

# DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF DICTATORSHIP: Olav Storstein's unexpected confrontation with the Italian fascist propaganda (1935)

A democracia na educação vista pelas lentes da ditadura:  
o confronto inesperado de Olav Storstein com a propaganda fascista italiana (1935)

La démocratie dans l'éducation vue à travers le prisme de la dictature :  
la confrontation inattendue d'Olav Storstein avec la propagande fasciste italienne (1935)

BEATRICE PARTOUCHE

Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Roma, Itália. E-mail: [beatrice.partouche@uniroma3.it](mailto:beatrice.partouche@uniroma3.it).

---

**Abstract:** In the 1930s, the well-known Norwegian-Italian filmmaker Ivo Caprino attended the *Stabekk* Gymnasium, at which Olav Storstein was among his teachers. Before his student became internationally famous, Olav Storstein described in his book *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken* an episode in which they were both protagonists. The socialist teacher and the young student of Italian origin provide an opportunity to show two opposing educational models: democratic education and fascist authoritarianism. Through a process of inductive analysis that starts from the cited text and crosses archives and reference literature, this essay will highlight the contrast between these two models using for illustrative purposes the biographical episode that allows us to make a historical educational analysis in a comparative perspective, but also to place the episode in a broader context and relate it to relevant aspects of the period. In this story, the interests of fascist propaganda abroad and in Italy, the fascist and socialist educational models, the activities of the Dante Alighieri society, and the private and professional lives of the two protagonists are intertwined.

**Keywords:** Nordic education model; fascist education; Ivo Caprino; democratic education.

**Resumo:** Na década de 1930, o famoso diretor de cinema ítalo-norueguês Ivo Caprino frequentou a Stabekk High School, onde Olav Storstein foi um de seus professores. Antes de seu aluno se tornar internacionalmente famoso, Olav Storstein descreveu em seu livro *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken* um episódio em que ambos eram protagonistas. O professor socialista e o jovem estudante de origem italiana oferecem uma oportunidade de mostrar dois modelos educacionais opostos: a educação democrática e o autoritarismo fascista. Por meio de um processo de análise indutiva que parte do texto citado e percorre os arquivos e a literatura de referência, este artigo destacará o contraste entre esses dois modelos, usando o episódio biográfico para fins ilustrativos, o que nos permite fazer uma análise histórica da educação a partir de uma perspectiva comparativa, mas também situar o episódio em um contexto mais amplo e relacioná-lo a aspectos significativos do período. Nessa história, os interesses da propaganda fascista no exterior e na Itália, os modelos educacionais fascistas e socialistas, as atividades da Sociedade Dante Alighieri e as vidas particulares e profissionais dos dois protagonistas estão entrelaçados.

**Palavras-chave:** modelo educacional nórdico, educação fascista, Ivo Caprino, educação democrática.

**Resumen:** Dans les années 1930, le célèbre cinéaste italo-norvégien Ivo Caprino a fréquenté le lycée Stabekk, où Olav Storstein était l'un de ses professeurs. Avant que son élève ne devienne internationalement célèbre, Olav Storstein a décrit dans son livre *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken* un épisode dont ils étaient tous deux les protagonistes. Le professeur socialiste et le jeune étudiant d'origine italienne fournissent l'occasion de montrer deux modèles éducatifs opposés : l'éducation démocratique et l'autoritarisme fasciste. À travers un processus d'analyse inductive qui part du texte cité et traverse les archives et la littérature de référence, cet article mettra en évidence le contraste entre ces deux modèles en utilisant à des fins d'illustration l'épisode biographique qui nous permet de faire une analyse historique de l'éducation dans une perspective comparative, mais aussi de placer l'épisode dans un contexte plus large et de le mettre en relation avec des aspects significatifs de l'époque. Dans cette histoire, les intérêts de la propagande fasciste à l'étranger et en Italie, les modèles éducatifs fascistes et socialistes, les activités de la société Dante Alighieri et les vies privées et professionnelles des deux protagonistes s'entremêlent.

**Palabras clave:** Modelo educativo nórdico, educación fascista, Ivo Caprino, educación democrática.

## INTRODUCTION

In the interwar years, the contrast between a teaching approach that oriented toward pacifism and one that aimed to nurture nationalism was the subject of international debate and contrast among intellectuals (Partouche, 2022). The risk that education and, more specifically, school textbooks could influence the political opinion of the younger generation, was a concern (Claparède, 1929; Dotation Carnegie pour la paix internationale, 1923; World alliance for promoting international friendship, 1928). Norway was among the first countries that took initiative to eliminate from school textbooks a narrative that could bias students and generate prejudice towards other peoples (Foreningen Norden, 1937). While in Italy, where the need to enhance the myth of the homeland was strong, well aware of its potential, education was used to spread the political ideals that inspired fascism. This article aims to provide a concrete example of how narrative can overturn the meaning of a story and highlight the interpretive differences. A school episode is seen contextually, on the one hand through the eyes of an anti-authoritarian socialist teacher, who believed in the values of free discussion, encouraged his students to ask questions and comment on newspaper news, and on the other by an authoritarian government that had made education a privileged place of ideological indoctrination and in which freedom of speech and press was censored. It is thus an example of narrative manipulation used for propaganda purposes, which allows us to reflect on the political use of history as well as the extensive means the propaganda apparatus made use of.

The occasion is offered by a short story by Olav Storstein (1904-1973) that curiously involves Ivo Caprino (1920-2001), then his young student. This episode is all the more interesting when we consider that the protagonists are two figures who have been prominent in the Norwegian culture, the former as a teacher and representative of progressive educators (Jørgensen, 1971) and the latter as an outstanding protagonist in animation filmography (Haddal, 1993).

## THE STORY

In the last chapter of his book *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken*, dedicated to politics in schools, Olav Storstein expressed his view on how schools should have related to political issues and closed the chapter with a biographical episode that, as author himself stated, “amusingly illustrated the opposition between authoritarian and democratic schools” (Storstein, 1972, p. 86).

