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School expansion and uneven modernization. Comparing educational inequality in Northern and Southern Italy

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Abstract

The paper asks whether the patterns of educational expansion and inequality were the same in the two parts of Italy: the North, more industrialized and developed, and the more backwards South. This is a theoretically relevant issue as, despite this major socioeconomic heterogeneity, Italy has a centralized school system, whose main institutional features are the same all over the country.

By means of an educational transition analysis of the five waves of the Italian Longitudinal Household Survey we analyze school expansion and long-term trends of educational inequality, both in general and at each specific school transition. The main results indicate that there has been increasing divergence between the two areas in educational expansion and in the effect of social background on years of education attained, favouring the North.

The main difference between the two areas is found at two transitions, the one from elementary to lower secondary and the one from lower to upper secondary. While the first difference diminishes over time, the second grows over time and is currently crucial. Its reasons are found in the different propensity of the offspring of the working class to enrol in vocational schools, which is stronger in the North.

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1. Introduction and motivation

Research on educational stratification typically focuses on the national level, and macro level works compare different national cases. There are good reasons for this, as educational systems are a key component

of the modern national states (Meyer, 1977), and the homogenization of schooling all over the territory and the population of the state is among the key aims of contemporary educational systems (Van de Werfhorst & Mijts, 2010). However, looking at sub-national variation in school expansion and inequality, as well as in their change over time, can also be of theoretical interest, for instance to check whether the aim of educational equalization (Breen & Jonsson, 2007) is actually achieved all over the state or internal social and economic heterogeneity can effectively impact on its realization.

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This is not the first work which compares educational inequalities in different areas of the same country. For instance, Paterson and Iannelli (2007) examine variations among England, Wales, and Scotland in the association between social origin and educational attainment and the role that different (sub-)national educational policies may have played in shaping these variations. Also the Italian case is of strong interest, but for a different reason. Since its birth as a national state, Italy has been seen as divided between a developed North and an underdeveloped South, and the creation of a national and heavily centralized educational system has been one of the major means by which the Italian elites have tried to overcome this divide, especially after World War II (WW2 hereafter). However, the North–South socio-economic cleavage has persisted, or even increased, despite a dramatic educational expansion and a relevant convergence in the implementation of homogeneous school policies across the country. Thus, the North–South comparison in Italy could be of interest because in the second part of the 20th century the two areas have been affected by the same school policies and their educational system became more similar, while they experienced divergence in their economic performance, with the North largely outperforming the South.

Nevertheless, the sociological literature on Italian school expansion and its relations to social inequality, blossoming since the late 1980s, has only marginally included the North–South divide in its analytical framework. This paper gives a contribution towards the filling of this void, studying school expansion and inequality in educational achievement in Italy from the point of view of the North–South divide. Empirically, we adopt the educational transition approach (Mare, 1980, 1981), which allows to investigate inequality of educational opportunities at different school transitions (IEOpps), as well as to get a general picture of the overall inequality in educational outcome (IEOut) (Buis, 2010a).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly describes the recent history of the North–South cleavage in Italy, while Section 3 reviews the literature on school inequality in the two parts of the country. Section 4 outlines the research hypotheses, while Section 5 presents the data and Section 6 the modelling strategy. Section 7 presents the empirical results and, finally, Section 8 proposes some conclusions.

2. The ‘Southern question’, school policies and the Italian uneven modernization

Italy is a relatively late comer to the number of European nation-states. As in other cases, notably that

of Germany, a common elite culture and language developed much earlier than a national state, while the country remained politically divided for centuries into a number of states, eight after the European Restoration of 1815, some of them very small. The Italian national state was born between 1859 and 1871, and since the early decades of its history the internal regional divides have remained one of the main problems. In particular the cleavage between North and South, called *la questione meridionale* (the southern question) in Italian history textbooks and public discussion, has often been considered as *the* main problem of the Italian national state (Gramsci, 1995 [1926]).

As it happened at the same time in other European countries (Ramirez & Boli, 1987), the creation of a centralized and standardized national school system, inspired by the French model, was one of the major means to build an homogeneous national state, as the population had to be subtracted from the influence of the Church, who fiercely opposed the new state, and of local traditions. The new state had also to deal with illiteracy: at the time of its foundation, only about a quarter of the population was literate, and most of it concentrated in the wealthier and more developed Northern regions (Barbagli, 1982).

However, the diffusion of mass education and the actual implementation of the rhetoric of the modern state in Italy were much slower than in other European countries, and in the 50s the differences between primary and secondary schooling in the North and in the South were still huge, in both infrastructure and participation (Perri, 1971; Salvemini, 1962). In the following years, thanks to the state intervention (via *Cassa del Mezzogiorno*), the gap between North and South in educational infrastructures – at least at primary-school level – was reduced, and the participation to compulsory schooling began to increase, reaching the levels of the Northern regions.¹ During the 1960s the gap between North and South gradually decreased also at the lower secondary education level, mainly because of the national centralized school policies oriented towards the inclusiveness of the school system. In 1962 the school system was partially de-stratified, creating a comprehensive lower secondary school in which compulsory schooling up to 14 years of age could be actually implemented, while it had been introduced but not enacted under Fascism. The reform regarded

¹ See, for instance, law n. 105 (19th March 1955) and law n. 555 (18th July 1959) concerning the improvement of school facilities in the Southern Italian regions.

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