



## Geography's preeminence: Italian Commission for the Knowledge and Study of Geography at School

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Since on 30 March 2022, by Decree of the Minister Prof. Patrizio Bianchi, the “Commission for the knowledge and study of geography at school” in Italy was established at the Ministry for Education, with an act which owing to its institutional importance not only boasts very few precedents in the history of the relations between Geography (understood as a community of scholars and teachers) and the Institutions called upon to foster and guarantee its teaching, but having the clear political meaning for the goals of such provision and for the moment in time in which it is implemented.

Its institutional importance derives in concrete terms at historical level, not only therefore at an ideal one, from the premises according to which both Minister and Ministry deemed it is necessary to grant the request for the establishment of the Commission proposed by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, backed by all the main scientific and cultural Associations of the sector.

Such proposal began to take shape at the beginning of the summer of 2021 and was seriously taken into consideration by the Ministry before it reached its final decision.

By Decree of a Minister of the Republic, it can in fact be stated that:

- the main importance of geography as a common good, a cornerstone of critical knowledge, the understanding and teaching of which represent the basis of education to sustainability and citizenship, knowledge of the territory and global processes, as well as the principles of democracy and equality among citizens;
- the recognition of geography as a common good and as the element for the critical knowledge of territories, the environment, landscape, kinds of life in its spatial dimensions and relative interactions with the socio-economic and physical elements of the Planet Earth, a basis for present and future experiences, represents also the preeminent instrument to generate new models of development to reset the conflicts between generations, coherent with the sustainable development objectives established by the 2030 United Nations Agenda

and consequently is acknowledged

- the need to set up a Commission, aimed at the drafting and formulation of proposals that will recognise the preeminent

importance of the knowledge and teaching of geography in the education system.

The decision to establish the Commission must therefore be interpreted not only as the recognition of the importance of the teaching of geography at educational, didactic and cultural levels, but also as an official acknowledgment on the part of the Institutions that such recognition has been lacking with regard to geography in Italian schools until now. Over the course of years, the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, in synergy with other cultural institutions and international bodies, has repeatedly not only reported this shortcoming, but has also duly documented the by no means farsighted mechanisms and choices bringing about this chronic failing and the socially devastating impact in taking away the guarantee of a diffused geographical literacy from whole generations of future citizens.

With the establishment of the Commission, such issue can no longer be silenced, as often happened in the past instrumentally and undoubtedly dishonestly at an intellectual level even before a didactic and educational one, like a biased claim in fact, representing an opportunity to reverse course also along that process of progressive divarication between legitimation at scientific level (advanced and in line with the scientific progress and cultural tensions that the subject expresses in Italy and abroad) and public legitimation (much more than “late”) which in Italy has taken on an almost radical dimension, causing considerable damage not only at school level, but in all those sectors (health and public health, territory maintenance and government, prevention, management of and attention to social inequalities and the conflicts arising from these, programming and planning of the territory, conservation and valorisation of the environmental, cultural and landscape heritage, reconversion of production systems and the reorganisation of work towards sustainability etc.) in which the correct knowledge and wide culture of the territory should not have been ignored.

The unpreparedness in the prevention and initial inadequacy in tackling the spread of the Covid-19 contagion, just as the need to put on the plane of reality (and measure their efficacy) the policies and instruments implemented first to

contain and then to reduce the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, represented for everyone who did not know and/or were sceptical about the social function of geographical knowledge and the competences deriving from it, a dramatic (and undoubtedly undesirable) discovery/denial.

In the same way the slow progress for the attainment of the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda and the need for a considerable acceleration in the ecological transition process represent the confirmation (or the chance for a clear and definitive realisation for the incurable deniers of the cultural value of geography, often fuelled by entrenched policy opportunisms) like an extensive and structured counter action to a widespread geographical illiteracy might react to a general interest, insofar as indispensable leverage both to guarantee a genuine common commitment in supporting such radical changes as citizens of the world, and to increase the efficacy of the measures implemented to both ensure the permanence of the effects in a transcalar scenario and with a sincere intergenerational vision.

A need for knowledge and geographical skills made equally urgent by the current barbarity of the return of war in Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which unfortunately reminds us of the impossibility of taking for granted the capacity to critically interpret reality and, above all, the representations (often cartographic) that are produced and conveyed of this reality. This conflict has violently reposed, according to a sometimes excessively Manichean and somewhat simplistic and misleading vision, the incompleteness of the process of cultural emancipation by the idea of State/Nation/Power as well as the full affirmation of the right to self-determination. A banalisation of the complexity of territorial reality that finds its legitimation at political and public level also by reason of a manipulation that feeds on the incapacity to govern and produce knowledge with the diachronic and synchronic dimension engaging in dialogue, a capacity which instead a proper and complete geography education make it possible to acquire and apply from the very first school years.

