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Disability and Childhood in the Asylum of Bologna: Continuity and Changes during the Nineteenth Century (1811-1902)

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L'articolo intende indagare la realtà del manicomio "Francesco Roncati" di Bologna nel periodo che va dal 1811, anno in cui si registra l'ingresso del primo minore, al 1902. Si è pensato di prendere in considerazione un lasso così ampio di tempo, per cogliere le evoluzioni, i cambiamenti, che in determinati momenti, come all'inizio del secolo scorso, si sono rivelati cruciali per l'introduzione di nuove teorie e prassi inerenti la rieducazione dei minori con deficit fisico e mentale. Attraverso l'analisi dei documenti conservati presso l'archivio dell'Istituzione "Gian Franco Minguzzi", riferibili ai casi di 396 bambini e adolescenti che vennero ricoverati nel manicomio bolognese in quell'arco temporale, è stato possibile individuare alcuni aspetti relativi alle caratteristiche, alle condizioni di vita e alle vicende personali dei minori, in rapporto all'interesse che medici e psichiatri rivolgono sempre più all'infanzia tra Otto e Novecento.

This article intends to investigate the historical reality of the "Francesco Roncati" asylum in Bologna from 1811, the year in which the first child is registered, all the way until 1902. Such a long time period is taken into consideration to grasp the evolutions and the changes which, at certain moments such as at the beginning of the last century, proved to be crucial for the introduction of new theories and practices concerning the re-education of minors with physical and mental deficits. Through the analysis of the documents retained in the archive of the "Gian Franco Minguzzi" Institution, with specific reference to the cases of 396 children and adolescents who were admitted to the Bolognese asylum at that time, it was possible to identify some aspects related to the characteristics, living conditions and personal vicissitudes of minors, in relation to the interest that doctors and psychiatrists increasingly turn to in children between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Introduction

The present contribution is in continuity with my previous publication which discussed the experiences of the internment of minors in the asylum of Bologna between 1902 and 1908, this being a particularly fruitful moment for the development of new studies in the field of psychiatry, with focus on the treatment of minors with physical and mental deficits (Raimondo, 2019).

Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, the so called "abnormal" childhood became the object of systematic observations along with consequent theorizing of psychiatry whose precursor studies date back to earlier periods. A famous case was that of the French physician Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who at the end of the eighteenth century had dealt with the Savage of the Aveyron in trying to prove his educability. Starting from this moment in the field of psychiatry, but no less in that of psychology, pediatrics and finally of pedagogy the practice of observing children starts by radiographing its behaviors, attitudes, eventual pathological manifestations, above all, in the pursuit of an attempt to distinguish a normal from an abnormal childhood, and defining the boundaries thereof. Nevertheless, the identified lines of demarcation never appeared completely clear and precise.

The city of Rome, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, can be considered a real laboratory in which doctors and educators faced the problems related to the care and education of

children in difficulty while trying to experiment and introduce new orientations and strategies. In that particular context, Maria Montessori, with regard to the “regeneration of degenerates”, emphasized that Italy was very behind France and other European countries and therefore tried to devise a method that envisaged proceeding step by step, placing as a first necessity the education of the senses; within this framework followed intelligence and morality. Moreover, we must not forget that the nineteenth century ended with the establishment of the “Lega nazionale per la protezione dei Fanciulli deficienti” (National League for the Protection of Deficient Child), created in Rome in 1899, which had found in Maria Montessori the most important spokeswoman and founder along with Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano and Clodomiro Bonfigli (Babini and Lama, 2000). The primary purpose of the League was in fact to open special institutes for the assistance and scientific observation of children, so-called “deficient”, recognizing their subjective specificities on the basis of which to foresee targeted and individualized interventions; in article 2 of the chapter “Title and Purpose” of the institution specified how for the education of “children who are in low psychic conditions” a special medical assistance was necessary, that is to say a continuous surveillance, and it was therefore not sufficient to intervene only on a correctional level. The proposals of the League immediately assumed a resonance at national level, finding support from the Minister of Public Education, Guido Baccelli¹, as well as an adhesion to local associations and committees ready to activate concrete actions, such as the establishment of educational medical institutions where children and young people could find an environment “to their size” (Babini, 1996).

