e., factual) contents, on the basis of her belief that schooling should be aligned with children's capacities and interests. Bontempi considered these capacities and interests to be always predetermined by children's national character which «is the essential element of their reason for being» (*Adula*, 1935, 24/10).

Concrete reform suggestions mirror this dual, nativist-progressive conviction. Like the *Lega*, Bontempi directed her attention mainly to the teaching of history and civics. She argued history needed to be rendered more relatable by selecting and preparing its contents in ways that highlighted pupils' Italian roots and struck emotional chords. Similarly, she felt civics teaching should focus less on institutions, and more on their history. Again, this was both because civics «cannot be based on abstract thought capacities, which are still immature in children» and because «if the young man wants to admire his country, he will

not base his admiration on the way the legislative or judiciary powers work, but in the value of the men to whom the representation of these powers is entrusted» (*Adula*, 1916, 5/12).

Like for her role model Montessori, the educational relationship constituted the centre of Bontempi's reflection on education. Bontempi argued the progressive method «overturns the fundamental principles of school discipline» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/34). But, unlike the *Lega*, her meaning was not negative. She vehemently condemned schooling for requiring «passive discipline [...], which is nothing but an immediate reaction to our impositions and commands» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/34). She believed children should not act morally because they fear teachers' or authorities' punishment, but because they feel that the «true prize is the joy that follows good action, [...] it is knowing oneself in harmony with the law that regulates all things» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/35). Pupils could only develop this kind of moral attitudes if educators limited themselves to providing them a supportive environment and refrained from providing direct instruction, since, ultimately, «the idea of good has to be born out of a sincere conviction of the soul» (*Adula*, 1914, 3/34).

Where Bontempi's main source of inspiration was progressive icon Montessori, Alfred Zander declared his greatest teacher to be Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. In the early 1930s, Zander was a publicly renowned expert on the eminent Swiss pedagogue. Although the eighteenth-century-educator can hardly be considered a representative of educational progressivism, Zander re-interpreted his writings in anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, and progressive terms, using them to suggest a radical departure from models of schooling of the time. While Zander's PhD thesis uses Pestalozzi to downplay the importance of public deliberation and democratic institutions, it still refrains from the polemic and overtly dramatic tone of later publications and speeches – such as the 1933 keynote speech on Pestalozzi Zander held at the invitation of the Zurich teacher's association and the *Pestalozzigesellschaft* (Zander, 1933). In the latter, Pestalozzi serves as reference for arguing that education should be redesigned so as to focus primarily on forging a national community, defined in overtly nativist and anti-Semitic terms.

Zander's whole professional and educational biography – from his teaching experience in progressive schools, to his collaboration with progressive educators, to his studies with Switzerland's progressive luminaries (Zander, 1931a) – was deeply involved with progressivism. Still, when discussing the curriculum, he did not explicitly refer to progressive education or fascism. Like progressive educationalists, Zander underscored the need to enhance the role of physical education in the next generation's education, he however traced these claims back to Pestalozzi (Zander, 1931b). In 1934, when he started to organise, and then led the *Front's* youth organisation, he put these ideas into practice. The young *Frontists* engaged in military training, sports, hiking, and performed social duties in their community. Zander considered traditional schooling, with its

disciplined, individualist, intellectually focused, and compartmentalised form of learning to be generally unsuitable for moulding future leaders. According to the educationalist, self-organised, active, and collaborative experiences represented a superior counter-model to traditional schooling (Zander, 1935).

In 1932, the Swiss Teachers Association's official journal published six consecutive articles in which Zander delineated his ideas about school reform (Zander, 1932). In a prescriptive manner, he laid out a list of practical activities supposed to provide a communitarian experience, such as motivating pupils to read their texts out loud, as well as engaging them in manual (making egg boxes) or physical activities (singing, hiking). While throughout his writings (thesis, pedagogic papers for teachers, educational programme for a fascist youth organisation), Zander's rhetoric and framing changed, his ideas about the curriculum remained consistent – and in line with those advocated by progressive educators.

