



Book Review

The Montessori Movement in Interwar Europe: New Perspectives

By Christine Quarfood
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In recent years, biographical studies of Maria Montessori have increasingly moved away from presenting Montessori as a singular pedagogical genius to considering Montessori as a movement builder immersed in a complicated, dense, and changing international network of theorists, practitioners, and policymakers. Scholars have highlighted the wide-ranging intellectual networks of feminists, doctors, anthropologists, philosophers, theosophists, Catholics, fascists, and pacifists whose work Montessori was reading and actively engaging with even after leaving academic research. In addition, new research presents how all of these thinkers were actively debating Montessori education, grappling with a wide range of pedagogical, theological, and philosophical issues, and defying the representation of Montessori education as a single ideological monolith.

Christine Quarfood, professor of history of ideas at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, makes a vital contribution to this conversation. Thanks to a translation from Swedish to English, Christine Quarfood's 2017 study, *Montessoris Pedagogiska Imperium: Kulturkritik och Politik i Mellankrigstidens Montessorirörelse*, is now available to English-speaking readers as *The Montessori Movement in Interwar Europe: New Perspectives*.

Quarfood is curious to examine why such dynamic expansion of the Montessori movement occurred around Europe in the interwar period. The interwar period was a time when the European public was sympathetic to an educational approach that promised lasting peace through transforming children's early experiences, even as the adults grappled with pedagogical questions that continue today about the Montessori Method.

Building off her previous research (Quarfood, 2005) on Montessori's early career and transition from working with students with disabilities to nondisabled children, Quarfood's second book, *Montessoris Pedagogiska Imperium: Kulturkritik och Politik i Mellankrigstidens Montessorirörelse* [*The Montessori Movement in Interwar Europe: New Perspectives*] (Daidalos: 2017), brings to light many contemporary education journals in the United Kingdom and Italy that reconstruct a European audience vigorously debating Montessori's ideas.

Even as the public was receptive to Montessori's larger views, audiences in Britain, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe continued to grapple with questions about how much of Montessori's ideas were original and what she borrowed from others, to what extent her approach was scientific or pedagogical, how freely teachers could innovate and whether her insistence on orthodoxy stifled innovation, who could train teachers, and the relative importance of teachers versus the educational materials.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the term "Montessorism," which was used in the 1920s and 1930s to reflect Montessori's unique worldview, akin to other isms like feminism and pacifism. The remainder of the chapter presents a snapshot outline of Montessori's career up to the 1920s.

Chapter 2 takes on a debate about the "invisible Montessori teacher," whom critics in the interwar period argued was excessively devalued in favor of emphasis on students' learning directly from Montessori materials. Echoing arguments made by Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg (2007), Quarfood suggests that teachers' central role in the Montessori classroom is their position as deliberate and studied observers conducting surveillance on their students. Quarfood connects the invisible Montessori teacher to other contemporary ideas of surveillance, from Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison model. The chapter offers intriguing questions for future empirical research: *To what extent is teacher observation impactful because the observation leads the teacher to modify their instruction? Or to what extent does the process of being observed impact the students in real time?*

Chapter 3 attempts to explain the reasons behind the Montessori movement's rapid expansion during the interwar period. In contrast to previous explanations that focused on promotional news coverage of the movement, Quarfood argues that a common point of resonance is Montessori's emphasized view of the universal need to emancipate the child from adult oppression regardless of socioeconomic circumstance and cultural background.

Whereas previous researchers had critiqued Montessori for abandoning her early work with poor children, Quarfood documents how Montessori perceived herself as the champion for universal children's rights even as she accepted the financial support of wealthy patrons.

Chapter 4 documents the interwar popularity of Montessori education in the United Kingdom. Through an analysis of articles published in the *Times Education Supplement*, Quarfood follows public debates within the British Montessori community, especially between "eclectics" who linked Montessori pedagogy to other educational reform movements and "pure Montessorians" who followed Montessori's instructions to use her Method in isolation. *Times Education Supplement* contributors debated on who could train Montessori teachers, whether teachers could modify the materials, and—with the emphasis on individual rather than class-wide work—the question of the movement giving too much power to children. With Montessori siding squarely with the orthodox camp, former members of the London Montessori Society circulated a letter in 1922 protesting Maria Montessori's "extreme autocratic government" (p. 81), which granted far more freedom to children than it did to its members, a charge that was to continue in other countries throughout Montessori's career.