The commencement of the medical-pedagogical institute², based first in San Giovanni in Persiceto and then, subsequently, in Bertalia, in which from 1899³ at the behest of the director of the asylum Francesco Roncati the minors were transferred to the city asylum, represented a significant moment in the evolution of the treatment of children and adolescents with physical and mental deficits because the obsolete practices relating to the simultaneous presence of adults and minors in the same environment were finally questioned. What appears to be really significant is that with a certain degree of foresight, Francesco Roncati already since 1872 had opposed this promiscuity by issuing a circular, in which he advocated for the non-admission of minors within the institute psychiatric, stressing the need for their “custody” to be exercised exclusively by the family; to this end, he invited the mayors to identify alternative support measures if, due to the precarious economic conditions, the parents had not been able to take care of their children. It therefore seems interesting to report a large excerpt of this Circular:

La Deputazione ha ritenuto che i fanciulli in tenera età non possono di niuna guisa cadere a carico della Provincia. Infatti, i fanciulli prima dello sviluppo delle facoltà intellettuali hanno d'uopo di una qualche custodia, e se per avventura qualcuno di esso di manifesti per ebete e cretino anco nei primi anni, non per questo la famiglia deve sgravarsi dall'obbligo di quella custodia, che in ogni modo è tenuta di prestare. Stante ciò la scrivente avverte gli Onorevoli Signori Sindaci che non saranno assolutamente ammessi nel Manicomio a carico della Provincia i fanciulli in tenera età, ai quali, ove la famiglia sia miserabile e in condizione di non poter sostenere il mantenimento e la custodia, potrà provvedere la pubblica beneficenza.

¹ On January 30, 1899 he had spread and somehow legitimized the establishment of the National League through a circular sent to the education authorities: the mayors, the prefects, but also to the presidents of the Pie Works (*Opere Pie*) and the patronages for poor primary school students. Almost recalling the words spoken on the occasion of the Turin pedagogical congress by Maria Montessori, the minister highlighted how the attention paid to the education of those children to whom “mean nature” had denied her gifts was also a preventative action in favor of the future society where those unhappy, if left to themselves were destined to be useless or even harmful. The minister, also in those same years, commissioned Maria Montessori to perform in the *Scuole Normali* of Rome, where the elementary teachers were trained, a series of conferences on psychology and special pedagogy of deficient children (Babini, 1996, p. 84)

² Archivio storico provinciale di Bologna (from now on ASPB), Associazione emiliana per la protezione dei fanciulli deficienti, issue n. 1.

³ Reference is made here to the circular concerning the wording “intorno al mantenimento di fanciulli nel Manicomio provinciale” kept at the Institution “Gian Franco Minguzzi”.

This circular, with the explanatory title “Around Children in the Provincial Manicomio”⁴ delineates a watershed between a *modus operandi*, characterized by the coexistence of minors and adults in asylums and the opening of institutes specifically designed to host minors, as well as the first “orthophrenics schools”⁵. In trying to analyze such an important passage, it was considered appropriate first to identify the characteristics of the children, taking into account the duration of the period in which they were guests at the Bolognese Institute. To this end, it was necessary to take into consideration a wider period of time, between 1811 and 1902, comparing the data present in the entry register with the folders filled in for every single individual interned (396 children and adolescents)⁶.

The State of Research

The history of the Italian asylums has, in its multiple aspects, been approached by various scholars who have explored very particular and circumscribed phenomena, of which an example is the relation to so-called “war neuroses”. This afflicted a multitude of soldiers welcomed into the asylums during the first world war (Valeriano, 2014; Fiorino, 2011; Scartabellati, 2008)⁷. Another phenomenon being studied was that of women interned during the Fascist period because they were accused of having moved away from the norm; the same went for wives and mothers who were overwhelmed by war and unable to overcome the confusion caused by that traumatic event as well as for those who had not yet come of age (morally abandoned girls, female victims of rape) (Valeriano, 2017).