When referring to issues concerning authority and the educational relationship in the aforementioned article-series, Zander deliberately chose to use a semantic field borrowed from progressive education. For instance, he claimed that «a school full of joy is a demand of the pedagogical Eros» (Zander, 1932, p. 211) and called for teachers to equip themselves with a «pedagogy of freedom» to destroy the «house of cards called 'authority and discipline'» (Zander, 1932, p. 217). It is only towards the end that Zander started to explicitly defend his political views, relating them to an elaborate conception of discipline. Accordingly, traditional schooling and society were characterised by a deleterious «rigid discipline», whereas education's aim should be a «rigorous» or «true» discipline (Zander, 1932, p. 331-2). A «strong community feeling» (Zander, 1932, p. 332) within schools and the national community, moreover, were presuppositions for such true discipline to emerge. Indeed, only after pupils recognised their teacher as an epitome of their community's will, could they develop towards him or her the kind of emotional commitment and self-discipline that allowed them to accept and internalise the *Volksgemeinschaft's* rules and hierarchies. Whoever did not share or feel this national spirit was not only deemed unable to learn true discipline, they also proved to be part of «circles alien to the community» (Zander, 1932, p. 332). Zander concluded with one pregnant motto: education's aim is to teach children «to be able to serve – and enjoy to please» (Zander, 1932, p. 405).

Conclusions

Our analysis shows that parties and educationally engaged representatives within the interwar Swiss far right shared some of progressive education's most fundamental assumptions. This conclusion holds for the fascist parties analysed, which rhetorically distanced themselves from progressive education as a pacifist and child-centred movement, but still approved of its care for character-building and

the child's nature, as well as for the educators who explicitly combined progressive education with their far-right political and cultural activism. These actors did not agree on concrete educational reforms, and they disagreed in their assessment of educational progressivism. However, their vehement critique of traditional schooling, as well as their belief that a less academically based curriculum and more self-regulated learning could bring about individuals' and the community's real natures, brought together the different strands within the far right, and linked them to educational progressivism. These findings add new evidence to the literature stating that, notwithstanding the progressive movement's internationalist and pacifist orientations, in practice, its ideas were compatible with far-right ideology. Our analysis also suggests that it was not *despite* their nativist and authoritarian attitudes that these far-right actors embraced educationally progressive tenets, but in fact it was *because* of them.

Regarding nativism, these activists believed their societal vision represented the order individuals and society would naturally achieve, be there no destructive forces – such as current schooling styles – hindering their development. Hence, they favoured a curriculum designed so as to bring to the surface pupils' innate characters and abilities, and not to improve their intellects or equalise inequalities. This required a minimal curriculum focusing on teaching pupils the skills required by the activities they were naturally predisposed to, and fostering their commitment towards the community they organically belonged to. An educational approach aiming at rendering education more captivating and effective by drawing on pupils' background and engaging them in collaborative forms of learning thus sounded very attractive.

In relation to authoritarianism, the far right put discipline at the centre of their educational thinking. Our protagonists all envisioned a hierarchical and disciplined society in which every individual was happy to stay in his or her place and always put the community's needs over his or her own. However, they strongly disagreed on how disciplined and authoritarian education itself needed to be in order to achieve such an outcome. Especially for Bontempi and Zander, strict forms of education, which acclimatised children to obeying teachers and authorities without convincing them of the importance of doing so, provided a poor basis for a truly disciplined national community. Educational progressivism's promises of more active and less hierarchical forms of education leading to deeper, character-changing, and self-regulated learning and behaviour thus strongly appealed to these far-right pedagogues.

The similar reception of progressive education by far-right parties and educational protagonists of different Swiss regions suggests that the attractiveness of the progressive programme stemmed less from these actors' cultural than from their ideological affiliations. Indeed, the various actors constituting the interwar Swiss far right longed for different kinds of communities. Zander first wanted to unite Switzerland into a multilingual, but racially homogenous independent community, and later fought for it to join the German Reich. Bontempi

despised Switzerland's multilingualism and wanted Ticino to form a more or less independent national community with strong links to Italy. Their articles also come from different traditions and speak to different linguistic audiences. While Zander's reference was the legendary German-speaking Swiss Pestalozzi, Bontempi's guide was Italian Montessori. However, they both reached the same educational conclusions, turning to educational progressivism to support the development of the organic, morally sound, and self-regulating national communities they envisioned. It is both their active engagement in the progressive education movement and their ideology, that draws these two figures closer together, and distinguishes their thinking from that of more conservative representatives of the right of the time. Moreover, the reasons why progressive education seemed to resonate with these actors' thinking are quite similar to those that rendered it attractive to fascist Germany and Italy, which Zander and Bontempi admired so very much. This shows how their reliance on educationally progressive concepts radicalised their educational, and maybe also their political thinking.