Chapter 5 examines interwar-era Montessorism through what Quarfood calls Montessori's "cultural-critical phase," a middle period in her career when she was less focused on developing new curricula and instead working to influence the cultural milieu around her. Quarfood focuses on the debates published in European Montessori journal *The Call of Education* (1924–1925) with articles published in English, French, German, and Italian. In addition to continuing to hash out debates made in the British Montessori community, *The Call of Education* contributors paid special attention to Montessori's articulation of the sensitive periods of child development, linking Montessori's work to contemporary developmental psychologists and psychoanalysts.

Chapters 6 through 9 present a case study of Montessorism in Italy from 1918 until Montessori left Italy in 1934. Chapter 6 details Montessori's initial optimism in the immediate post-World War I period, when experimental government-supported Montessori schools were established in Rome, Milan, and Naples. In 1922, Italian educational experts began to abandon the Montessori experiment, critiquing the prohibitive cost of setting up classrooms, the marginalization of the teacher, and Montessori's unwillingness to allow teachers to innovate. Having pulled her support for the existing

government-supported Montessori schools in the wake of this criticism, Montessori pivoted enthusiastically toward the fascist regime as a potential new source for political and economic patronage.

Chapter 6 also includes a useful summary of the historiography (primarily in non-English sources) of Montessori's relationship with Benito Mussolini and the Italian fascist regime. Quarfood is, as are others, to some extent examining a variation of the U.S. Watergate question—"What did the president know, and when did he know it?"—as she deconstructs when Montessori realized the dangers of collaborating with the fascist regime and how complicit she was as a result. In contrast to previous scholars who variably argue that Montessori was politically naive or opportunistic, Quarfood concludes Montessori and her son, Mario Montessori, were deeply invested in the regime even with mounting evidence of its brutal nature following Mussolini's transition to dictatorial rule in 1925. In contrast to colleagues like pedagogist Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, who left Mussolini's Ministry of Education following the fascist-led assassination of socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti in 1924, the Montessoris continued to publicly support the regime until the early 1930s, when they came under increasing suspicion and surveillance for being suspected of anti-fascism.

Quarfood paints a portrait of both Montessoris enthusiastically and publicly endorsing Mussolini, meeting with him personally on several occasions, making Mussolini the honorary head of the Opera Nazionale Montessori (the national Italian Montessori organization), joining fascist organizations, and repeatedly appealing to Mussolini for greater funding to support their Italian and international endeavors. In return, Montessori schools in Italy grew to 170, and Mussolini supported a Montessori teacher training college in Rome, even as the Montessori professor of fascist culture was reporting on her fellow professors at the college.

Quarfood also reinterprets the question of why Mussolini was so willing to embrace Montessori education, given that a method focused on independence might be seen as incompatible with an increasingly totalitarian regime. In contrast to previous arguments that Mussolini elevated Montessori education for its international prestige so as to legitimize the new regime, she provides evidence that fascist politicians such as Minister of Public Education Pietro Fedele believed the Montessori Method could be particularly "fertile

soil for patriotic feeling" to build fascist Italian children (Quarfood, 187).

Rather than the increasing intrusion of fascism in the classroom, Quarfood argues that the failure of the fascist regime to fully support a Montessori teachers' college was the breaking point that led Montessori to leave Italy and abandon the project of building a system of Montessori schools throughout Italy.

Quarfood's study has a rich array of insights and historical nuggets, and the vigorous debates within Montessorism offer ample questions for further study:

- *To what extent did the unresolved questions debated by Montessori adherents and interested others limit the spread of the movement as measured in more concrete terms, such as the numbers of teachers trained and schools created?*
- *As a transnational movement with expansion occurring simultaneously in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, to what extent were these debates connected across these regions?*
- *Does any evidence show, as Montessori was entering this cultural-critical phase, that she was reflecting and changing her approach in response to public critiques, especially as she subsequently developed the Elementary curriculum of Great Lessons while working in India?*
- *And finally, how can learning the long history of debate within Montessorism instruct contemporary Montessori educators in engaging with and integrating constructive criticism and critiques?*

Ultimately, although Montessori might have hoped for obedient practitioners faithfully implementing her Method, Quarfood's study documents European, interwar-period Montessori educators vigorously and repeatedly questioning every aspect of the pedagogy. It is refreshing to uncover how this long history of intellectual dynamism and debate reveals the dense, multilayered sediment that undergirds the modern global Montessori movement.

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