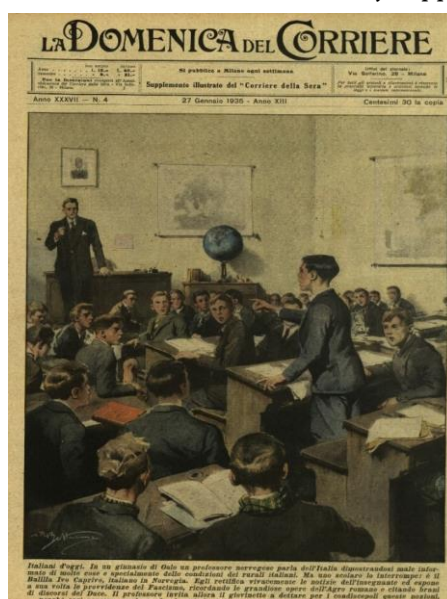
In the winter of 1934, while the professor was giving a geography lesson on Italy to his gymnasium class, a student disputed the content of the textbook. The boy, of Italian origin, believed that the description of the underdeveloped conditions in Italy, especially from an agricultural point of view, was incorrect or at least outdated. He

believed the new measures and initiatives, promoted by the regime, to reclaim marshes and significantly improve the living conditions of peasants (De Felice, 1974), were not considered. The professor invited his student to bring valid documentation to substantiate his statements and offered him to display the results of his research in class and share his knowledge with his classmates. On the appointed day, he left his seat at the desk so that the student could present his arguments while the class took notes.

From Storstein's perspective this was not a significant event, and indeed he would probably have even forgotten the episode, if it had not happened to him, sometime later, to receive an invitation for himself and his student to go to Rome at the expense of the Italian government to receive a reward for the courage and merit of the young *balilla*.<sup>1</sup> The invitation was addressed to the teacher who, recognizing the valor of the brave young man, and had had no choice but to correct the geography book, and to the student who, defying authority, had not hesitated to defend his country from the false statements contained in his school textbook (Storstein, 1946).

Along with the invitation came two<sup>2</sup> newspaper clippings: the front page illustrated by Achille Beltrami<sup>3</sup> from the Sunday supplement *La Domenica del Corriere* ('Italiani d'oggi', 1935) and an article from the daily newspaper *Il lavoro fascista* ('Un Balilla Residente Ad Oslo Documenta in Un Ginnasio Norvegese Le Provvidenze Del Fascismo in Materia Agraria', 1935).

**Figure 1** - Front page from the *Corriere della Sera* Sunday supplement (January 27, 1935)



Source: Italiani d'oggi (1935).

<sup>1</sup> Members of the fascist youth organization (Opera nazionale balilla - National Balilla Organization) established under the Ministry of National Education aimed at assistance and physical and moral education of the youth (McLean, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> There is also a third article in the *Corriere della sera* that Storstein probably never learned about.

<sup>3</sup> Illustrator of the Sunday supplement of the daily newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* from 1899 to 1944. He drew about 4600 covers.

Beltrami's illustration depicted a boy standing behind his desk in class, pointing his finger at the teacher as if to make a reproach, while all his classmates looked at him with an expression of astonishment and apprehension. This drawing greatly amused the author of the story, who explained how things did not unfold out that way; rather, he had left the chair to his student and allowed him to speak freely exposing his argumentation, going to the back of the classroom, without interfering during the presentation and instead remaining in the background as an observer.

In Storstein's opinion, the stir caused by this episode, which represented nothing exceptional or unusual compared to his democratic educational style and the way he conceived schooling, highlighted the difference between democracy and dictatorship (Storstein, 1972, p. 192).

The original text of the article<sup>4</sup> also described the episode quite differently compared to how the author experienced it:

A Balilla resident in Oslo documents in a Norwegian gymnasium the provisions of fascism in agrarian matters.

News arrives from Oslo of a significant episode involving the balilla Ivo Caprivo, a resident there.

The young man, who attends a Norwegian gymnasium, having heard his geography professor say at school that the conditions of our land workers are miserable, remarked to him, in front of the whole school class, that it would be good for him to update his knowledge in that subject, so as not to make erroneous judgments.

Following this, the professor invited Caprivo to prove his assertion and set him a deadline of a few days to report on the current conditions of Italian land workers.

Young Caprivo then prepared an exposition of all the provisions instituted by fascism in support of the peasants, mentioning the battle of the wheat, the draining of the marshes from Littoria to Sabaudia to Pontinia<sup>5</sup>, documenting them with translations of extracts from the Duce's speeches and with photographs he had obtained from that Fascio.

The teacher declared himself convinced and invited Caprivo himself to dictate them to the students so that they could add the aforementioned notions to the chapter devoted to Italy from the textbook in use at that school.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Un Balilla residente ad Oslo documenta in un ginnasio norvegese le provvidenze del fascismo in materia agraria." The same article also appeared in *Il Corriere della sera* with a different title but the same text: "Il buon nome dell'Italia rurale difeso all'estero da un balilla".

<sup>5</sup> Here we refer to the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes, an area that had been an unhealthy marshland for centuries. Already since before the advent of fascism there had been efforts to drain the area but fascism took all the credit for it and it was a propaganda topic (Frost, 1934);

The general secretariat of the Fasci abroad, as soon as it learned of the episode, appointed the balilla Caprivo as team leader and reported him to the O.N.B.<sup>6</sup> presidency for the granting of the coveted distinction of the Cross of Merit<sup>7</sup> (Un Balilla Residente, 1935, p. 3).

This dual interpretation provides us with insights into the educational differences there were at the time between the teacher's democratic view and the fascist conception of the pupil-teacher relationship. In the former case the teacher encouraged his students to speak freely, to confront each other, to express their ideas, in the latter this attitude was strongly discouraged because to contradict the teacher was to challenge authority. In fact, in the newspaper, the episode was not seen as a free sharing of knowledge between the student, the teacher and his peers, but as a rebellion. Within an educational system based on obedience and punishment (Loparco, 2017) (among other things) with the awareness that an act of rebellion could have had negative consequences for the student, from the journalist's point of view, a considerable amount of courage had been required to allow the student to refute the teacher and the school textbook. The motivation had been so strong that even a shy<sup>8</sup> 14-year-old had felt the need to stand up and correct the teacher "in front of everyone" (Il Buon Nome Dell'Italia Rurale, 1935; Un Balilla Residente Ad Oslo, 1935), thus defending the honor of his people and his country, to the point of earning three newspaper articles and the praise of the government.