It is appropriate here to mention the initiatives promoted by the Direzione Generale Archivi del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali whose success derives from the realization of a project entitled “Carte di legare” as an “institutional place” able to provide “an organic vision of protection of the archival heritage of these institutions”. With regard to the presence of minors in an asylum, “Carte da legare” provides a helpful number of quantitative data from which we can note that in the period considered here, the number of children and young people, compared to the total number of patients represents 3.1% in Ascoli Piceno, 1.4% in Milan, 2.2% Volterra, 3.1% in Genoa, 6.7% in Rovigo, 1.3% in Reggio Emilia, 3.8% in Bologna, 4.7% in Rome, 2.1% in Sassari, 4.9% in Naples. These data allow us to reflect and ask ourselves about a constant presence over time, and certainly not a small one, in order to reconstruct particular aspects of the history of the mental institution itself.

Taking these issues into consideration is an extremely fertile ground for scholars and still in many ways unexplored owing to the fact that the investigations on the relationship between minors and asylums are still not very numerous. At a national level, existing research is all focused on individual realities; these are studies that began in the seventies, in correspondence with the turning point invigorated by Franco Basaglia. These include the following contributions: “Bambini in manicomio” (1975), edited by *Psichiatria democratica*, the book-dossier that reports the cases of as many as 2761 children, ten percent of whom are under the age of four, and who in the 20th century—within sixty years—were locked up in the Roman psychiatric hospital of Santa Maria della Pietà; “La fabbrica della follia” (1971), edited by the *Associazione per la lotta contro le malattie mentali*, a historic denunciation of the dramatic living conditions inside the Collegno psychiatric hospital near Turin where a short chapter is dedicated to the children present in the

⁴ For the analysis of this circular we refer to the previous contribution.

⁵ The first was opened in Rome on 7th April 1900: it was the opening of the first real theoretical training course with training experience at the kindergarten school annexed to the school; the course had a total duration of eight months (Babini, 1996, p. 85). A special manual already existed for these masters, in which it was distinguished. We educate the children who are weak of mind and periodicals of “pedagogy for emendation” flourished (Guarnieri, 2006, p.282).

⁶ Data held at the “Gian Franco Minguzzi” Institute.

⁷ Inside the mental hospitals a huge multitude of soldiers were welcomed, suffering from a series of different symptoms, ranging from “lipemania” to “stupor trauma”, not easily ascribable to natural causes.

asylum. In recent years, further studies have appeared, including the book by Ezio Sartori (2003) “Bambini dentro. I minori in ospedale psichiatrico nel XX secolo: il caso del S. Maria della Pietà a Roma”⁸; the publication, edited by Alberto Gaino, “Il manicomio dei bambini” (2017), which contains the testimonies of those who have personally experienced the experience of internment in the Villa Azzurra asylum, as well as the one curated by Paolo Tortella and Elena Becchi (2018) “I ragazzi di Villa Giardini: il manicomio dei bambini a Modena”. These works highlight how, in the various contexts investigated, children inevitably followed the fate of adults, subjected to the same treatments and restraint systems, characterized by similar lifestyles and levels of isolation. To depict a rough idea of the terrible situation to which they were subjected, frightful details emerge about how cold the rooms were, how thin the bed linen was, and the terrible quality food.

On this issue, further research is currently being developed with the aim of gathering further data and information on the various Italian realities, some of which was presented at the conference “Bambini e ragazzi ‘perduti’. Devianza, disabilità, follia dell’infanzia (secc. XVI-XX)”, held at Verona between May 31 to June 1 2019. Investigations of this type can integrate themselves, drawing elements of comparison and contextualization, within a long tradition of studies on the history of childhood, inaugurated in Italy by Egle Becchi, then continued by the works of Leonardo Trisciuzzi (1976), Valeria Paola Babini (1996; 2000), Patrizia Guarnieri (2006) and many others at an international level⁹, all of whom addressed the issue of child health and the distinction between education and care, highlighting the commitment of hygienists, psychiatrists and pediatricians. The interventions of the latter were carried out not only on a theoretical level, that is to say finding results in the organization of various congresses for children¹⁰, but they often translated into concrete actions through the opening of departments of child psychiatry, of specialized institutions, right until the beginning of the first course in child neuropsychiatry in 1960 (Guarnieri, 2006, p.265).

