

From urchins to sailors: an educative and civic experiment in Naples (1913-1928)

The story of “Caracciolo”, between poverty, social solidarity and education challenges.

Maria Antonietta Selvaggio, Prof.Dr

Researcher in Sociology and Professor in Social Research Technique and Methodology
Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences, University of Salerno, Italy

Abstract

This paper proposes to examine Giulia Civita Franceschi’s work in the city of Naples, in favour of abandoned childhood. Between 1913 and 1928, she obtained by the Ministry of Navy and steered the training ship *Caracciolo*, which became for many urchins their home and family. So, they had the occasion to be saved from misery and delinquency. While before it they crowded streets, squares and arcades of the city, searching charity and ready to steel for surviving, on board ship they became *little sailors*, living a laborious and restrained life. Civita, inspiring to the concept of the sea as an educator, showed that thanks to her method, edged children and boys could become citizens, conscious of their rights and duties. The ship was site of visits by Italian and foreign delegations, which went to observe closer an educative experiment, considered as a pattern to imitate.

The ship was a «second birth» for the Neapolitan urchins, offering them a new starting point, not an arrival point or a temporary protective recovery. The orientation impressed by Giulia Civita, in fact, marked the “Caracciolo” among other similar experiences as a unique educative pattern.

Keywords: urchins; sea; Caracciolo, training ship; educative pattern; second birth.

Memory, responsible heritage and research

The paper we present derives from an operation which is at the same time a historical search and a memory retrieving. It is the case of a reminiscences patrimony, remained enclosed for long time in familiar and domestic spaces; for a little while it has been rendering publicly available. Everything starts from the discovery of a private archive, from which the photo-documentary exhibition *Da scugnizzi a marinaretti. L’esperienza della Nave Asilo ‘Caracciolo’ 1913-1928¹* was born. The archive, whose holder was Ornella Labriola (Arturo Labriola’s and Nadine Skortzova’s daughter) died in 1991, has

¹ The exhibition, launched at the Maritime Museum of Naples in April 2009, has become a circulating show. The prospective is to make it host in a public building in Naples. For a complete illustration of the exhibition paths you can see Antonio Mussari and Maria Antonietta Selvaggio (editors), *Da scugnizzi a marinaretti. L’esperienza della Nave Asilo “Caracciolo” 1913-1928. Mostra foto-documentaria*, Naples, ESA, 2010.

arrived at The Maritime Museum of Naples through a *caracciolino* 's descendants, called Gennaro Aubry², linked to Mrs. Giulia Civita Franceschi (known as "Montessori" of the sea and headmistress of the Training Ship) by a filial relationship. For long time the tracks of a extraordinary educative experiment, addressed to abandoned childhood in Naples, and admired at international level for its method originality, has kept buried in the folds of so many *caracciolini*'s private memory, detracted to the city's public memory and the national history of educative practices. The archive, acquired in the photographic part during a first stage, has been completed with the donatio of the whole documentation to the Museum. It includes a copious correspondence, a press review with published articles on the "Caracciolo" in various occasions (visits by national and foreign authorities, acknowledgements and witnesses), some printing bulks, official documents, materials concerning the institution, Ship administration and management, personal notes and drafts by Giulia Civita Franceschi, speeches texts pronounced in public events.

The experience of "Caracciolo" Training Ship, inspired to the «redeemer sea» principle³, was unfolded during the years of 1913/1928. At receiving over seven hundred road boys and children was called Mrs. Giulia Civita Franceschi (1870-1957). Her work was appreciated by great personalities as Maria Montessori, Édouard Claparède, Enrico Ferri and by several Italian and foreign experts, who visited the Ship to observe closer the so called «Civita's system».

An educative approach, appropriate at minors' recovery and integration, at risk of delinquency and exposed at any kind of diseases, both physical and moral. The privileged objective on the Ship was the conquer of dignity linked to the job, solidarity and affects. The "Caracciolo" Ship, in fact, was not only a training school for maritime activities, but a community in which every wean, respected in his own needs but also encouraged and enhanced in his own attitudes, was «helped *individually* to improve

² Among others, the journalist Franco Avati talks about him. Avati is the author of an article written at Giulia Civita Franceschi's death, happened on the 27th October 1957. «About the little mariners who grew up on the "Caracciolo" Ship, some became officials, others served with honour their operating in the Navy. Gennaro Aubry reached the grade of machine captain and was decorated with two silver medals. For Gennaro Aubry Mrs. Giulia had always had a weakness, she had perceived that boy would never have abandoned. And Gennarino went always visiting his good friend. He was the most assiduous [...]. Four of her guys - Buono, Di Iorio, Aubry and Ernano - have wanted to take her coffin on their own shoulders; many others have accompanied her towards her extreme home». (*Ricordo di Giulia Civita Franceschi. Di una vecchia nave borbonica fece una casa per 700 "scugnizzi"*, on "Il Messaggero", 9th November 1957, p. 3. Maritime Museum Archive in Naples, since now AMMN, Documents Civita-Labriola-Aubry, *Press Review*).

