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READING EMERGENCY IN ITALY: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES ON PROMOTION OF READING, LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS

It is impossible to be rich and stupid for more than one generation: in Italy the process of economic development and social welfare is stagnant. The competitiveness of industries and companies isn't driving its roots into the ground of culture and education anymore. The investment policy on public schools is going backwards and the reading habit is running the risk of being looked upon as an obsolete and eccentric behaviour.

In a country where only every tenth person uses a library, and less than every second person reads one book a year, libraries are called to play a leading role in defence of democracy and against social exclusion.

A book is a seed of responsibility and a library is an outpost of freedom, especially in a country where – as said by Tullio De Mauro, one of the most engaged Italian intellectuals – every third person belonging to the ruling and entrepreneurial class never reads books and newspapers. A manager like this can run his firm – he said –, only pursuing his personal and immediate interest, for as long as he doesn't get handcuffed.

In a recent survey on the state of the art of culture in Italy, he bitterly underlined that, while the poor have been always far from reading, nowadays a new reading emergency concerns first of all the upper class, cut off for a third from the reading habit.

While publishers have interpreted reading promotion only as a chance to increase sales, and schools have been held captive by an authoritative and instrumental model of reading practises, within the last fifteen years Italian librarians have been engaged in a heated debate on the role and the meaning of reading promotion, as a tool of social development.

Some of them have asserted that promotion was an ambiguous and dangerous field. In their opinion, librarians should have served at their best the already-readers, instead of running after the non-readers as if they were infidels to convert. As a matter of fact, we must admit they were right when they appealed to Mr. Pennac's "Right of non-reading".

Librarians working in the biggest and grounded libraries have left the promotion challenge in the hands of those colleagues working in the poorest and smallest ones, the so called "barefoot libraries". They considered such librarians so desperate to be compelled to leave their desks and go out to look high and low for new users.

Seen from a distance, reading promotion has been judged a luxury for those people who don't let themselves in for something more serious: instead of being

considered integral part of the library service, it has been looked upon as a matter for creative people, not calling for anything similar to study in depth or a systematic approach.

Escaping the attention of the academy, reading promotion has laid its peripheral roots into the risks of improvisation and incoherence. Nonetheless it has become the favourite field of action of the little and medium size Italian public libraries, which have staked everything on promotion, since they had not been paralysed yet by their own dimensions, improper users and the preservation of ancient collections.

Here is a clear example of this clash within our category. A conspicuous part of the professional community has never accepted the “Biblioteche fuori di sé” (Libraries out of the walls, literary speaking “libraries beside themselves”), born as a national movement in 1995 in order to share and coordinate all the ways for contaminating with the experience of reading any town corner: malls, barber and hairdresser shops, beauty treatment centres, squares, parks, fitness centres, swimming pools, pubs, hospitals, open-air markets, and, during the Summer, the beach and the nearby pine forest.

Most of these experiences have been growing in the last ten years: even though all the bookmobiles one meets in Italy can be counted on one’s fingers, we can state that nowadays a librarian is not considered a betrayer of the profession anymore if she spends her summertime carrying around heavy boxes full of children books.

After ten years of clashes and skirmishes on the dos and don’ts of “Libraries beside themselves”, the very problem is still the mere position of reading promotion and of promotion itself among the professional tools of Italian librarians. While all librarians believe the dimension of promotion is desirable, not all of them are ready to consider it as primary in their strategic actions.

Especially in these last years, when the public fund cuts have left their deep marks on our budgets, promotion actions have been the first to fall, while they should be considered the best answer to our libraries oxygen demand.

And now let me rummage in our professional drawers, in order to pick something to share with you this afternoon. I’ve chosen three different perspectives I would like to show you as the main challenges we are engaged with at present and will be in the near future. Each perspective can be read as a field of action, where we are acting some winning strategies, especially whenever we are able to abandon our traditional tendency to work on our own and therefore to cooperate with other librarians and other members of the book chain.

Working alone in order to see in capitals only the name of our library – and first of all, in order not to see the names of other libraries – is our favourite sport. One can easily understand how this anti-systemic approach burns our best energies and turns us all into hamsters running inside the wheel. We run, run, run, but we keep sadly staying at the same place. Our defeats ought to teach us how to maximize resources and how to reach a more mature attitude towards the relationship between our own library and the rest of the world. Time is now ripe, we cannot wait anymore, if we want to survive.

First challenge: Reading and love

In our cultural background there is still - hidden somewhere - the secret idea that reading is useful and good for everybody. This is true, of course, especially when the reading habit is used for studying, researching and improving one’s knowledge and abilities for life and work. It’s that kind of reading beloved by teachers, by parents and by aunts too – as we learn from the famous Swiss writer Peter Bichsel,

who has explained in his delicious book why in the world there are more aunts than readers.