---

<sup>6</sup> Opera Nazionale Balilla.

<sup>7</sup> T. N.: "Giunge notizia da Oslo di un significativo episodio di cui è stato protagonista il balilla Ivo Caprivo, colà residente.

Il giovane, che frequenta un ginnasio norvegese, avendo sentito il suo professore di geografia affermare a scuola che le condizioni dei nostri lavoratori della terra sono miserevoli, gli ha fatto osservare, di fronte a tutta la scolaresca, che sarebbe stato bene che egli aggiornasse le proprie cognizioni in tale materia, per non esprimere giudizi errati.

A seguito di ciò, il professore invitò il Caprivo a dimostrare il suo asserto e gli fissò un termine di qualche giorno per riferire circa le attuali condizioni dei lavoratori della terra italiani.

Il giovane Caprivo preparò allora una esposizione di tutte le provvidenze istituite dal Fascismo a favore dei contadini, accennando alla battaglia del grano, al prosciugamento delle paludi da Littoria a Sabaudia a Pontinia, documentandole con la traduzione di brani dei discorsi del Duca e con fotografie avute da quel Fascio.

Il docente se ne dichiarò convinto ed invitò il Caprivo stesso a farne oggetto di dettato alla scolaresca, perché essa potesse aggiungere le predette nozioni al capitolo dedicato all'Italia dal libro di testo in vigore in quella scuola.

La Segreteria Generale dei Fasci all'estero, non appena venuta a conoscenza dell'episodio, ha nominato capo squadra il balilla Caprivo e lo ha segnalato alla Presidenza dell'O.N.B. per la concessione dell'ambita distinzione della Croce al Merito".

<sup>8</sup> Storstein (1946, p. 192) points out in the book that in the documents he had received from Italy, the term shyness had been highlighted as an inescapable characteristic of 14-year-olds maybe to exalt the courage of the boy who despite his natural shyness had "stepped up to fight against the prejudice that discredited his fatherland". The article refers to the fatherland, even though Ivo Caprino was born and raised in Norway because under the Law No. 555 of June 13th, 1912, children followed their father's citizenship, so in Italy Ivo Caprino would have been considered Italian.



## HOW CAN WE BE SURE THE STUDENT WAS REALLY IVO CAPRINO?

By reading the two Norwegian editions of Storstein's novel, it would not have been obvious to understand who the student protagonist of the story was. In fact, in the first Norwegian edition published in 1946, the first name -Ivo- appears without the last name, while in the more recent 1972 re-edition (Storstein, 1972), when Caprino had become an accomplished filmmaker, both first and last names are omitted and only the first name's initial - I - remains. So, the identity of the famous director is only known thanks to the first edition of the book, published in Sweden in 1945 (Storstein, Olav, 1945), having the student's name spelt out in full. For some reason unverifiable for the moment, Caprino's last name was misspelt in the newspaper articles and changed into Caprivo. Probably Storstein, years later, did not remember his student's exact last name and simply copied it from the newspaper thus referring in his book to Ivo Caprivo (Storstein, 1945).

Still, there is little doubt that it was him, both because such a case of quasi-homonymy in 1930s Norway would have been an incredibly unlikely coincidence, and because all available sources confirm that Caprino attended a gymnasium in *Stabekk* and Olav Storstein was one of his teachers (Haddal, 1993). So, it would still have been possible to trace the boy's identity, but certainly, the Swedish edition provides us with confirmation.

## THE ITALIAN POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

If we contextualize the event and we analyze the interpretation that an Italian reader might have made of it in 1935, it is important to consider that between 1925 and 1926, Mussolini had passed a series of legal norms known as *leggi fascistissime*<sup>9</sup>, which among other things abolished the freedom of press by submitting all newspapers to the control and possible censorship of any content that was believed to be anti-national or merely critical of the government. The functions of parliament were restricted, the National Fascist Party was the only legal one, all political formations were dissolved, and so were associations and organizations accused of carrying out actions contrary to the regime, all citizens' associations had to be subjected to the control of the Public Security authorities, and the only recognized trade unions were the fascist ones, strikes were strictly forbidden (De Felice, 1968).

Clearly school texts, and more generally, national education was not extraneous to this control (Ascenzi & Sani, 2005). Indeed, the 1923 school reform, namely the Gentile reform, had been considered "the most fascist" of the reforms passed by the government (Appello Agli Studenti Fascisti, 1923; Charnitzky, 1994;

---

<sup>9</sup> Literally translated it means the most fascist laws.

Susmel & Susmel, 1956). The school had the responsibility of shaping future citizens and was the institution that better allowed to exercise total control over educational content, starting with textbooks.

As early as in 1925, Mussolini (1926, p. 250) delivered a speech declaring the function that the government intended to assign to education, at the first national congress of the School Corporation, in which his orientation was very clear:

The Government demands that the school be inspired by the ideals of Fascism; it demands that the school should not be, I will not say hostile, but not even foreign to Fascism or agnostic in front of Fascism; it demands that the whole school in all its grades and in all its teachings should educate the youth of Italy to understand Fascism, to renew itself in Fascism and to live in the historical climate created by the Fascist revolution.

From 1923 to 1928 a Commission for the Examination of schoolbooks was working on the selection of suitable school texts. Initially with the aim of improving their quality (Lombardo Radice, 1925) but soon the purpose of the work manifested its politically based selective nature (Ascenzi & Sani, 2009; Ostenc, 1980). In elementary schools, from 1930 onward, a single standardized text was imposed in all the schools of the kingdom, unifying teaching approaches and, most importantly, operating total control by the governing bodies. Formally this choice had been necessary because “no book met the aims of the fascist school perfectly” (Charnitzky, 1994; McLean, 2018).

