

Luciano Guerri. *Istruire nelle verità repubblicane: La letteratura politica per il popolo nell'Italia in rivoluzione (1796-1799)*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999. 374 pp. €23.24, paper, ISBN 978-88-15-07083-8.



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The period from 1796 to 1799 can be described as the Italian experience of the French Revolution--three years of a lively political debate which would deeply influence the subsequent history of the Italian states. Guerri's research is the first account of some of the most important educational political literature of that time. As he is well aware, his study is not intended to be a complete analysis, but a survey of some significant samples. Guerri adopts a national perspective in order to offer a broad view of the vast literary production in Italy alone. The number of texts composed for the education of the "people" about the new "republican truths," written between 1796 and 1799, Guerri discusses is huge. This number reflects, in the author's opinion, the political enthusiasm of those who backed the French Revolution's ideals, but also the need to divulge and describe them to a population in Italy who experienced a "passive revolution."

Among the authors of such political pamphlets were not only the erudite Italian elites but also many others who were able to write and had something to say about what was going on on the

peninsula. Guerri remarks that the style of these booklets was often simple, and the texts not infrequently included many linguistic mistakes. The presentation format of these publications was generally poor and only a few of them had some illustrations or different printed character styles.

As Guerri notices, these texts had the clearly stated purpose of instructing the people. They tried to explain, using simple vocabulary, some of the most dense and intricate intellectual and political concepts related to the French Revolution, among them liberty, equality, democracy, and sovereignty. This large-scale educational project has been very much criticized in the past. It has been accused of being superficial, repetitive, and lacking in originality, extremely rhetorical, and, most of all, abstract. These shortcomings meant that the literature failed to reach its audience: it was unfamiliar and incomprehensible to the public for whom it was written.

But Guerri's opinion is different. His research uncovers the presence of many different interpretations of the same revolutionary concepts, so that the charges of superficiality and lack of origi-

nality will no longer be sustainable. Guerri disputes even the accusation of vagueness: in his view the texts are much more explicit than was before thought. Furthermore, even if such an educational project dramatically failed to hit its target, these writings provide invaluable documentary sources to understand that era's political views. Guerri argues also about the general interpretation of the period 1796-1799: while usually labelled "triennio giacobino," he suggests instead "triennio repubblicano," in order to ensure a more accurate term for the political experience in which the Jacobins were just a minority.

The educational and political texts produced took different forms: "dialogues," "catechisms," "discourses," "instructions," and many others. Their aim was to instruct both the "mind" and the "heart" of the people in the new political ideas that came into Italy along with the Armée d'Italie. Guerri points out that the target public of these writings was very large: they were addressed primarily to the non-educated, i.e. the vast majority of the population. The peasants, rural communities, youth, and priests were considered some of the most important targets.

Guerri underlines the importance of Catholicism in the political debate of the "triennio repubblicano." A crucial aim for those who were in favour of the Republic and democracy was to secure the support of the Church, and so many texts explain why and how democracy could coexist with religion. It was very important for them to win favor with the priests because of the clergy's influential role in local communities. So the Catholic Church came under pressure as the new republican governments tried to persuade bishops and priests to collaborate with them or, at least, to remain neutral. Religion and democracy did not have an easy relationship. Many ecclesiastics simply rejected any kind of compromise and retreated into self-voluntary exile. Others tried to find a rapprochement, and continued their activities under the new political regimes. Guerri is

very interested in this latter group. He divides it into two categories: the "democratic Catholics" and the "condescending Catholics." Those belonging to the former, who were in the minority, were willing to reform the Catholic Church: they thought democracy to be the best form of government to accompany religion, they were in favor of the suppression of religious orders and monasteries, and they fought against the Roman Catholic cult. Those who were in the latter category tried to reach a settlement with the new political order, but with the purpose of stopping any sort of reform of the Church. With this aim in mind they supported the moderate republican governments which had been established in Italy.