The presence of minors in the asylum: the Bologna case

In light of what was referred to, on a historiographical level my contribution examines the reality of the Bologna asylum, starting from a situation in which children and youngsters crowded the interior spaces, mixing with adults due to the absence of age restrictions, in many cases hospitalized after being declared dangerous to themselves and others. It should be pointed out that this mixture also involved other city institutes: in 1822, for example, the “Reclusorio pei discoli” (house of correction), established for correctional and punitive purposes against deviant and marginal people, presented the same characterization as well as very similar practices of coercion and isolation aimed at depersonalizing subjects. In this regard, it should be noted that in 1832, in a report of the Provincial Council of Bologna, this state of affairs was condemned, highlighting also, among other things, its ineffectiveness.

[...] ci sarà però concesso dal Superiore Governo di fare di volo alcun cenno sull’inutilità, ed irregolarità attuale di questo Stabilimento, affinché più chiara apparisca la convenienza delle misure proposte. È dunque a sapersi che il locale del Discolato presenta ora una stranissima raccolta d’individui di ogni età, sesso, condizione, moralità per lontanissime, e disperate cause, anche di sola beneficenza, e per semplice ripiego in esso collocati, e l’un coll’altro comunicanti, e quasi confusi. Tra essi il numero

⁸ On the asylum of Rome see also the chapter of Silvia Bracci “Bambini in manicomio” in the volume edited by Pompeo Martelli e Tommaso Poliseo (1996, pp.61-63).

⁹ An example for all H. Cunningham (1997), but also works by M. Micale and R. Porter (1994), N. Rose (1985) e R. Cooter (1992), that tend to analyze the issues addressed, concerning both psychiatry and childhood within a complete framework, linking them to wider social, institutional and political processes.

¹⁰ See the Proceedings of the International Congress for the Protection of Childhood edited by G.B. Allaria, Julien Ruben, Ernesto Egidi, Varallo Sesia (1937) (conference held in Roma). For a more general picture see M. S. Dupont-Bouchat (2003, pp.207-235).

dei detenuti detenuti per condanna, o per equivalente misura economica di polizia, vi è per ordinario scarsissimo, eppure la Provincia, e la città è in ispecial modo ridonda spaventevolmente d'uomini scostumatissimi, e di donne perverse. Lungi adunque dal produrre l'assistenza del Discolato alcuna calcolabile attività a miglioramento del morale, ed a garanzia dell'ordine pubblico, la reclusione nel medesimo è una punizione prova di buoni individuali risultati. I reclusi guastansi vieppiù vicendevolmente nella morale, e vi acquistano maggior tendenza al delitto, per la fatale comunione che vi hanno fra loro, i piccoli delinquenti colla gente consumata nei delitti. Niun genitore poi di qualche senno vorrà esporsi a collocare un proprio figlio in uno Stabilimento sì pericoloso, e sì giustamente screditato colla quasi sicurezza d'onore effetto naturale della stessa reclusione nella comune opinione infamante, e per la comunicazione cogli altri reclusi, in sorte è peggiore, e più impudente di prima”.

It was considered appropriate to reproduce this extensive excerpt insofar as the similarities with the circular issued by Francesco Roncati, of which we have already made mention in the introductory paragraph, are evident since in both documents the necessity for parents to look after their children is reaffirmed, albeit with difficulty, by avoiding directing them towards institutions that are not always able to support their growth paths.

It should be noted that, for the years taken into consideration, “minors” were those under the age of fifteen¹¹. To give just one example, in a city like Bologna, even the “Ospedale degli esposti”, established in 1224 to accommodate unwanted children called “bastardini” kept children and young people under their own protection until their fifteenth birthday, after which, especially if the children were male, they tried to insert them into the world of work in order to prevent idleness and wandering; the girls, on the other hand, were allowed to remain in a designated part of the hospital, specifically the “Conservatorio delle zitelle” which was set up for charitable purposes¹²: by receiving newborns into the hospital, they became *figlie del luogo*, thereby acquiring the right of protection from the institution for all their life.