On the highest step of the podium we are called to place not the functional reading, but the free one. It is the useless and wandering kind of reading which cannot tolerate any control or report cards, but it's always looking for secret passages and conspiratorial ceremonials. We are speaking of reading as transgression and infringement of the supreme law on the right use of life: "Don't read, study! Do anything useful, don't lose your time!". All the reader's life is a hurdle race between reading and its competitors: family, friends, school, job, tv, hobbies, shopping, internet, sport, sleeping.

The pleasure of reading is a disease spread by playmates, schoolfellows and in general people one is in contact with. The library can play the role of the incubatory room for the contagion. It is the readers' hatchery, where a book can be perceived as an individual and unrepeatable journey in Wonderland. One must have the opportunity to discover new worlds, make mistakes and meet authors and stories they like or dislike, instead of being carefully guided along the tracks of their habits and tastes. Going off the rails is not the effect of a dangerous accident, but it's a precious gift the library can offer anybody.

In Italy we have tried to act this first challenge, bringing two rifles to firing position: *seduction* and *sedition*.

A *seductive library* is not only a place full of opportunities, where one can find good music, good friends, good coffee. It's a place where one can meet oneself and recover the time and the space to think, to breathe again, to allow themselves to re-weave their links among the community. The library we look at is the new main square of the town; it's the crossroads of every citizen's story. Here anybody can meet the sense of their past and the roots of their future. Seduction in this context means the ability of the library to lead its users to discover what they don't know yet about themselves and about the world; it means giving them the opportunity to decide what they want to become. A library card is a passport to the future: all one's wealth is here, on the shelves. It's enough to stretch out one hand.

The tools of seduction belong naturally to the field of love.

I'll now show you a promotional library product I planned for my library, keeping in mind the teenagers as one of the toughest target of users. This product is a booklet similar to a perfume bottle, and the title sounds like the name of the famous perfume brand, but mixed with part of the word "library". So this false bottle contains twenty "reading sprays" which promise the readers to leave "that pleasant sensation of intelligence which will be with you all day long".

The message is: Your charm will be irresistible if you are a reader, and thanks to the books offered by the library and reviewed in the booklet, everyone will fall under your spell. This is a joke, of course, but at the same time we know that it's true: if one reads, one becomes better.

One of the first promotional products I planned many years ago was a box of pills against brain ageing and faltering memory. It looked like a common drug present in the medicine cabinet of every home in Italy, and - I suppose - all over the world. These two products were very successful and helped us gain new readers among teens and young adults.

Every year, an important and serious public library, The Berio Library in Genoa, schedules a beauty contest among its female users: the bare aim, of course, is not looking for the best "Miss Berio Library", but it is looking for a new position of the library among the values of the common users.

In a library system around Milan, in the more developed area of the country even in the library field, librarians have planned a project called "Love at first sight", in which they are engaged to share with the users their passion as readers, selecting

books they have personally loved. Users are invited to choose among the books put into the limelight, to add new titles and leave the books read on the bench dedicated to the lovers of reading.

The reading advice from librarians to readers is the *trait-d'union* between seduction and sedition.

In this context *sedition* means on part of the librarians a new research of connivance with readers, who can now find in them not only public servants but also travelling companions, able to recommend some good books to read and advise against the junk offered by the cultural and entertainment industry. Some libraries have begun to advise users against bad books, allowing new readers to acquire the reading habit, preserving feeble readers from the risk of abandoning it and helping heavy readers to spend their reading time in a more significant way. Time for reading is precious, and the library is the garrison for the reader who must be armed to the teeth.

Second challenge: Reading and success

Within the last twenty years, we have lived in a country where it has been possible to thrive without reading: Italians haven't needed books in order to buy Porsche cars. Who cares for libraries and books, if one is engaged in getting on, if one is focused on becoming rich and famous? Football players and tv starlets, the heroes of the new generation in my country, are less familiar with books than my pussycat is.

The hypocritical curtain of deference to reading has been unveiled. In a famous sample survey polled about 10 years ago among young people, most interviewees proclaimed themselves proud of being non-readers, and with no more sense of guilt, they gave vent to all their hate against readers, for being as spineless and boring as one of the most depressing national poets, Giacomo Leopardi, who was a heavy reader, and hunch-backed too.

Our challenge, as librarians, consists in showing how libraries can be useful to anyone to become rich and famous. Nothing strange: we have to soil our hands with models of thinking far from our mood and with values we perceive as so different from ours. But we are called to use all the possible tools for communicating with people of any age, and draw their attention. We have to gain their trust, and let them discover how deep our strength to better their lives is, however they would want to better them.

Especially in the last years university libraries have been strongly engaged in a war against the so called "library anxiety", the sensation of inadequacy and uneasiness felt by many students, when they are not familiar yet with the rules of the library and the logic of data bases, when they feel embarrassed about calling librarians for help or they suppose to be the only ones in the University who aren't OPAC geeks.