The report of the ministerial commission issued in 1926 described as follows the concerns for the ideology that seemed to be prevailing in the school texts up to that time, basically criticized anything that was not a message of pure patriotism, confirming how the school was the privileged place for the diffusion of the fascist ideology:

Still too often, among warm expressions of patriotism, the residues of that old falsely democratic conception, made up of passive neutralism and leveling mechanism, which pushed the way to socialism and its mad attempts at destruction, appear: remnants of a pacifism, which is not the wise aspiration for a realistic peace in the Latin tradition, representing the defense of the work accomplished for human progress, but is simply utilitarian cowardice coated with Oriental religiosity and Nordic moralism; remnants of a certain whining and Protestant rationalism, which chases after its own materialistic conception of political problems<sup>10</sup> (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1926, p. 3276).

---

<sup>10</sup> Also in “Report on nationalism in history textbooks” (World alliance for promoting international friendship, 1928, p. 179) and *La revisione internazionale dei testi scolastici di storia tra le due Guerre Mondiali* (Partouche, 2022, p. 173).

Of this passage we want to emphasize how pacifism, Nordic moralism, and protestant rationalism, are listed as negative elements.

## FROM WHAT WAS ITALY TO BE DEFENDED?

The Italian school had constructed a rhetoric in which the primacy of Italy in every subject had to be emphasized. The fatherland was described by showing its almost divine nature. Every pretext was exploited to declaim the intellectual superiority of Italians, to the point that references to great foreign personalities were discouraged, diminishing their merits over knowledge of Italian history and tradition (Partouche, 2022). Special attention was also given to the education of Italians abroad (Pretelli, 2009), so in this context it is not surprising that every possible opportunity to praise Italy and the Italians was taken advantage of.

We cannot know exactly which book contained the controversial text contested by Caprino, but through an overview of the geography books in use in Norwegian gymnasiums in those years, we found some passages that might provide us with some valuable examples. The texts analyzed do not conceal the poverty of the peasants (Arstal & Skattum, 1933; Horrabin, 1930), the Italian dependence on greater foreign powers for coal supplies and perhaps a degree of political uncertainty (Holmsen, & Wiborg, 1927). After all, the regime could control the national press but certainly could not prohibit foreign authors from making the descriptions they believed to be true in their texts. As in the following two examples:

[Italy] is the only country that has managed to maintain some degree of independence. But this independence is more apparent than real. Italy exhausts coal and thus becomes dependent on the group that supplies it with the coal it needs. But fortunately, Italy can assert itself by sometimes supporting one, soon the other of the two powers competing for supremacy in the Mediterranean. If France or Britain ruled the Mediterranean alone, Italy's independence would be even more obscure. Moreover, Italy is all in an inland sea, and even if the country had coal, Italy would then be doomed and would be a state of a different rank, because another power has established itself at the exits of the open ocean. The time has passed when the Mediterranean alone was part of the world that mattered, and the states that have their coasts outside the Mediterranean now have the upper hand. Sooner or later Italy will have to join the British or French group to secure fuel supplies. Without fuel, the great modern industry cannot exist. The abundance of cheap labor makes the country more attractive to the iron and steel lords of New France. No amount of military zeal can



compensate for the lack of coal. Or as Mussolini himself said: Warships cannot be lit with songs (Horrabin, 1930, p. 131).

And:

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Campania remained uncultivated and from its smelly marshes rose disease germs. In recent years the marshes have been dried up and people have begun to cultivate the plains and plant trees. Some wealthy families own large parts of Campania. On their properties, we see small villages of huts, consisting of cone-shaped reed or rice huts. Waged laborers live here with their families. In the center of the huts is a simple fireplace, and smoke comes out of a hole at the top of the cone. The furniture is terribly poor and shoddy (Holmsen & Wiborg, 1927, p. 44).

Briefly, it is worth mentioning that the regime launched propaganda campaigns constantly to promote each of its initiatives. These include the actions undertaken to achieve self-sufficiency in wheat production, through the reclamation of the Pontine marshes in southern Lazio and the Battle of the Grain (Armiero & Biasillo, 2022), and the policy of autarchy, which characterized the Fascist economy from 1935 to 1940 (although this economic policy had its beginnings in the interventions following the 1929 crisis) through the substitution of imported raw materials with domestic products, to achieve a level of self-sufficiency which would have guaranteed Italy food and production autonomy in case of war. Much space was dedicated both in political speeches and in the press, for autarchic products. Cities were covered with posters and radio stations continually repeated the names of the new all-Italian products. Guides and books for proper autarchic consumption were freely distributed in schools, factories, and especially provided to Italian housewives (Fazio, 2015). All was accompanied by evocative images such as the well-known one of shirtless Mussolini harvesting wheat<sup>11</sup>.

This information should provide the necessary framework to understand why a simple passage from a school textbook in a foreign country could receive so much attention. Fascism needed to show the rapid and effective evolution of the nation and its people and to silence all dissonant voices. Every opportunity useful to the cause was used for propaganda purposes, including the instrumentalization of a geography lesson taking place 2,000 km away.

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://archivio.fototeca-gilardi.com/item/it/1/39645>.

## TIME TRAVEL THROUGH ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Now it will also become easier to understand how the Italian press became aware of such an ordinary episode. Certainly it had not been informed by the professor nor by the school: the event did not seem relevant, and in fact, its account stems not from Caprino's objection to the lesson but from Storstein's astonishment at receiving an invitation from Italy to acknowledge him and his student as an exemplary case, a fact which, by the way, as the author tells it, was not a source of pride or vaunt for the young student, but rather embarrassed him greatly (Storstein, 1972).

It was quite inevitable that the young Caprino would have gone to an Italian institution to carry out his research; Storstein's guess was that he went to the legation of Italy<sup>12</sup>. His assumption was not entirely wrong, and by following this trail we discovered that most likely the source of his research was the Oslo committee of the Dante Alighieri society<sup>13</sup>.

This is an association that “exercises its activities through the promotion of culture and art, for the protection and dissemination of the Italian language and culture in the world, by reviving the ties of compatriots abroad with the fatherland and nurturing among foreigners a love for the Italian culture, civilization and language”<sup>14</sup>. By the Italian government, at a time of great migration flows, it was intended not only to spread Italian culture abroad but also to represent Italy abroad and maintain a bond with Italian emigrants. Its foundation dates back to 1889 and still continues its cultural activities in 80 countries around the world, on all continents.