Returning to the theme concerning the presence of minors in the psychiatric hospital of Bologna, it must be recalled that the first adolescent who crossed the threshold of the ancient headquarters of the asylum, annexed to the Sant’Orsola Hospital, is the thirteen year old of peasant origins, Anna Frabetti, who was diagnosed with “mania”. Other 185 children will follow until 1866, the year in which we see the transfer of the premises of the asylum in via Sant’Isaia, 90. It must be said that the ancient seat, annexed to the hospital was also titled “Spedale degli Incurabili”: this denomination had precise repercussions on the choice of the people who were admitted to it which, as we shall see, had a specificity all of its own in the case of Bologna. As Elisa Montanari writes (2015, p. 11), it can be considered the first “urban asylum nucleus”, or, as other scholars agree, “the first nucleus of a real mental hospital that will be increasingly strengthened” (Giacanelli, Bellagamba Toschi, Nicoli, 1985, p. 12). A moment of change had been marked by the “decreto Farini” (Farini Decree) which in the Statute concerning the reform of the Bolognese hospitals established that for the province of Bologna and those of Emilia, the asylum had to be separated fully and properly from the hospital. With this decree – which aimed to resolve both a management and organizational problem, through the establishment of the “Corpo Amministrativo degli Spedali”, as the only administrative and surveillance center for the hospitals of the city – the concrete opportunity presented itself as modifying the situation of assistance for the mentally ill, until then relegated to a general health management authority, inasmuch as the Province began to be directly involved in it. The new legislation (July 7, 1866) offered to Francesco Roncati (director of the asylum from 1864 to 1905)¹³

¹¹ A precise dividing line is derived from the data on “Carte da legare”: subjects under the age of fifteen were minors.

¹² This institute was very different from the others in the city, precisely because of the very high presence of young girls it welcomed. In the other institutes, in fact, the girls were selected on the basis of certain criteria, while in that of the Bastardini, all were accepted indifferently since having been exposed in the pious place they became like daughters and the Hospice assumed full responsibility for them.

¹³ The “Consiglio Provinciale” (Provincial Council) decided to name the asylum in its session on October 13, 1906 to this director, soul and creator of the institute’s renewals. At the end of 1916, the institute changed its name, changing the term “mental hospital” in “hospital” and thus transforming it into the “Provincial Hospital Francesco Roncati” in Bologna

an opportunity to consolidate his work, successfully dissolving all the suspicions that had arisen against him, following his intention to transfer the patients to the former convent of the Salesian nuns in “Via Sant’Isaia, 90”. This happened on the night of September 12th, when an “isolated and foolish” procession of “madmen” successfully reached the new destination on foot, crossing several streets of the city streets.

In the first “nucleus”, in the years between 1811 and 1866, the ages relative to the time of entry of children and adolescents are distributed as shown in the following table. From it we can see that the highest number is over 9 years old, while the presence of very small children is rare.

Age of minors entered from 1811 to 1866

Age	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
2	2	1.07	2	1.07
3	4	2.14	6	3.21
4	7	3.74	13	6.95
5	2	1.07	15	8.02
6	6	3.21	21	11.23
7	8	4.28	29	15.51
8	10	5.35	39	20.86
9	15	8.02	54	28.88
10	19	10.16	73	39.04
11	15	8.02	88	47.06
12	14	7.49	102	54.55
13	22	11.76	124	66.31
14	31	16.58	155	82.89
15	32	17.11	187	100.00

The main data that can be deduced from the analysis of medical records concern the reasons that led to hospitalization, thus referring to the peculiar characteristics of the different subjects. Physical and mental deficits, such as “idiotism”, “dementia”, “furious mania”, “delirium”, “idiocy with deafness and blindness”, “deafness and muteness” characterize 103 hospitalized children. These are diagnoses that come close to the imaginary that we still preserve of the typical asylum patient of that time. However, it is very surprising to note that the reasons underlying the hospitalization of as many as 77 minors concerned the following diseases: “rognà” [scabies], “prurigine” [pruritus], “impetigine” [impetigo], “ectima alle mani” [orfs], “eczema pilare al capo”, “porrigine furfuracea a rognà”. It is probably the risk of infections that had been the cause of their removal from the family, since they were later discharged once they had recovered. In this regard, it is noted that in 1849 7 cases of inpatients appear, with the characterization of “rognoso/a” at “charity”¹⁴. This aspect leads to the conclusion that the asylum was considered an important seat of the institutional network designed to collect children in need of care, often in the absence of other possibilities and alternatives. It is very significant to note that in some cities such as Genoa, Naples, Mantua, Reggio Emilia and Bologna, people suffering severely from contagious skin diseases were interned in hospitals called “degli Incurabili” (Stumpo, 2000, p.313). The peculiarity that characterizes this first asylum nucleus becomes more evident if we consider the fact that we will no longer find the latter type of patients in the new location in “Via Sant’Isaia, 90”; this detachment from the Hospital would result in a more distinct characterization of the structure, which from that moment will no longer be able to

for mentally ill people; later, in 1926, the name became the “Francesco Roncati Provincial Psychiatric Hospital” in Bologna and remained so until the institute was closed.