Notes

- 1 On German-speaking Switzerland: Glaus (1969), Wolf (1969); on Italian-speaking Switzerland: Bianchi (1989); Bonalumi (1970), Cerutti (1988), Crespi (2004); on French-speaking Switzerland: Cantini (1992), Joseph (1975); for a recent overview: Schumacher (2019).
- 2 On the contrary, our aim is not to explore the extent to which progressive education and its representatives leaned towards far-right ideologies.

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Keywords: Progressive education, fascism, Switzerland, politics of education, educational history

Die Zuneigung/Nähe der autoritären, nativistischen Rechten zur Reformpädagogik: Erkundungen in der Schweiz der Zwischenkriegszeit

Zusammenfassung

Ist die Rede von Reformpädagogik, denkt man zunächst kaum an Autoritarismus oder Nativismus. Bildungshistorische Studien zeigen hingegen Rezeptionsformen der Reformpädagogik durch rechtsextreme Bewegungen oder Regierungen. Der Artikel befasst sich mit den Hintergründen dieses Phänomens. Es wurde eine systematische Analyse bildungspolitischer Programme rechtsextremer Parteien und Pädagogen für die italienisch- und die deutsch-sprachige Schweiz während der Zwischenkriegszeit durchgeführt. Die Analyse zeigt, dass innerhalb der extremen Rechte die Reformpädagogik nicht trotz, sondern auf Grund ihrer politischen Ideologie rezipiert worden ist. Zukünftige Forschung zur Bildungspolitik kann deshalb von der Untersuchung pädagogischer Programme und Vorgehensweisen politischer Bewegungen profitieren.

Schlagworte: Reformpädagogik, Faschismus, Schweiz, Bildungspolitik, Historische Bildungsforschung

Les affinités du nativisme autoritaire pour l'Éducation nouvelle: une enquête sur cette relation dans la Suisse de l'entre-deux-guerres

Résumé

On considère généralement que l'éducation nouvelle a peu de points communs avec l'autoritarisme et le nativisme. Cependant, différentes études montrent que des gouvernements et des mouvements de la droite extrême et radicale ont adopté des principes progressistes. Cet article interroge les raisons de ce phénomène en confrontant les idées pédagogiques des principaux partis et éducateurs d'extrême droite de la Suisse alémanique et italienne pendant l'entre-deux-guerres. L'analyse systématique de leurs textes suggère que leur adhésion au progressisme ne s'oppose pas à leur idéologie autoritaire et nativiste mais qu'elle s'inscrit dans leurs idéaux. Les futures recherches sur l'éducation (nouvelle), et sur l'éducation plus en général, devraient donc s'intéresser aussi à ces implications et affinités politiques.

Mots-clés: Éducation nouvelle, fascisme, Suisse, politique de l'éducation, histoire de l'éducation

Le affinità della destra nativista autoritaria con l'educazione progressiva: un'indagine nella Svizzera fra le due Guerre

Riassunto

In generale, si considera che l'educazione progressiva abbia pochi punti di contatto con l'autoritarismo e il nativismo. Tuttavia, diversi studi mostrano come governi e movimenti di destra estrema e radicale abbiano adottato principi progressisti. Questo articolo indaga le dinamiche legate a questo fenomeno confrontando le idee educative di partiti ed educatori di estrema destra nella Svizzera tedesca e in quella italiana fra le due Guerre. L'analisi sistematica dei testi di questi attori suggerisce che essi abbiano aderito al progressivismo poiché queste idee erano in linea con la loro ideologia autoritario-nativista. Per questa ragione, le future ricerche sull'educazione progressiva, e sull'educazione in generale, dovrebbero interessarsi anche alle implicazioni e alle affinità politiche.

Parole chiave: Educazione progressiva, fascismo, Svizzera, politica dell'educazione, storia dell'educazione

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