In the city of Christiania (today Oslo) a committee of the Dante Alighieri National Society was founded on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1923, “under the auspices of the Royal Legation of Italy”. Among the eight founding members was Mario Caprino, Ivo's father, the only Italian in the group at the time. In fact, the Oslo committee was mainly run by Norwegian volunteers with a deep knowledge of the Italian language and culture.

Mario Caprino had met his wife Ingeborg (Ingse) Gude in Rome in 1910 and moved permanently with her to Norway shortly after Ivo's birth in 1920. Ingse was the daughter of a diplomat, she followed her stepmother in Rome after her father's death. She was an artist and was the granddaughter of one of Norway's most recognized Romantic painters, Hans Gude (Haddal, Per, 1993). In Norway Mario imported Italian wine, started a career as a furniture designer as a self-taught, and, according to the records held in the Dante Alighieri archives, he has also been vice-consul (Haddal, 1993). He was not very active in the committee (Società Dante Alighieri, 1927),

---

<sup>12</sup> A legation was a diplomatic representative office of lower rank than an embassy. Where an embassy was headed by an ambassador, a legation was headed by a minister.

<sup>13</sup> Storstein was most likely unaware of Mario Caprino's ties to the “Dante”.

<sup>14</sup> Article 1 of the Dante Alighieri Society statute: <https://ladante.it/images/trasparenza/Statuto-SocietaDanteAlighieri.pdf>

although he had been given important roles over time, perhaps precisely because he was the only Italian member. It does not seem to be a far-fetched assumption to believe that it was at the “Dante” that the boy found the information he needed for his research and that this was also where the news that reached Rome originated.

There were strong ties between the Italian legation in Oslo and the Dante Alighieri committee, but the association saw itself as a cultural organization without political influence. However, with Mussolini's rise to power, especially from the 1930s onward it became increasingly evident from the correspondence between the branch in Oslo and the central office in Rome, that there was no longer satisfaction in representing only language and culture (Miscali, 2023). All cultural initiatives, as well as Pirandello's visit to Oslo in November 1933, were used as a means of propaganda as confirmed by a letter sent from Oslo to the central committee in Rome in December, in which confirmation was given that the event “well contributed to the Italian and fascist propaganda” (Società Dante Alighieri, 1934). These interventions of cultural diplomacy were aimed at promoting Italy abroad with the intention of setting up commercial agreements, overturning negative stereotypes about Italy and instead showing its political and cultural greatness (Miscali, 2023, p. 8; Pretelli, 2004).

This is why there was a substantial implementation of the activities organized and promoted through the Dante Alighieri, including the initiatives of 1933-34 listed in a report conserved in the archives, which included activities (Società Dante Alighieri, 1923-1959b) that may have provided useful material to the young Caprino for his geography research. On January 24th, 1934, there had been a presentation by Roberto Conte of the conference “Italian Reclamations-Landscapes and Views, with projection” (Società Dante Alighieri, 1934). Material had been made available for this activity directly from the Ministry of Agriculture, and the plates had been paid for by the central board. Most probably the material or part of it had remained at the disposal of the committee. Through some archival documents, it was possible to verify that in January 1935, the same month in which, the articles were published in the Italian newspapers, Paolo Colombo, editor of the roman edition of the newspaper *Lavoro fascista* was in Oslo for research purposes and to speaker at a conference about the Italian cinema at the Dante Alighieri (Società Dante Alighieri, 1935). So, he has been most likely the person who made the story reach Rome.

In 1937 when the outbreak of World War II was approaching and the influence of political propaganda led by the Ministry and Central Office in Rome became more and more evident, much pressure was brought on to make changes in the nominations of members leading the association. The resignation of the president Professor Trygve Tranaas, who had led the association for 12 years, was demanded because his political views did not conform to the new Italian politics, he was not a fascist, and he was “obstructing a greater modern Italian affirmation of the Dante” (Società Dante Alighieri, 1937a). Mario Caprino was reappointed vice-president, at this point, not only because he was Italian but also because, as highlighted in a letter, he had a

brother<sup>15</sup> Congressman in Italy (Società Dante Alighieri, 1937b). The Committee was suppressed after the outbreak of war in 1940. The final break with the central office in Rome did not occur until October 1942, after which the association officially ceased. A curious fact: In 1949 a group of intellectuals and artists promoted an official appeal to recreate an Italian-Norwegian circle. Aage Storstein who was Olav's brother was one of the signatories (Società Dante Alighieri, 1923-1959a).

## OLAV STORSTEIN

The first edition of *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken* was published in Sweden in 1945 and was entitled *Skolan mitt i byn*. Norway during the war was occupied by Nazi Germany, and Storstein was a member of the Norwegian labor party and an active opponent of Nazism, he was one of the teachers deported<sup>16</sup> to Kirkenes in the spring of 1942 (Storstein, 1972, pp. 143, 149) and was in neighboring Sweden from his release until the end of the war. He was a writer, a literature scholar, as well as a left-wing progressive educator and professor of literature, history, and geography (Skagen, 2023). He was a socialist, anti-authoritarian and it will be clear so far that his pedagogical thinking was inspired by democratic values, but this definition is not sufficient to explain his thought and method. In addition to *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken*, Storstein published three other books that explain the pedagogical values he believed in and what kind of school he hoped to contribute to building: *Barn 1932* (1932), *Kateterskole eller arbeidsskole* (1934), *Lesebok for voksne av skolebarn* (1938).

It is evident in his writings that his priority was to make students feel free and not forced into the trap of strict rules (Storstein, 1934, 1938). Storstein argued that traditional unidirectional education in which the teacher speaks, and the students listen was to be replaced with a school characterized by autonomous activities and free forms of collaboration. He believed that traditional rigidity robbed students of the natural curiosity typical of children, killed the desire to ask questions, a desire that is otherwise “as insatiable as a child’s appetite” (Jarning, 2006). “The task of the school and the church is to make young people humble and obedient” (Storstein, 1934, p. 21), he further specified, describing the system he criticized and opposed. He, therefore, stated that school accustoms children not to ask questions but only to wait for them to be asked (Storstein, 1934). His idea was that schools should have aimed to develop the social spirit and solidarity of pupils and a collective mentality.