³ We take back here the happy expression used by Jack La Bolina in his article *La nave scuola "Caracciolo". Mare di Napoli, redentore*, on "Il Secolo XX", n. 8, 1914, pp. 713-722. J. La Bolina, pseudonym of Augusto Vittorio Vecchi (1842-1932), Candido Augusto Vecchi's son (1814-1869), a Garibaldi's supporter. After leaving the Navy with the lieutenant junior grade, he was fond of teaching and writing. With the pseudonym of Jack La Bolina, drew out from *The last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, yielded a wide literary and essay writing production, in which he preserved a central place to the sea, the naval science and the Navy. In 1894, he founded the Italian Naval League, publishing articles and interventions on the Italian Naval League periodical review the "Rivista marittima", and on other magazines for long time. He was interested in juvenile literature, addressing to the childhood part of his production and collaborating to "Il Giornale dei Bambini" by Ferdinando Martini and the "Giornalino della Domenica" by Vamba (pseudonym of Luigi Bertelli). He was among the most faithful friends of Giulia Civita, with Giulia and her son Emilio he maintained a regular and long correspondence.

and develop himself in a harmonic way»⁴. For these characteristic traits Mrs. Civita defined her method as an «natural education».

The story of “Caracciolo” Training Ship and Giulia Civita’s personality

The bill by the minister Pasquale Leonardi Cattolica represents the document thanks to which the Ministry of Navy gave to Naples the old pirocorvet “Caracciolo”. After the ratification of the law (13rd July 1911, n. 724) and the institution of the Consortium pro Training Ship with the approving of its statute (Royal Enactment 23rd June 1912, n. 758), the ship was inaugurated in April of 1913. Different personalities contributed to the realization of this accomplishment. They, in various way stimulated, inspired and made possible the concretization of the project, we remember Enrichetta Chiaraviglio Giolitti, David and Elvira Levi-Morenos, Antonia Persico Nitti, Lucy Re-Bartlett, the deputy Francesco Dentice of Accadia, speaker of the law at the Chamber of Deputies, the marquis of Campolattaro, the first president of the citizens’ Committee pro Training Ship. We can’t leave out that among the first proponents for the transference in Italy of the *training ships* English experience there was since 1878 Pasquale Villari. Being a deep connoisseur of the good results achieved with that system in England, he had insisted on the necessity that the abandoned infancy problem had tackled looking after «the origin of the malaise»⁵, recognizing that the idea of *school - vessels* had already been suggested by Jessie White Mario in her essay *La miseria in Napoli*. Here the English journalist and one of the notable figure of our *Risorgimento*, quoting England as a model, wrote:

The bairns, here educated as cabin boys aboard the vessels, are orphans, needy and derelict people, picked up before they become *rei*, and such is their success, that all the captains make required of these ship-boys and at sixteen they pay them like men⁶.

When the “Caracciolo” was inaugurated, the initiative already presented two previous examples in Italy: the “Garaventa” Workshop Ship in Genoa, working since 1883 and aimed at accepting young men who had served jail punishments, and the “Scilla” Training Ship, promoted in Venice by David and Elvira Levi-Morenos since 1906 and working as fishing school for fishermen’s orphans of Adriatic Sea.⁷ The “Caracciolo”, differently, was destined to host both maritime men’s orphans and the abandoned bairns of Naples - «tottered» and «tottering» in the criminological language of the

⁴ Giulia Civita Franceschi, *Un esperimento educativo: la nave asilo Caracciolo. Relazione inaugurale di Giulia Civita Franceschi, Congresso delle donne napoletane, 29-30 giugno 1947*, Naples, A. Caldarola, 1950, p. 4.

⁵ Cfr. Pasquale Villari, *Una proposta utile*, on “Rassegna Nazionale”, 2nd September 1878.

⁶ Jessie White Mario, *La miseria in Napoli*, Capitol Seventh “I Bastimenti-Scuola”, Florence, Le Monnier, 1877, p. 260.