These considerations can be translated into the belief that the Commission's work will mainly have to focus on the acknowledgement and monitoring of all those elements of a structural nature which represent (at administrative, organisational and legislative level) an impediment for the recognition of the preeminence of geography in Italian schools, as referred to in the Minister's decree. That is, to build a basis of knowledge (also with respect to the limits posed for example in relation to the data available and/or accessible) from which to formulate the opinions requested. In fact, all too often in an artfully misleading way, the public and scientific debate on the role of geography is reduced to the poor performance of geographical knowledge, and therefore by extension of those teaching/applying it, proposed as a reflection of an inadequacy caused by a failure to update the methods and contents of the discipline.

Such debate is more than often fuelled by specialists (teachers by training, educational publishing, school in the wide sense), who, despite not having any preparation and/or title that might qualify them as experts of didactics of geography and/or geographical research applied to didactics, plug (or sell) personal opinions as absolute truths with universal value.

This is a harmful operation not so much in this regard, since teachers and scholars have no lack of appropriate fora and suitable occasions to refute theses of a more adventurist than pioneering nature, as in the finalisation of the initiatives supporting the teaching of geography.

The problem is not geography (whose updating of methods and contents is guaranteed not only by constant metacognitive practice and the ongoing research activity as for every subject, but that it takes advantage of a documented propensity for interdisciplinarity, as much in didactics as in research), but the evident mismatching between educational needs/demand for training and the insufficient and rarefied offer of the teaching of geography and inbound training and service of teachers qualified for the teaching of geography.

The Minister assigns the task to the Commission of:

- a) drafting a periodic report on the state of the study and knowledge of geography in the entire school system;
- b) formulating proposals for geographical education and sustainability, for incoming and in-service teachers of primary and secondary schools, for the elaboration of a three-year plan of the training offer (PTOF), with particular reference to sustainable development as a follow-up to the *Piano RiGenerazione Scuola* and for the valorisation of the teaching premises as contexts of learning and the promotion of outdoor education;
- c) monitoring European and international good practice with regard to geography education;
- d) proposing updated and technologically innovative didactic instruments for the teaching of geography, also in an interdisciplinary approach;
- e) contributing a new geographical literacy to promote values of solidarity, foster inclusion practices and stimulate actions aimed at reducing inequalities.

The following have been called upon to carry out this task:

- Riccardo Morri, National President of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers and President of the Master's Degree in Management and valorisation of the territory at the *Dipartimento di Lettere e Culture moderne* of the Sapienza University of Rome, in the role of Coordinator;
- Gino De Vecchis, Honorary Professor of geography of the Sapienza University of Rome;
- Dino Gavinelli, Maître de Conférences des Universités – section 23 Géographie physique, humaine, économique et régionale, President of the Management Committee of the *Scuola di Scienze della Mediazione linguistica e culturale*, University of Milan;
- Cristiano Giorda, Advisor for CUN Area 11, Vicepresident of the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences, *Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione*, University of Turin;
- Silvia Grandi, expert of the Technical Scientific Committee *RiGenerazione Scuola*

- for support in initiatives regarding sustainable development in schools;
- Elisa Magnani, Coordinator of the Master’s Degree Course in Geography and territorial processes, *Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà*, University of Bologna;
  - Carlo Mariani, *Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa* (INDIRE), Researcher;
  - Giovanni Mariani, School Head of the Istituto IISS *Pietro Sette di Santeramo in Colle*;
  - Daniela Pasquinelli d’Allegra, primary school teacher, Lumsa University of Rome;
  - Paola Pepe, geography teacher in upper secondary school since 1999, certified CLIL methodology, *Istituto Istruzione Superiore Statale “Pio La Torre”*, Palermo;
  - Mario Tozzi, *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* and member of the Scientific Committee of the *Touring Club Italiano*;

– Cristina Stringher, *Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione* (INVALSI), Researcher.

A severe limitation to the full deployment of the energy and professionalism placed at the disposal of the Ministry is nevertheless represented by the time available to the Commission, since its duration is foreseen as not going “beyond the end of the government mandate of the Minister”: since, if “unforeseen events” do not occur (government crisis), the end of the present legislature will be on 23 March 2023, the Commission will thus have to demonstrate that it is able to best fulfil and as far as possible the tasks assigned to it in only 12 months.



Figure 1. The Decree which establishes the “Commission for the knowledge and study of geography at school” in Italy. Article 1: Establishment and Tasks. Source: Italian Minister for Education.



Figure 2. Patrizio Bianchi, Italian Minister for Education. Source: <https://www.raiscuola.rai.it>.