His educational proposals, successfully practiced in his classes, included writing a class newspaper and corresponding with other schools with whom to discuss, for example, local issues (Storstein, 1934, pp. 62–64). He encouraged his students to

---

<sup>15</sup> Antonello Caprino (1886-1954), fascist hierarch, lawyer and poet.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.fanger.no/stories/laereraksjonen>

question textbooks, especially geography textbooks, which he found repetitive and boring, and steered possible methods for them to independently gather the information they needed to expand the information the textbooks provided. He was also encouraged free writing, preferring spontaneity to an empty stylistic exercise (Storstein, 1934, p. 32). Perhaps also to show his students that their opinions and ways of writing were significant, he published their work (Ongstad, 2002) in two of the books already mentioned: *Barn 1932* and *Lesebok for voksne av skolebarn*. In the latter, the student Odd W.'s critique of Storstein's own work closes the book. This demonstrates how open he was to dialogue with his students and how he really encouraged them to have freedom of thought without fear of being reproved for saying something wrong.

Storstein wanted social fabric and politics to enter the school as part of education for democracy, which in his view had to be experienced in practice with democratic bodies in the school. An activity that was particularly dear to him (Børhaug, 2010) was commenting on current affairs by reading newspapers, although for this he had opposition from some parents who preferred to keep their children “away from the world's evils for as long as possible” (Storstein, 1934, p. 9).

He believed that politics was not only of interest to adults, but concerned everyone, including children. This became even more evident after the wartime events, which clearly affected the children as well (Storstein, 1946, p. 145).

Exploring the news brought out the students' curiosity especially for political issues. On one occasion, with a political election approaching, confusion arose among the students about the exact nature of elections, which programs the different parties had and especially what the actual difference between them was. Storstein took advantage of this opportunity to organize a structured activity by dividing the students into groups representing each party and giving his class time to simulate “election meetings with subsequent discussions” (Storstein, 1934, p. 48). Storstein specifies that “the teacher stays in the background as much as possible during the discussions” (Storstein, 1934, p. 48). And this brings us back to the episode in which Ivo Caprino is left to take over the teacher's desk while Storstein stays on the background as an observer.

In his work we can recognize the influence of Dewey, Makarenko, Freinet, as he himself acknowledged (Storstein, 1972, pp. 20–48). Without going into the details of each activity, of which we only want to give an overview in order for his work to be understood, it nevertheless seems clear that he was an innovator (Jørgensen, 1981, p. 42); therefore, it should not be interpreted as the prevailing educational style of 1930s Norway. However, he was also not unique in the Norwegian scene at the time but was part of a broader movement of teachers who believed in the same principles and who were advancing the New Education values (Jarning, 2009). In 1972, his book *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken* was printed in a new edition and launched as a contribution to the development of more collectively characterised schools in Norway. The rise of new

pedagogical ideals in the 1960s and 1970s made his views on schooling relevant to the founders of the experimental gymnasiums in Oslo and Bærum forsøksgymnasene (Jørgensen, 1971).

## IVO CAPRINO

Ivo Caprino may not be well known among today's youth but needs no introduction to a Norwegian reader of the previous generation when he was considered the Norwegian Walt Disney (Bendazzi, 1994). He is unfortunately mostly an unknown figure in Italy. It must be said that, apart from having an Italian father and name, his ties with Italy have been scarce. Mario himself seems not to have maintained close ties with his family of origin and, although he divorced Ingse Gude in 1927, he remained in Norway, where he died in 1959 (Pulina, 2009).

Caprino is an important person in the history of Norwegian cinema. He built a film studio and developed a distinctive form of film by animating, initially in an amateur way, some puppets manufactured by his mother Ingse. He made his debut in 1948 with the short film *Tim og Tøffe* and in the 1950s and especially 1960s achieved international fame and success and also began working for television. Thanks to a secret system, patented by him, that allowed figures to move continuously in front of the camera without showing wires, he was able to produce high-quality and very popular films (Haddal, 1993, p. 97).

The breakthrough came with *Veslefrikk med fela*, which won the first prize for best children's film at the 1952 Venice Film Festival. For the 150th anniversary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth in 1954, he was commissioned to make *Den standhaftige tinnsoldat* (Engelsland & Strand, 1955), which won numerous international awards. Caprino's film adaptations of *Karius og Baktus* by Thorbjørn Egner have become classics in which, as well as the films inspired by Asbjørnsen and Moe, he enacts the Norwegian fairy tale tradition (Bestard, 2009). *Flåklypa Grand Prix*, in 1972, set an audience record that no other Norwegian film has come close to. It was exported in 12 different language versions and must be counted among the best Norwegian films and still among the most entertaining, suitable for both adults and children (Haddal, 1993).

Caprino's achievements are many, we have only listed the most well-known. In his production, there is a strong presence of the Norwegian fairy tale tradition probably transmitted by his mother who surely breathed the artistic atmosphere of Norwegian Romanticism of which Hans Gude was a very important representative. The name of the character - *Il Tempo Gigante*<sup>17</sup> - starring in his most viewed and famous film is surely an expression of his connection with Italy.

---

<sup>17</sup> The character is a car and its name in Italian it means *The giant time*.



Then a third characteristic of his production can be found in his best-known television character *Televimsen*. This figure was initially conceived as a funny image to be displayed during interruptions of television broadcasts due to technical problems, which used to happen frequently. It soon came to life and became a very popular animated character. Styled as a little gentleman with suit and hat, he played many instruments, and his broadcast partner was the famous Norwegian actor Rolf Just Nilsen.

*Televimsen* was irreverent and commented on news and current affairs in a straightforward and sharp manner. In an interview Caprino stated that in his “television programs, the puppets discuss politics and current events. Their abstract nature makes them interesting. If the same topics were discussed by actors, they would not have the same meaning” (Bendazzi, 2017).