⁷ For a complete map of the assistance institutions promoted by Ministero of Navy, you can see Francesco Loriga, *Storia delle fondazioni ed istituzioni assistenziali della Marina. Il caso delle Navi Asilo*, in Antonio Mussari and Maria Antonietta Selvaggio (editors), *Da scugnizzi a marinaretti*, quoted, pp. 104-117.

time -, better known in Italy and around the world with the name of *scugnizzi*. The headmistress Giulia Civita Franceschi came aboard the Ship in August of 1913 at the age of forty-three and remained there until 1928, year in which she was expelled by the fascism that, in its totalitarian intent, wanted to insert this educative institute in the Balilla National Work, interrupting in this way the peculiar mission.

The fascist anger, - will remember Giulia in one of her note of '46 written in third person –exceeded in depriving the good and beautiful things to those people who had wanted and created them, just for a naïve, transparent intent to adorn themselves with the things others had accomplished. It depleted Mrs. Civita Franceschi's works, it depleted her boys, with its ill-judged hardness which pretended to be a virile behavior, a particular mask, this, concerning weeks and nerds⁸.

Giulia was born in Naples on the 16th April 1870, the eldest daughter of Emilio Franceschi and Marina Vannini, who moved from Florence in the Neapolitan city in 1867. At the age of nineteen she married the criminal lawyer Teodoro Civita and they only had one son Emilio. He was one of the most valid collaborator of his mother in the “Caracciolo” adventure. She died at the age of eighty-seven on the 27th October 1957.

As about her “wild temper” Olga Arcuno has left us a precise witness:

She who always had firmly, and boldly sometimes, stood up to all the authorities during her management at the “Caracciolo”, stood up to her rivals until 1933, when at the end she had to go under. In her soul remained rebellion and bitterness, jointed an anxious expectancy of better times⁹.

Arcuno refers to the Fishermen and Little Mariners School for which were concealed from the State itself Fusaro and Mare Morto Lakes. Civita worked in it from '28 to '33, when «the fascists roughly took possess of the Lakes, to use them for profit aim»¹⁰. Among the negative consequences of the supremacy act, there is also the non-realization of a project, already imagined in Civita's mind for long time, that is the open to the abandoned female children and girls, so called *scugnizze*, of her work concerning the recovery and rehab, destined up to then exclusively to their male children and boys of the same age. With the birth of the Fishermen and Little Mariners School in 1921, in fact, they had foresaw nearby Fusaro Lake a building for female children but the iter for its realization, hardly hampered by private interests, had an unsuccessful result. So, we need to arrive at the post-war years to find information

⁸ AMMN, Documents Civita-Labriola-Aubry, *Personal notes Civita*.

⁹ Olga Arcuno, *Giulia Civita Franceschi: dare una casa e una famiglia all'infanzia abbandonata*, on “Solidarietà. Mensile di educazione civile e politica”, n. 7, XIV year, November 1957.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

concerning Mrs. Civita. And two women, the journalist Lieta Nicodemi and the CAF (Female Activities Center) vice-president but also the director of the monthly review "Solidarietà", Olga Arcuno, to bring her back on the scene to celebrate her merits. But not only these. Actually, they proposed to obtain for the forlorn infancy of Naples, after the Second World Conflict, a new season for their dignity acquisition following the "Caracciolo" educative pattern. At this calling Giulia Civita, nevertheless her suffered grievances and delusions, answered with great impetus, providing a convinced and ardent explanation of her method. She illustrated her results, soliciting them not to let the seed of a so much fecund experience die. The opportunity was offered her, besides Lidia Nicodemo's and Olga Arcuno's articles on the "Risorgimento" and "Solidarietà" pages, also by the open speech entrusted her in occasion of Neapolitan Women Congress (29th of June 1947). It was then that «without false modesty», she renewed, jointing the fundamental concepts of her method, also the female «primate» in the educative and rehabilitation field.

In every field, woman has wanted to conquer knowledge and situations which were, until some lustra behind, exclusive inheritance of men. Many women have put every study to show and have showed the possibility of an equality, which nowadays no one would like to deny. Nevertheless how many of us have thought to overturn the problem and precise which and how many are the fields concerning their exclusive heritage, and no studies, or grades and degrees could alienate? A sector where incontestably we find such our primate is that of very young people education, that of the re-education of many poor creatures, of whom the brutality of things and men has violated the purer heritage. So it is what ten lustra behind would be poetically called the "innocence" and more realistically today we indicate as joy and right to live according to our own age. Such simple concepts are the concepts that brought to life the educative system which promoted and gave fame, without false modesties, to the Training Ship "Caracciolo" ...¹¹.

But we understand well from her speech tone, and above all from its conclusion, that what lies at her heart is the *scugnizzi's* destiny, that dramatic problem that comes back today to rage in this our tormented city and it will rage so much when the years render more visible the consequences of the passage of two armies – the former of owners, and the latter of winners¹².