¹⁴ For five children the diagnosis is not received. In one case, however, we are faced with both diagnoses.

accommodate people suffering from contagious skin diseases in order to be considered only as a site of specific treatment for mental deficits.

The definitive management transition from the “Corpo Amministrativo” to “Provincia”, which since 1865 had seen its competences ratified with regard to the maintenance of the so-called “mentecatti”, took place in 1868, when, by resolution of 19 September, the “Corpo Amministrativo” handed over to the Province the “l’azienda del manicomio”. The new institution was located in the former convent of the Salesian nuns, in “via sant’Isaia, 90”, thus beginning to assume an increasingly functional character to the tasks to which it was assigned. From January 1, 1869, the “Deputazione Provinciale” began to manage the psychiatric institute, which was separated from the “Corpo Amministrativo degli Spedali” and called, from that moment, the “manicomio provinciale” (provincial asylum). The presence of children registered continued in a constant manner over time, as shown in the table below; the table further shows the ages of the patients, from 1869 to 1902.

Age of minors from 1869 to 1902

Age	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
4	1	0.48	162	78.26
5	7	3.38	169	81.64
6	9	4.35	178	85.99
7	9	4.35	187	90.34
8	10	4.83	197	95.17
9	10	4.83	207	100.00
10	19	9.18	19	9.18
11	13	6.28	32	15.46
12	22	10.63	54	26.09
13	25	12.08	79	38.16
14	30	14.49	109	52.66
15	52	25.12	161	77.78

Hospitalization time from 1869 to 1902

Hospitalization time	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
0_[0-1) Months	15	10.56	15	10.56
1_[1-2) Months	21	14.79	36	25.35
2_[2-3) Months	16	11.27	52	36.62
3_[3-4) Months	13	9.15	65	45.77
4_[4-5) Months	2	1.41	67	47.18
5_[5-6) Months	9	6.34	76	53.52
6_[6-7) Months	3	2.11	79	55.63
7_[7-8) Months	13	9.15	92	64.79
8_[8-9) Months	7	4.93	99	69.72
91_[9-10) Months	3	2.11	102	71.83
92_[10-11) Months	1	0.70	103	72.54
93_[11-12) Months	4	2.82	107	75.35
94_[12-24) Months	15	10.56	122	85.92
95_[24-36) Months	7	4.93	129	90.85
96_>=36 Months	13	9.15	142	100.00
Frequency Missing = 65				

A particular fact that distinguishes this second phase relating to the presence of children in the Bolognese asylum is correlated to the extent of the period of hospitalization. Many children, in fact, were dismissed within a short time as soon as the director had ascertained “unverified mental alienation”. For example, the following cases are reported: Fernanda Cocchi, aged ten, “returned to the family because it was not found to be dangerous and in need of special custody”; Clementina Bignami and Carlo Bignami, both hospitalized on January 18, 1865, were discharged after a few days for the same reason “issued for unverified mental alienation”; Umberto Rossi, 7 years old, hospitalized in 1892 with a diagnosis of “idiotism with epilepsy” and “since the idiot Rossi was very old from puberty he was not accepted unless under observation and trial, by special concession of the Deputation Provinciale. The administration of potassium bromide (2 g. per day) fully prevented the epileptic recurrences and certainly contributed to making him of such good character that it was necessary to judge its presence beyond the asylum (Roncati) as unjustified”. However, there is not sufficient evidence from the analysis of medical records as to the reasons behind this certification (“the unverified mental alienation”); this makes it very difficult for scholars to be able to trace the real motivations that led some parents to have their own children interned, except for very few cases. Gianni Nocchieri, aged 11, a student, was interned and in correspondence with the diagnosis reads “epileptiform access” “dicesi” (someone says). With regard to the latter case, if one investigates in depth, one can grasp the motivations that forced him to cross the threshold of the asylum: “son of a woman who leads the life of a prostitute, and who two years ago left him on the street (then going

elsewhere to go about his everyday life), he was welcomed and kept at home by a Maria Guidetti Tassinari married without children”.

