

# H-Net Reviews

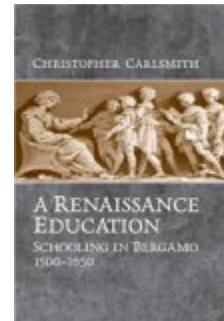
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Carlsmith. *A Renaissance Education: Schooling in Bergamo and the Venetian Republic, 1500-1650*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xvii + 435 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9254-0.

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During the last twenty-five years a significant debate has arisen over the nature of education in the Italian states between 1200 and 1500. Following in the tradition of Eugenio Garin, Paul Grendler has argued that humanism reshaped secondary schooling: “Italian pedagogues had effected a curriculum revolution, one of the few in the history of Western education, in the relatively short time of about fifty years—400 to 1450. They solidified their triumph by 1500. The *studia humanitatis* replaced *ars dictaminis*. The *auctorista* disappeared; the humanist took his place.”[1] This view has been disputed by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine. Focusing on case studies of how teaching was conducted in classrooms, they see a mismatch between ideals and practice and dismiss claims that humanism triumphed over a sterile and outdated scholasticism.[2] The revisionist case has been developed further by Robert Black. Having made a close study of thousands of manuscripts and archival documents, Black maintains that there were few changes in the teaching of grammar between 1200 and 1500, that teachers and students focused on philology rather than morality, and that the teaching of Latin declined in Florence during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries but improved in the subject towns of Florence.[3] The emphasis on continuity has been supported by David Lines in his study of the teaching of Aristotle’s *Ethics* in Italian universities. According to Lines, the humanists did not introduce significant changes until the end of the fifteenth century.[4]

In the present study, Christopher Carlsmith analyzes educational institutions in northeastern Italy between 1500 and 1650, especially in the city of Bergamo. Pre-university education is the focus, but Carlsmith also considers elementary schooling, pre-professional training,

and university instruction for the sake of comparison. Previous studies of schooling have usually examined one institution or one type of education, so Carlsmith’s examination of the whole range is unusual. Education in Bergamo seems to have centered on grammar schools but other kinds of instruction were also available. Secondary schooling in grammar was provided by the communal schools of Bergamo as well as by the schools of the confraternities of Sant’Alessandro in Colonna and Sant’Alessandro della Croce. Grammar was at the heart of the curricula of the Caspi Academy, a private, cooperative boarding academy founded in 1547, and of the college run by the Samaschans in the seventeenth century. The seminary in Bergamo also taught grammar as well as catechism, singing, and “sacred subjects.” Law was taught occasionally in Bergamo, though with such irregularity that there cannot be said to have been a school. Reading and writing were taught in the Schools of Christian Doctrine and in the smaller parish-based schools. There are no records of a notarial school in Bergamo so notaries probably trained through apprenticeships. Given that Bergamo was a center of commerce, it is surprising that there are only a few references to the teaching of mathematics or *abbaco*.

As Carlsmith notes, “institutional records are the foundation of this study” (p. 8). The book is based on a wide range of primary sources: treatises; handbooks; reports; budgets; minutes; petitions, inventories; statutes; letters; schoolbooks; maps; building plans; depositions; pastoral visitations; episcopal decrees; papal decrees; synodal records; ordination registers; confraternal records; city council deliberations; incunabula; tax records; property holdings; privileges; disputes over in-

heritances; personnel lists; negotiations with teachers and parents; contracts or wills relating to teachers; reports submitted by the podestà and capitano as well as ducal pronouncements; acts of the Venetian Senate; and materials relating to the university in Padua. In Bergamo, Carlsmith has worked in the Civic Library 'Angelo Mai', the Episcopal Archive, the Seminary Archive, the archives of the parishes of Sant'Alessandro in Colonna and Sant'Alessandro della Croce, and the State Archive of Bergamo. He has also worked in the archives of the Samschan order in Genoa and of the Jesuit order in Rome, in the University of Padua archives, in the state archives of Brescia, Venice, Verona, and Vicenza, and in the provincial archives of Clusone and Chiari.

The diligence of this research is to be admired. However, with characteristic scrupulousness, Carlsmith records that, "Although archives in Bergamo and the Veneto are rich, there are some primary sources that do not form part of this study. Unlike the Florentines, the people of Bergamo did not keep *ricordanze* in which to record personal and commercial affairs. Nor did the Bergamaschi typically record events in journals or diaries as, for example, Marin Sanudo of Venice famously did. The well-studied, and unique, Florentine *catasto* of 1427, with its detailed tax returns on each of Florence's inhabitants, has no counterpart in Bergamo. Lectures, commentaries, glosses, and student notebooks can provide tremendous insight into classroom practice, as David Lines has shown us for Bologna, but such sources are more abundant in university towns; I have found very few of these for sixteenth-century Bergamo.... A significant collection of sixteenth-century books is held in Bergamo's archives, but these *cinquecentini* usually do not contain notes of possession, rendering it difficult to argue that a particular book was used by an instructor or a student. Book inventories do survive for a couple of teachers in Bergamo, and these tell us something about the intellectual interests of these pedagogues, but they reveal little about actual classroom practice" (pp. 9-10).