Remaining in a purely speculative sphere and just suggesting an idea that could be deepened by more competent experts, we found, significant. Could it be possible that he wanted to make these topics easily accessible to all audiences, thanks to his professor's influence?

## FINAL REMARKS

Storstein closes his story by remarking that perhaps, whoever had thought of an award for him and his student, intended to be an example and to inspire Italian students and teachers - at the time subjugated to the fascist regime - had not considered that they represented the exact opposite of the model they were supposed to support. In fact, there was a stark opposition between how the events described by the author had unfolded and how they were interpreted looking through the eyes of dictatorship. Caprino was a young student who was freely allowed to express his opinions, and the democratic educational model, to which he was accustomed, represented a “mortal enemy” (Storstein, 1972) of the authoritarian system created by Mussolini. In fact, the newspaper account of the event, had it not been manipulated, would have represented democracy and not the repressive system embodying dictatorship, as the student had spoken freely expressing his ideas without any fear. We do not know whether the journalist who relayed the news to the newspaper's editorial office had deliberately altered the story. Certainly, the version that was given was appealing to the propaganda system. With just a few lines of a short newspaper article, it had been possible to extol the value of young Italians abroad, to celebrate the love and pride for the homeland that remained strong despite the distance. To defend the country from falsehoods and stereotypes related to the past, without losing the opportunity to highlight the progress achieved thanks to the regime's new policies. The need for the existence of Italian societies abroad, such as the Dante Alighieri, which through their activities successfully kept the Italian language and culture and the ties with emigrant citizens alive, was confirmed. The few pages with

which this story is told, made extraordinary by the fact that it features two non-ordinary personalities, pictures a condensation of images that recall a variety of conflicting aspects: freedom of expression, censorship and repression, progressive education, propaganda activities aiming at consolidating consensus abroad and in Italy, the transformation of cultural activities into cultural diplomacy.

This episode shows how the manipulation of history was used for political purposes and how narrative choices are not neutral. Confirming the importance of this issue that was widely debated at international level in the inter-war years when the question was raised as to what consequences an overly nationalistic approach to education would have had on future generations.

## REFERENCES

- Appello agli studenti fascisti. Energico telegramma dal Presidente ai Prefetti. (1923, December 7). *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1.
- Armiero, M., & Biasillo, R. (2022). *La natura del duce: Una storia ambientale del fascismo*. Giulio Einaudi editore.
- Arstal, A., & Skattum, O. J. (1933). *Geografi for middelskolen*. Aschehoug.
- Ascenzi, A., & Sani, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Il libro per la scuola tra idealismo e fascismo: L'opera della Commissione centrale per l'esame dei libri di testo da Giuseppe Lombardo Radice ad Alessandro Melchiori, 1923-1928*. Vita e Pensiero.
- Ascenzi, A., & Sani, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Il libro per la scuola nel ventennio fascista. La normativa sui libri di testo dalla riforma Gentile alla fine della seconda guerra mondiale (1923-1945)*. Alfabetica.
- Bendazzi, G. (1994, October 30). Stelle di Oslo. Storia di Ivo Caprino, il cineasta di origine italiana divenuto il Walt Disney dei norvegesi. Pupazzi protagonisti in mezzo ai fiordi. *Il Sole 24 Ore*.
- Bestard, H. (2009). *Ivo Caprinos Dukkefilmer* [Masteroppgave i Film og fjernsynsvitenskap]. Høgskolen i Lillehammer.

- Børhaug, K. (2010). *Norwegian Civic Education – Beyond Formalism? L'Éducation Civique Norvégienne – Au-delà du Formalisme?* 9(1).
- Charnitzky, J. (1994). *Fascismo e scuola. La política scolastica del regime (1922-1943)*. La Nuova Italia.
- Claparède, J. L. (1929). *L'enseignement de l'histoire et l'esprit international*. Bureau français d'éducation.
- De Felice, Renzo de. (1968). *Mussolini e il fascismo. Mussolini il fascista. L'organizzazione dello Stato fascista (1925-1929)*. Einaudi.
- De Felice, Renzo. (1974). *Mussolini il duce. Gli anni del consenso (1929-1936)*. Einaudi.
- Dotation Carnegie pour la paix internationale. (1923). *Enquete sur les livres scolaires d'après la guerre*. Centre européen de la Dotation Carnegie.
- Engelsland, R., & Strand, R. (1955). Ivo Caprino. Dukkefilmens Walt Disney. *Nå*, 1, 7–9.
- Fazio, G. (2015). Mussolini, l'autarchia, i libri e il mondo della carta. *Novecento.Org*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.12977/nov64>
- Foreningen Norden. (1937). *Nordens läroböcker i historia*. Foreningen nordens historiska publikationer.
- Frost, R. S. (1934). The Reclamation of the Pontine Marshes. *Geographical Review*, 24(4), 584–595.
- Haddal, P. (1993). *Ivo Caprino! : Et portrett av askeladden i norsk film*. Hjemmets Bokforlag A/S.
- Holmsen, A. & Wiborg, N. (1927). *Geografisk lesebok med bilder og karter: Vol. III*. Gyldendal norsk forlag.
- Horrabin, J. F. (1930). *Økonomisk geografi i grunndrag*. Det norske arbeidespartis forlag.

Il buon nome dell'Italia rurale difeso all'estero da un Balilla. (1935, January). *Corriere Della Sera*, 4.

Italiani d'oggi. (1935, January 27). *La Domenica Del Corriere*, 37(4).

Jarning, H. (2006). Dewey Square. In Steinholt, Kjetil & Sommero, Henning (Eds.), *Improvisasjon. Kunsten å sette seg selv på spill*. N. W. Damm & Søn.

Jarning, H. (2009). Reform pedagogy as a national innovation system: Early twentieth-century educational entrepreneurs in Norway. *Paedagogica Historica*, 45(4–5), 469–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230903100874>

Jørgensen, M. (1971). *Fra skoleopprør til opprørsskole*. Pax.

Jørgensen, M. (1981). *Hverandre. Hvordan kan skolen oppdra til fellesskap og samfunnsansvar?* Gyldendal. [https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\\_digibok\\_2007071001027](https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2007071001027)

Lombardo Radice, G. (1925). *Vita nuova della scuola del popolo*. Sandron.

