



The fight for geography in the italian schools (2010-2014): an updating

Gino De Vecchis^a

^a Dipartimento di Scienze documentarie, linguistico-filologiche e geografiche, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy
Email: gino.devecchis@uniroma1.it

1. Introduction

As stated in the editorial of Number 0 (December 2012), J-Reading magazine goes ahead with its aim of contributing to the construction of a bridge between didactics and research, which is strategic for the development of the subject. However at the same time it is committed to encouraging and valorising the exchange among the researchers of the various scientific contexts and teachers at all school levels working in the different countries of the world, thus facilitating that sense of belonging and “scientific globalisation” of the subject, which is increasingly important in a world characterised by continuously evolving and rapidly increasing real and digital mobility.

Setting out to gain its place in an international dimension, each magazine represents an invitation to establish points of contact and to build together in order to collaborate and support common objectives.

In the case of J-Reading the privileged area is – as mentioned – the research-didactics relationship, so as to offer the clear awareness of the value of a precious combination able to consolidate the relations between the school world and the university one, which must not be separated by too deep a division.

In this international perspective there is the possibility of working together seriously, both at a theoretical and research level and also at the practical one of daily teaching activity.

For example: what is the situation regarding the teaching of geography (at the various school levels) in the different countries of the world? How much attention is paid by the international bodies – like for instance the European Union or UNESCO – to geographical education? What are the educational and didactic objectives pursued? What are the relationships of geography with the other subjects? And furthermore: what is the image of geography in the public opinion and how is it perceived and conveyed by the mass media? These are just some of the questions among the many possible ones that deserve to be seriously compared at international level.

A great deal of information circulates by means of different channels and documents, but a lot of it is not properly diffused, so much so that the educational panorama is continuously evolving, also owing to the changes taking place everywhere in the political, social and institutional frameworks.

2. The starting point

What happened recently in Italy bears witness to the change that is possible within the context of a fruitful international collaboration.

With the 2010-2011 school year the reform of the Upper Secondary School was introduced, introduced by the Minister Mariastella Gelmini and characterised moreover by considerable economic saving, resulting in the heavy reduction of the number of hours of teaching, weighing decisively on the whole new organisation.

Even though already being in a disadvantaged position, geography paid a high price in this reform. It underwent an alarming scaling down in the secondary schools, with the association of geography with ancient history in the first two years, to which an overall three hours per week were granted, instead of the four hours that history and geography together had before. Furthermore, geography was eliminated from the timetable of all the professional Institutes and from all the technical Institutes in the technological sector. In this latter sector there was the extremely alarming elimination of geography from a number of courses in which it had consolidated traditions. This was the case of the Nautical Institute (today called *Transport and Logistics*), in which the teaching of the subject was fundamental for the training of seagoing personnel, who must have a deep knowledge of the physical-political environment in which they find themselves working. And again in the technological sector was its surprising absence in both the *Agrarian economy, Agro-foodstuffs and Agro-industry* course, and in that of *Constructions, environment and territory*. And yet environment and territory are key concepts in geographical language and thought. In the *Administration, Finance and Marketing* course, the economic sector underwent a downscaling as it was only present in the first biennium, while in the previous version it was also included in the second one, even though there was a partial recovery owing to an increase in the hours per week which went from two to three. The tourism course was the only one to have an optimal number of hours of the subject.

The answer of the geographers and the Italian Association of Geography Teachers

The ministerial decree exacerbated the malcontent of the teachers resulting in a strong reaction on the part of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, who in January 2010 made an appeal for an adequate inclusion of geography which was endorsed by all the other Italian geographical associations.

Below is the text that teachers were invited to sign.

SCHOOLS WITHOUT GEOGRAPHY

Doing geography at school means educating citizens of Italy and the world to be aware, independent, critical and responsible, to know how to live their lives within their environment, and how to change it in a creative and sustainable way, with an eye to the future.

In the new curricula envisaged for high schools and technical and professionals schools, geography as a subject is destined to be heavily penalised or to disappear entirely.

We the undersigned believe that to deprive ourselves of the knowledge systems supplied by geography, in a society that is increasingly globalised and complex, means depriving students of knowledge that is absolutely essential if they are to face the challenges of the world.

This challenge was not without risks as it had no support or backing from lobbies but it recorded endorsements that went beyond the best of forecasts. It was signed by a number of rectors, head teachers, teachers and scholars, journalists. Associations also expressed their commitment including the Touring Club Italiano, UNICEF-Italia and the WWF. The huge interest aroused in the public opinion was also surprising and a clear sign of the widespread awareness of how important geography is in order to understand the world in which we live.

There was a firm desire to take the appeal outside Italy; with this in mind the colleagues of the Italian Geographical Associations have been making every possible effort in international organisms, first of all the International Geographical Union and the EUGEO. Over 2,000 endorsements arrived in just a few days

coming from almost seventy countries, distributed everywhere over the different continents. In Europe however, besides the United States of America (committed both with the American Geographical Society and the Association of American Geographers) and Brazil, the largest number of adhesions was recorded. A record number of signatures came in particular from the United Kingdom, thanks also to the contribution of the Royal Geographical Society, which rallied by writing to Minister Gelmini herself.

Important backing for the initiative arrived also from the Associação de Professores de Geografia (Portugal), the Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles (Spain) and from the National Association of Geographers (India). Among the associations giving their support to the appeal are lastly the Saudi Geographical Society, the Hungarian Geographical Society and the Finnish National Board of Education etc.

Most of the foreign signatories (over 70%) was made up of school teachers and university researchers and lecturers. The contribution by students was also significant.