How does Carlsmith approach his material? Rather than offering a quantitative analysis, he produces a qualitative, narrative account. Although he has used Robert Black's detailed examination of city council records in Arezzo as a model, "my methodology and conclusions are most akin to those of Paul Grendler" (p. 18). Carlsmith categorizes schooling by its institutional sponsor.

The book is arranged into six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the pre-university organized by the commune of Bergamo between 1482 and 1632. Carlsmith divides these

150 years into sub-periods. Before 1482 noble families and the church oversaw education and humanism had little impact. Between 1482 and 1524 the commune was more active and it appointed humanists such as Giovanni Battista Pio and Giovita Ravizza to teach grammar and rhetoric. The role of the commune in education weakened between 1525 and 1632 and the church took the lead once more. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the intermittent teaching of law in Bergamo. Carlsmith attributes the rise and fall of communal involvement to external political forces and economic changes. Perhaps the most original of Carlsmith's findings are located in chapter 2. Here he shows the crucial part played by lay confraternities in education in Bergamo. Their support for education had begun in the late thirteenth century but it grew after 1550. The confraternities provided schools, teachers, and scholarships. The leading confraternity, the Misericordia Maggiore, sponsored academies for the training of priests as well as a residential college in Padua for *Bergamaschi* students there. The next two chapters consider the role of the Catholic Church in education in Bergamo following the Council of Trent. Chapter 3 considers the Schools of Christian Doctrine which taught reading, writing, and the basics of Catholic doctrine to a wide range of boys and girls, and the diocesan seminary which trained boys destined for careers in the church. The contrasting fortunes of the Jesuits and the Somaschans are discussed in Chapter 4. Although backed by money, the papacy, and the bishop of Bergamo, the Jesuits were not permitted to teach in the city. Meanwhile the Somaschans successfully ran orphanages and public schools there. Private teaching is the subject of chapter 5. This included private tutors, home schooling, and the Caspi Academy. The final chapter expands the scope of the book to make comparisons between Bergamo and local towns, the cities of Brescia, Verona, and Vicenza, and the capital city of Venice.

One of Carlsmith's key arguments is that there was a transition from "Renaissance education" to "early modern schooling": "during the long sixteenth century pedagogues, parents, and politicians in Bergamo experimented with an astonishing array of options to teach children and adults ... this pluralism of educational choices represents part of the movement from medieval to modern society" (p. 10). However, whilst there were more schools and literacy levels did rise, there was also greater restriction on access to education. He attributes this restriction to the socioeconomic value of education to middle- and upper-class citizens.

Carlsmith's case studies of Bergamo and of other

towns and cities in the Veneto reveal that the organization of schooling was *ad hoc*: “Schools were founded by a wide variety of individuals and institutions but rarely lasted more than a few decades... This instability is particularly noticeable for civic-sponsored schools; by contrast, schools run directly by the Catholic Church (e.g., seminaries) tended to endure longer and to preserve their identity more forcefully” (p. 287). Carlsmith is struck by “the cooperation among the various institutions traditionally assumed to be at cross-purposes” (p. 286). This cooperation could involve shared teachers and shared classrooms.

Carlsmith argues that students and institutions viewed the purpose of education differently. Throughout the period, most students aimed to become merchants and bureaucrats and some sought the priesthood. However, there were changes over time in the aims of institutions. Seminaries and clerical academies preferred to be insular whilst the Schools of Christian Doctrine wanted to teach more people and make reading part of the catechism.

Carlsmith also engages with the Myth of Venice. He contends that “individual city councils had considerable leeway in hiring and firing teachers, for example, and the Venetian governors typically ruled with a light hand ... [confirming] the independence and flexibility that existed between centre and periphery in the Venetian Republic” (p. 12). But this is not so unusual. As Carlsmith notes, Robert Black has emphasized the variety in schooling across Florentine Tuscany. This creates a problem for historians: “it is difficult to lay out an overarching chronology that applies to all facets of education in Bergamo and the Veneto between 1500 and 1650, for individual variation was significant” (p. 289).

Whilst siding with Black in the importance of context and variety, Carlsmith generally takes Grendler’s part in

the historiographical debate which has raged for the last twenty-five years: “In my view, his interpretation of education in the Italian Renaissance is the most accurate” (p. 18). However, the arguments of revisionists such as Black and Lines have focused on the fifteenth century and been based on extensive reading of texts used by teachers and students in the classroom. As Carlsmith observes, “only scattered references to education in Bergamo exist during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” and the focus of his book is on the period after 1500 (p. 7). In addition, as noted above, he has found very little evidence for classroom practice in Bergamo. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, this book is to be welcomed warmly. It should be included in any future discussions of schooling in the Italian states during the early modern period and of the nature of the Venetian mainland state.

#### Notes

[1]. Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140-41.

[2]. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[3]. Robert Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils, and Schools, c. 1250-1450* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[4]. David A. Lines, *Aristotle’s Ethics in the Italian Universities (ca. 1300-1650): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002).

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