Even if many priests joined the cause of the republic and actively promoted the new democratic ideas, the problem of the diffusion of "republican truths" remained. In order to cope with this issue many authors promoted the use of local dialects. They sometimes wrote in dialect directly or recommended their use when the texts were read aloud. This is another very interesting point that comes out of Guerri's research: the presence of a third party between the authors and the public. The political texts, in fact, were not read directly by the common people, who were mainly illiterate; rather they gathered in some public place to listen to an educated individual who read, and possibly personalized, the writings. In Guerri's opinion, it is difficult to understand the real effectiveness of this educational activity on the people. If we read the texts we must acknowledge their complexity. It would be difficult to conceive that many of those not formally educated could understand them properly. It probably was the mediator's adaptation on a local basis that made the text more accessible to a wider audience.

The "dialogue" was the literary style most often used to make the text more interesting, humorous, and captivating. Guerri studies very attentively the literary production of this genre. He divides the dialogues into three subject categories.

Some dialogues describe the bad effects of the Ancien R=game governments: the main characters are mostly monarchs or aristocrats who proudly flaunt their political crimes. Other texts are intended to explain the most important republican principles. Here the characters usually sustain two opposite sides to a thesis: e.g. a republican argues with a monarchist about the best form of government, or a philosopher enlightens a peasant or an uninformed person about the new democratic ideas. A third category of dialogues comments on and illustrates specific government acts. This subject accounts for the largest number of texts. The topic was evidently very interesting and exciting, especially if we consider the fact that what was discussed in these writings were mainly local issues. The characters here are, above all, typical citizens. These dialogues were, for the most part, authored anonymously, a fact that does not help the historian in his research.

Guerci also takes into account another educational genre: the political catechism. Usually shorter than dialogues, they are often simpler to understand. The catechism is divided into questions and answers and it is the pedagogical text par excellence. Many political figures of the time suggested that the republican catechism should have been adopted in schools in order to form "perfect republican citizens." Guerci's research points out a number of "original" catechisms from which many others were derived. Though the principal model was the French one, in Italy there were at least fifty archetypal texts that supported the republic and the democracy. There were also counter-revolutionary catechisms but Guerci was only able to find four of them. The authors of these catechisms were mainly ecclesiastics (Guerci suggests they were more familiar with this literary genre) and educated citizens, while only two belonged to the nobility. The catechisms were concerned with the concepts of republicanism and democracy. They provide the historian with possible ways to find explanations of the interpretations and understandings of the new words and

ideas that were renovating Italy--or at least what their authors thought was meant by those expressions. The interpretations were not, in fact, always consistent: "liberty," "equality," "patria," "patriotism," "convention," "constitution," "despotism," "republic," "democracy," "sedition," "rights," "duties," "citizenship," "privilege," and "aristocracy" were among the words described in these writings with various shades of meaning. "Democracy" and "equality" were amongst the most important and the most potentially dangerous expressions discussed in the catechisms. Guerci's analysis of the explanations given for such words clearly points out that the vast majority of the authors of these educational tracts were moderate republicans. "Democracy" always stood for "representative democracy" and only for a couple of the more radical writers did it mean "direct democracy."

Guerci seems to be correct when he questions the expression "triennio giacobino": even if Jacobins were perhaps the most visible political activists, they did not constitute the majority of them. This fact becomes even more evident in the catechisms' authors' discussions of the word "equality." Everyone knew that word (as opposed to the more learned term, "democracy") and gave it his own interpretation. The danger of social radicalism was latently implicit in "equality"; thus, the moderate political writers tried with all their efforts to define what was meant by such a hazardous word. For them it denoted a judicial equality and not a social one. It was, after all, the possibility of equality of opportunity rather than economic equality that the new republican governments sought. This latter kind of equality, they posited, would not be truly democratic for the simple reason that it would make equal the indolent and the industrious. Starting from the premise of a "natural inequality," the only just and righteous form of equality is that which gives all citizens the same political and judicial status. But, as Guerci points out, only a few seemed to be

aware of the profound social and economic inequality that all this implied.

This book is very important because it can be described as the first thorough analysis of an often neglected literary tradition. Guerçi's research is thorough and his study represents a first account of it. The author hopes that others will continue the exploration of the popular political literature produced in the "triennio repubblicano" but I really hope Guerçi will do more of that himself with his demonstrated impressive ability.

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