Meanwhile her hopes that this new atmosphere of freedom could favor, more than in the past, the problem solving, went disappointed. We can read on "L'Unità" the day after her death:

¹¹ Giulia Civita Franceschi, *Un esperimento educativo*, quoted, p. 1.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 10.

unfortunately the conditions are not revealed in favor as Mrs. Civita hoped. The problem she talked about has not been solved not even faced by whom could have and would have due: but her teaching remains.

And plays, as a severe blame for the authorities, the accent put on a moral heritage, which passes on her female friends and colleagues rather than on the institutional world:

... won't forget her female friends, from the teacher Olga Arcuno to Mrs Lieta Nicodemi, and all the headmistress of UDI, who had always her close of them and ready to take part in their initiatives¹³.

In fact, so Olga Arcuno writes in November 1957 on the monthly "Solidarietà":

Giulia Civita Franceschi, passing away during the night between the 26th and 27th of October u. s., has left a bidding morally heritage to whom that have had the fortune to stay near her - and understand her authentic personality - from the end of the last World Conflict. Then she, going out from her silence and isolation - which she was constricted to by fascists, who were responsible for the closing of her educator exceptional work -, with renewed energy by an immense hope took contact with so many people who could help her in the rebirth, she thought, of the human redemption initiative, which, in the best years of her life, she had integrally dedicated herself to¹⁴.

The Ship as «second birth»

Make the ship becoming a «second birth» - according to Giulia's words - meant above all to offer the Neapolitan *scugnizzi* a new starting point. Not an arrival point or a temporary protective recovery. The program foresaw a growing path in which the acquisition effort of responsibility was never separated from the tutorship certainty. It was not easy to conceal protection and freedom. It would be easier to create a total, protective, disciplining and segregating institution. It is frequent, in fact, to read among various memorials lines that the "Caracciolo" without Giulia's intervention would have fatally had a soldierly setting.

When the "Caracciolo" was destined to regenerate some *scugnizzi*, it was almost inevitable that people thought about a house of correction, a minor criminals' reformatory, in the sense and in the way in which they came commonly intended then. And where the repression prejudice had to dictate the method to apply aboard¹⁵.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Olga Arcuno, *Giulia Civita Franceschi: dare una casa e una famiglia all'infanzia abbandonata*, on "Solidarietà", quoted, p. 1.

¹⁵ Vittore Bonfigli, *La nave-asilo Caracciolo*, on "Noi & il Mondo. Rivista mensile de 'La Tribuna' ", n. 3, XI year, the 1st of March 1921, p. 174.

Such a prejudice, according to Vittore Bonfigli, was strengthened by the «thought of imitating the training ships and making this ship running neither more nor less a school for mariners students»¹⁶. It was the orientation impressed by Giulia Civita to modify the route and make the “Caracciolo” becoming a unique educative pattern among other similar experiences. On this aspect all the sources agree and there is not a document that doesn’t attribute to Mrs. Giulia the merit to have experimented a new method, even recognizing in it Montessori’s elements, but revised and adapted in an original form, until obtaining incomparable results. Her art was about education, inspired to some children’s natural needs, first of all the affective one and soon after that of keeping themselves occupied and acting. A «natural education» which she had made adherent to the particular lives of the *scugnizzi*, street children assimilated only in part to an abstract definition of the childhood and boyhood. In her work happened the shut among the socio-relief, educative and prevent prospective, through an action concentrated on two factors – the subject and his life contest - and based on the fundamental principle of respect for childhood, declined also in a form anything but rhetorical of motherly love.

For these reasons the “Caracciolo” is detached by a common institute of shelter and appeared rather as a particular adoption modality. Picked up people were considered there adoptive sons of a cultural not biological family. In such a way Giulia wanted to overturn the orphan and/or abandoned child’s statute, without a protective familiar net, arranging around this very weak individual a hedger habitat, a family vicar, as much as possible far from reformatory atmospheres and orphanage. The most efficient trial of the success concerning these model is in the pride statement made by Giulia Civita, after a long time-space, remembering her «caracciolini» and their affective relation which went on maintaining itself alive among them and towards their female educator.

Lots of them have today a family, someone has also grandsons, nevertheless with unchanged affect yet, they remember me and all those who collaborated and smoothed them the way as I did. [...] It still remains among them, very alive, their sense of narrow brotherhood that, after so many sticks, tries yet I *obtained what I desired*¹⁷.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Giulia Civita Franceschi, *Un esperimento educativo* quoted, p. 9.

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