The effects of library anxiety are not only a matter for the library reputation, but first of all are concerned with students' success. We know that students with a problem of library misuse have a habit of wasting their time, putting off the end of the courses and reaching a lower level of quality in their degree thesis. This is not only a problem of library instructions. From the students' point of view, this is a problem of personal success.

In this sense, we are engaged to change gear, and show how useful a library can be to improve one's conditions in life, and how good library literacy actions are not only for one's culture, but also for one's personal life projects.

We are undertaking the difficult task of discovering the secret links between reading promotion actions and library instruction programs, which in our tradition belong to different fields, are acted by different professionals and are dedicated to different user targets. Nowadays we need to bring them together, to knock down the fence between competent users and good readers, and unite the two sets of library programs in the eyes of the single reader.

In many libraries in Italy we are pursuing this aim beginning from the information literacy actions against digital divide, in the context of adult education and long life learning on one side, and in the relationship with schools on the other one. The point of view of the single reader, our lord and master, allows me to introduce the third challenge.

Third challenge: Reading as a personal experience

Reading is always a personal experience. One cannot promote it from the outside. As Mr. Pennac said in his *Reads like a novel*, one cannot compel anyone to be happy to read, as one cannot compel anyone to love them. Every time one uses the imperative mood with the verb “to read”, one is surely looking for trouble. Every promoting action can work only on the level of conditions of reading. If the actions of a library (or of any other cultural agency) don’t match the personal conditions in which the single would-be-reader can develop their attitude, these actions cannot be effective. Economics has developed in the last years a new branch, dedicated to the role of personal experience as the key to success in market competition. Even if we work in the non-profit area of social action, we have to learn from these new perspectives the importance of tailoring our service offer on every single reader.

Next March the 9th and 10th in Milan there is a national conference devoted to this topic, which is quite new for us – if you are interested, I’ll leave some copies of the program for you translated into English.

The “bespoke library” is the place where every reader can plan whether, why, how and when “library” may be written in their diary. In the last years this perspective has helped us to speed up the work with reading groups, both in person and at a distance (the library blogs), which in several parts of the country represent one of the most interesting innovations in the relationship between libraries and readers.

The ultimate challenge (last, but not least): reading, libraries and librarians

There are some secret links among the fortunes of reading, libraries and librarians. It’s easy to assert that wherever the reading habit is deep-rooted, libraries have the opportunity to grow and librarians are professionals reckoning on social regard.

In Italy the reputation of libraries and librarians is strictly dependent on their sad destiny. Please, just think of the situation of school libraries. They don’t exist, so their absence is the clear proof that they are superfluous. In some cases they do exist, but... do you know what are the necessary requisites for a teacher to become a school librarian? No LIS degree needed, no professional qualification. One must be formally declared mentally or physically unable to teach. This is the main way to become a school librarian in Italy. Oh, I have made a little mistake. I’ve said “This is the main way”. I should have said “This *was*”, since this way doesn’t exist anymore: within the last months, the figure of the school librarian has been cancelled from the board, as it were a late train. Thanks to the new law on public education, the so-called “School Reformation” of 2003 the school library has disappeared, and the juvenile literature has been removed from the syllabus: no more room for Alice, Pinocchio, Peter Pan, Tom Sawyer. No more room for treasure islands, secret

gardens and white whales. You cannot learn how to make money in order to buy your second Porsche car, if you spend your time with Moby Dick.

In this cultural climate, you can imagine how hard librarians must work, all together, in search of new and effective alliances with teachers, educators, associations, publishers, writers and intellectuals. We have to save and preserve our cultural heritage and at the same time we are called to open it to the globalized world and its challenges and opportunities.

In 2004 we slowly began to join forces, speak with a unified voice and give up the war against all the others. I'm referring to the new experience of "Passaparola" ("Word of mouth"), the annual meeting where all the members of the book chain can share their thoughts, programs and actions for promoting the reading habit, out of the logic of conflict, but in a systemic perspective.

As librarians in Italy we are swimming in a stormy sea but we are holding out. Every morning, when we raise the shutter of our shop, a new battle begins. We have to prove that we perform unique services vital to the community's well being and that we provide excellent value in return for tax money. Be sure, dear colleagues, we are stubborn and die hard.

Just in the last weeks, at the beginning of the year, the National Government and the local ones have cut a precious part of our annual funds we spend to survive. My library too is engaged, just in these days, with the risk of cutting on the opening hours.

Less library in a community is less democracy and less freedom. Less peace and less equity. I strongly believe in that. But the game is not yet over and a spirit of challenge and a desire for change inspire our daily actions. As Mr. Belushi said "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". It's time to go on the offensive. And time will tell who is the winner!

Thank you for your attention.