The overall answer, both at national and international level, with about 30,000 endorsements in less than one month, was a demonstration of to what extent geography is considered fundamental in contemporary culture. Worthy of note was also the impact that the appeal had in the mass media. And therefore, even if the appeal launched in support of the subject did not have important immediate results (with respect at least to the timetable structure of the reform mentioned above), nonetheless it had a huge and in many ways unexpected success owing to the quality and quantity of consensus, achieving an important action of awareness with an important spin off also at ministerial level.

3. A positive result

This success, greatly due to the international dimension achieved by the appeal, had a first confirmation in favour of the teaching of geography by Decree Law No. 104 of 12.09.2013 (“Urgent measures with regard to education, university and research”) by the Minister Maria

Chiara Carrozza, which reintroduced the teaching of general and economic geography with an extra hour in the first biennium of the Technical and Professional Institutes.

The introduction of the hour of “General and economic Geography” into all the bienniums of the Technical and Professional Institutes came into force in the 2014-2015 school year, with the ministerial decree of 5.9.2014 which set down the guidelines of the basic knowledge to be learned. In short it covers: the formation, evolution and perception of natural and anthropic landscapes; the processes and factors of change of the contemporary world (economic globalisation, demographic, energy, geopolitical aspects, resources and sustainable development); the organisation of the territory, local development, territorial patrimony.

Undoubtedly this measure did not resolve the problems of the teaching of geography in Italy, but in a certain way it can be considered as an affirmation of the strategic value of the teaching of geography for the development of skills linked to the management and protection of the territory, environmental risks, the valorisation of cultural heritage, globalisation and interculture and gives the student the necessary skills to interpret maps, graphs, tables, to analyse an area using methods, instruments and concepts of geography and to grasp the processes of change of the contemporary world.

4. For a global geography without boundaries

The case of Italy with its mobilisation in favour of the teaching of geography has not been the first one that developed outside the boundaries of the single state. Nonetheless what happened (the various ministerial measures and the process whereby so many signatures in support of this came from abroad) represented a very significant event. This was an event that highlighted both the importance of an international geographical “solidarity”, and a conscious need-desire to get together to stress the importance of the role of geography in the global society, where the frontiers (complex, porous, changing spaces) must be revisited, above all within their cultural limits.

The big international geographical associations, starting with the International Geographical Union, are committed on this front from which important results can be achieved.

In any case the magazine, *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography*, is available as an amplifier (also through its website <http://www.j-reading.org>) to the various initiatives taking place

in schools and universities for the benefit of the global community of geographers and above all of geography itself. For this reason it welcomes articles from any country that describe ongoing or accomplished attacks on geography, as well as the actions, reactions or “fights” that have been deployed, whereby to share information and good practice.

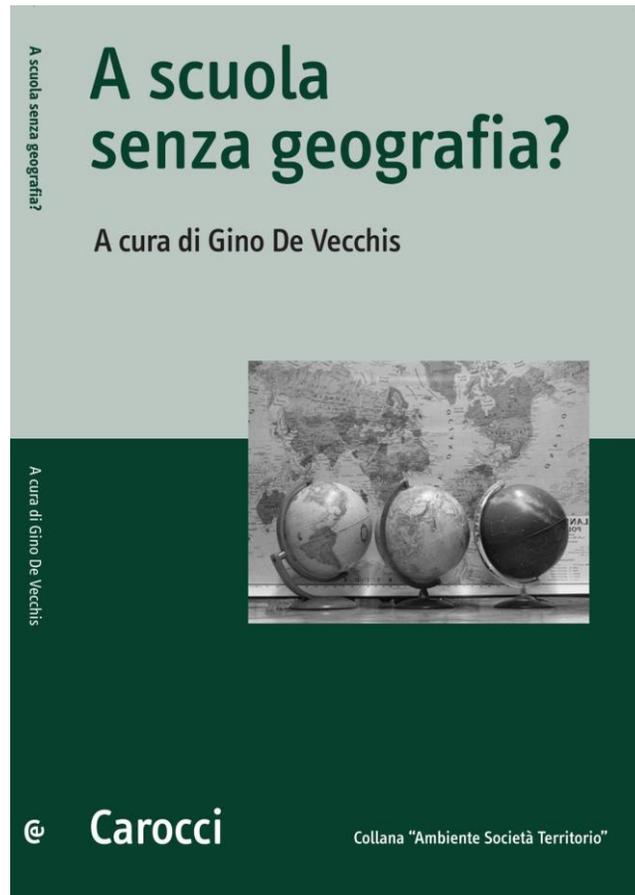


Figure 1. *At school with no geography?* The reform of the second cycle of higher education offered the opportunity to answer a number of questions: what is the role of geography in schools and society? What is the image of geography in the public opinion and how is it perceived and conveyed by the mass media? At the very time of this reform, which penalised the teaching of the subject of geography, the Italian Association of Geography Teachers along with the other brother associations, launched an appeal: “At school with no geography?”. This challenge was not without risks as it had no support or backing from lobbies but it recorded endorsements that went beyond the best of forecasts. The book, bearing the title of the appeal, is a record of what happened but above all a reasoning aimed at the future shared by scholars of different background, in the awareness of the potential of a fundamental subject for the education of today’s young people. The book is unanimous as it gathers together the contribution of all those who in answering the appeal (in Italy and abroad), expressed their evaluations and comments, thanks also to the use of mass media and the web. In this way an extraordinary opportunity was created to reflect on and diffuse a new and more appropriate image of geography.