

Quarfood, Christine: *Montessoris pedagogiska imperium. Kulturkritik och politik i mellankrigstidens Montessorirörelse*. Göteborg: Daidalos 2017. ISBN: 978-91-7173-512-6; 499 S.

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Maria Montessori is not just an advertising slogan for private schools, the name also carries the promise of a child-centred and yet scientific pedagogy. Future teachers, parents, school authorities, but also pedagogy students know Montessori as a name, maybe as a program, but very seldom do they have a deeper knowledge of her program or even the background of her pedagogical work. Christine Quarfood describes the history of the Montessori-movement during the interwar years and manages to create a detailed and balanced picture. Montessori's pedagogical work, her network, goals, and desires of individuals involved, and local events are brought together in a multi-faceted history of ideas that also includes biographical details. The combination of biography, history of international reception and social-historical contextualization is a much-needed supplement to the Montessori research so far.¹

Particular consideration was given to culture-critical ambitions of the movement in Italy, the US, England, and the Netherlands. The study thus seeks to supplement the explanations surrounding the great success of the Montessori movement with reasons regarding social commitment and future hopes in times of felt crisis. Quarfood describes her methodical approach as a contextualization of Montessori's texts published between 1910 and 1936 (pp. 12–14). The first section of the book deals with the ideological foundations of the Montessori method of education, whereas particular attention is paid to the history of the training of the senses and to preschool history. Here, Quarfood shows that Montessori was not the first to transfer material from handicapped didactics to the preschool area, but that Guiseppe Sergi's work inspired her in a lasting way. Also, Montessori was in good company together

with Ellen Key and Sergi concerning her criticism of Froebel's game education. The key to Montessori's long-lasting success is seen in the concept of self-actualization, which pushes the pedagogue into the background and gives the child the possibility of self-education (p. 82). However, without an early support from bourgeois circles, the Società Umanitaria, and the Italian women's association, the movement would hardly have come into play (p. 92).

The message of liberty and the scientific claim helped Montessori's method in the USA to get off to a good start. Montessori's breakthrough success with the translation of her method book (p. 105) and the enormous attention of the Casa dei Bambini in Rome from respected American scholars (p. 109) promoted the Montessori education very quickly. For some years, Montessori had her own manager that helped promote her didactic system. However, Montessori could not be celebrated for a long time: Criticism concerning the method was expressed relatively quickly, especially with regard to the self-education of the child. Helen Parkhurst – initially a student of Montessori – went her own way and shaped the state kindergarten in the USA independently. Scientists that earlier were involved in her work dissociated themselves from Montessori's intellectual requirements so that Montessori hardly became a figure within the so-called child study movement. The Montessori movement could not establish itself sustainably in the US.

Very interesting is the author's deconstruction of one of the key elements of the Montessori movement: Using the example of the world exhibition in San Francisco, Quarfood describes the disciplining effect of Montessori's method. Through a glass wall, the work of the children was visible to all spectators. The visualization of an otherwise hidden learning process, but also the supposedly passive role of the observing teacher, must have a disciplining effect on the children, who are otherwise expected to be self-determined. Quarfood concludes with reference to Fou-

¹Cf. among others Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori, A Biography*, New York 1976; Ela Eckert, *Maria und Mario Montessoris Kosmische Erziehung. Vision und Konkrektion*, Berlin 2007.

cault that the freedom of the children within the learning process is earned at the price of reduced anonymity (p. 150).

In Europe, the Montessori movement was able to establish itself quickly. One way to understand this breakthrough is to recognize the movement as a profitable enterprise. Instead, Quarfood focuses on the grassroots movement: For most teachers, the Montessori movement had no economic advantage. However, the movement conveyed something like dignity and the possibility of social engagement (p. 168) that was accompanied by a certain critique of civilization (p. 169). This criticism of civilization focused on the rights and freedoms of children (pp. 172–178) but in the end, the sociopolitical function and effects of this criticism remain somewhat vague for the readers.

Very interesting is the chapter about the church of the children that explains why Catholic infant education still relies on Montessori today. Montessori herself avoided the sensitive question of religious education and worked with both the socialists and the Franciscan Order (p. 236). For some years, Montessori had been involved in a project of the Catholic Church in Barcelona where she developed didactic material to prepare children for their first communion. According to Montessori, children should experience and understand their own church. Montessori developed material that allowed children to build their own church to make some real religious experiences (pp. 235–243). Even though Montessori herself took new spiritual paths, Pope Benedict blessed Montessori's method book in 1918 (p. 242), making Montessori a reference for Catholic didactics up until now.

The last part of the book deals with the fascist politicization of the Montessori movement in Italy and gives an overview of the current research as well as insight into the archive material of the secret police. Through the alliance Montessori-Mussolini, it was suddenly possible to open new schools, to set up a national teacher education, or publish several magazines on the Montessori-method. Quarfood examines the extent to which there was a real mutual interest between the fascists and Montessori and to what extent opportunistic considerations can explain the co-

operation. There is some evidence that the cooperation between Mussolini and Montessori was more pragmatic than idealistic but that they shared certain imperialistic visions. It is certain that Montessori's pacifist speeches in Nice and Geneva made the fascists more attentive (p. 359) and prepared for the final stages of dissociation in 1934. After the final break, Montessori's influence in Italy rapidly disappeared until after the war.

The book at hand gives a deep insight into the Montessori movement of the interwar period. The author has processed many sources as well as research literature from Italian, German, French, English, and Swedish contexts and reproduces them in a clear language. The fact that there is no clear deconstruction of the phenomenon in the end – as we know it from other pedagogical historians² – may be due to the very balanced presentation of the dazzling persona of Montessori who has staged herself as a scientist, leader, women's rights activist, advocate of the children, and much more at the same time.

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² Essential for the deconstruction of „Reformpädagogik“: Jürgen Oelkers, *Reformpädagogik. Eine kritische Dogmengeschichte*, 3. vollst. bearb. und erw. Auflage, Weinheim 1996.