On the basis of the Roncati Circular, we note that a large number of children were discharged a few days before entering. This is the case of 8-year-old Maria Fantini, a schoolgirl, admitted on July 26, 1876 and immediately discharged, because: “The infirm is rendered much more tranquil, was returned to the family, after complaints made by this Direction to the Provincial Administration in based on the circular on the admission of children to the Asylum”; this is also how Enrico Margilli, 6 years old, was admitted on May 2, 1872 that “he was sent home in accordance with the circular of the Provincial Deputation determining the age of admission of children (at 10 years)”; Silvio Ruggeri, 7 years old “fired in accordance with the circular one of the Provincial Deputation which prescribes not having to admit children under the age of 10 into the Asylum”. Unfortunately, we must note, among the cases analyzed, that twenty-five children died within the walls of the asylum.

Conclusion

Although the circular of June 7, 1872 had been issued, its full application in the city context was difficult, also because there were no alternative institutions able to provide for the recovery and assistance of children in difficulty. An effective response to the problem was represented by the opening of the first Italian pedagogical medical institute for “frenastenici”, on July 2, 1899, “in a very pleasant position”, in San Giovanni in Persiceto, under the medical direction of the psychiatrists Augusto Tamburini, Raffaele Brugia and Francesco Roncati. It was financed with funds and private donations, without any commitment from the public institutions, in this case the provincial administrative bodies. The news of its opening was given by its director, as well as founder, Socrates Gardini, in a letter addressed to the Emilian Association for the Protection of Deficient Children, in order to invite the Committee to visit the rooms of the Institute¹⁵.

Thus, it was that on July 24, 1899, the first boy, who had previously been hospitalized in the asylum, crossed the threshold of the medical-pedagogical institute: this was Mario Bandini, 13, suffering from “idiotism”. This date thus opened a different course of history for the institutions dedicated to the care and assistance of children with physical and mental deficits. It was a change that was the result of a new vision of childhood, thanks above all to the studies that were taking place at that time in the psycho-pedagogical field, which gave rise to the reflection and the elaboration of measures and practices aimed at influencing the non-predictable outcomes of growth paths and to promote new sensitivities towards the care and education of childhood as a whole, “normal and abnormal”.

The experience of the Bolognese asylum can be read in a paradigmatic way as a testimony of a precise historical moment in which the methods of internment and containment previously implemented, which proved to be quite ineffective, gradually made way for new scientific perspectives that increased the studies of specialist education. The experimentation of new recovery and prevention strategies was carried out as a benchmark for children with physical and mental difficulties within *ad hoc* structures, calibrating activities and methods of intervention based on their needs. The changes impressed by these new approaches, which at the beginning of the last century spread ever more prominently, led to the emergence of further needs, first and foremost the demand for adequately trained medical and educational personnel, as well as the experimentation of new methodologies in the field of re-education in the pursuit of correct operating methods so as to effectively concretize the new theorized educational ideas in daily practice. The experience of Bologna, as a testimony of a past, and with the relative changes that have taken place, should not be considered in an isolated and self-referential way. On the contrary, it seems more appropriate than

¹⁵ ASPB, Associazione emiliana per la protezione dei fanciulli deficienti, Istituto medico-pedagogico per la cura ed educazione dei frenastenici in S. Giovanni in Persiceto, June 14, 1899, issue n. 1.

ever to place it in the historical and cultural context of an era during which, in Italy and in Europe, the emergence of special pedagogy proceeded hand in hand with the birth of important realities in support of difficult childhoods, characterized by new educational intentions.

The present article aims to be a first approach to the issue addressed, as the start of an investigation that can bring out and compare, in an organic way, the Bolognese situation with that of the other mental institutions present in the Italian territory during the nineteenth century. The study of this specific reality, as examined by this article, in greater depth, that is by referring only to the local context, can thus be extended through analysis to other contexts to be able to paint a wider picture, and able to bring out the elements of difference and continuity, seen in their space-time dimensions.

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