Loparco, F. (2017). Former teachers' and pupils' autobiographical accounts of punishment in Italian rural primary schools during Fascism. *History of Education*, 46(5), 618–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2017.1332249>

Manifestazioni della 'Dante'. Oslo. Una manifestazione italiana. (1935). *Pagine Della Dante. Rassegna Bimestrale Della Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri.*, XVI(1), 31–37.

McLean, E. K. (2018). *Mussolini's children: Race and elementary education in Fascist Italy*. University of Nebraska Press.

Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. (1926, December 21). Relazione della Commissione ministeriale per l'esame dei libri di testo da adottarsi nelle scuole elementari e nei corsi integrativi d'avviamento professionale [Commissione Giuliano]. *Bollettino Ufficiale*, parte prima, 51, 3208-3313.

Miscali, M. (2023). Fascist Cultural Diplomacy and Italian Foreign Policy in Norway from the 1930s until the Second World War. *The International History Review*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2278610>

Mussolini, B. (1926). *Discorsi del 1925*. Alpes.

Ongstad, S. (2002). Positioning Early Research on Writing in Norway. *Written Communication*, 19(3), 345–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074108802237749>

Ostenc, M. (1980). *L'éducation en Italie pendant le fascisme*. Publications de la Sorbonne.

Partouche, B. (2022). *La revisione internazionale dei testi scolastici di storia tra le due guerre mondiali. I casi italiano e norvegese*. Anicia.

Pretelli, M. (2004). La risposta del fascismo agli stereotipi degli italiani all'estero. *Altreitalie*, 28(1), 48–65.

Pretelli, Matteo. (2009). Fascismo e giovani italiani all'estero. In Dogliani, Patrizia (Ed.), *Giovani e generazioni nel mondo contemporaneo: La ricerca storica in Italia*. CLUEB.

Pulina, P. (2009, October). Ivo Caprino, il Walt Disney della Norvegia, aveva radici sarde. *Il Messaggero Sardo*, 20.

Skagen, K. (2023). Olav Storstein. In *Store norske leksikon*. [https://snl.no/Olav\\_Storstein](https://snl.no/Olav_Storstein)

Società Dante Alighieri. (1923-1959a). *Comitato di Oslo, D-L000, Styre- og saksarkiv*, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Società Dante Alighieri. (1923-1959b). *Comitato di Oslo, D-L001, Styre- og saksarkiv*, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Società Dante Alighieri. (1927, March 27). *Elezioni della presidenza*. Comitato di Oslo, D-L000, Styre- og saksarkiv, 1923-1959, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Società Dante Alighieri. (1934, May 16). *Lettera del presidente della "Dante" di Oslo al Consiglio centrale della Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri di Roma*. Comitato di Oslo, D-L0001, Styre- og saksarkiv, 1923-1959, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Società Dante Alighieri. (1935, January 24). *Lettera al presidente*. Comitato di Oslo, D-L0001, Styre- og saksarkiv, 1923-1959, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway. See also: ('Manifestazioni Della "Dante". Oslo. Una Manifestazione Italiana.', 1935, p. 36)

Società Dante Alighieri. (1937a, April 5). *Lettera di G. Amadori al presidente della Dante Alighieri*. Comitato di Oslo, D-L0001, Styre- og saksarkiv, 1923-1959, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Società Dante Alighieri. (1937b, October 20). *Lettera di S. Beverfelt al presidente della Dante Alighieri*. Comitato di Oslo, D-L0001, Styre- og saksarkiv, 1923-1959, Oslo Byarkiv, Oslo, Norway.

Storstein, O. (1934). *Kateterskole eller arbeidsskole*. Fram Forlag.

Storstein, Olav. (1938). *Lesebok for voksne av skolebarn*. Tiden Norsk Forlag.

Storstein, O. (1945). *Skolan mitt i byn*. Kooperativa förbundet.

Storstein, O. (1946). *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken*. Tiden Norsk Forlag.

Storstein, O. (1972). *Fremtiden sitter på skolebenken*. Pax Forlag.  
[https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb\\_digibok\\_2007072000015](https://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2007072000015)

Susmel, E., & Susmel, D. (Ed.). (1956). *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini. Dal viaggio negli Abruzzi al delitto Matteotti (23 agosto 1923—13 giugno 1924): Vol. XX*. La Fenice.

Un balilla residente ad Oslo documenta in un ginnasio norvegese le provvidenze del Fascismo in materia agraria. (1935, January). *Il Lavoro Fascista*.

World alliance for promoting international friendship. (1928). *Report on nationalism in history textbooks*. Universal Christian conference on life and work. World alliance for promoting international friendship.



**BEATRICE PARTOUCHE:** Post-doc fellow at the department of educational sciences at Roma Tre University. Her main interest is in history of education and comparative education, with a focus on Scandinavian countries and the early 20th century historical period. She is interested in archival research in which she has an academic specialisation, and especially favours primary sources from historical school archives. She has been working for her department in the field of distance education and has been collaborating on teacher training projects since 2015.

**E-mail:** [beatrice.partouche@uniroma3.it](mailto:beatrice.partouche@uniroma3.it)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1113-332X>

**Received on:** 02.12.2024

**Approved on:** 05.14.2024

**Published on:** 06.03.2024

**RESPONSIBLE ASSOCIATE EDITOR:**

José Gonçalves Gondra (UERJ)

E-mail: [gondra.uerj@gmail.com.br](mailto:gondra.uerj@gmail.com.br)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0669-1661>

**PEER REVIEW ROUNDS:**

R1: 3 invitations; 1 report received.

R2: 3 invitations; 2 reports received.

R3: 3 invitations; no report received.

R4: 2 invitations; 1 report received.

**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Partouche, B. (2024). Democracy in education seen through the lens of dictatorship: Olav Storstein's unexpected confrontation with the Italian fascist propaganda (1935). *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, 24. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v24.2024.e332>

**FUNDING:**

The RBHE has financial support from the Brazilian Society of History of Education (SBHE) and the Editorial Program (Call No. 12/2022) of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

**LICENSING:**

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY 4) license.

