The Methodological Proposal of the Italian Nineteenth-Century Geographer Giuseppe De Luca: The Passage from the Simple to the Complex

Reviewer

Prof. Dr. Emilia SARNO
University Online Pegaso, Naples, ITALY

Giuseppe De Luca, Italian scholar, born in Cardinale, municipality of the province of Catanzaro, in 1823, and died in Naples in 1895, has the merit of having institutionalized the teaching of Geography at the Naples University[1]. A versatile scholar with several interests, thanks to his cartographic competence acquired when he was the official cartographer for the Real Navy, De Luca held the academic Chair of Geography and Statistics from 1861 to 1885. As soon as he was appointed as full professor, De Luca also carried out the functions of Rector at the Neapolitan University during 1862-1863, committing himself to renewing its structure and organization. For this reason, he developed a particular interest in didactics and the training of teachers of every order. Having finished his assignment, from 1863 and for over twenty years, he concentrated his effort to scientific systematization of geography and its promulgation. He established scientific relationships on the national and international scale and actively participated to geographical congresses and disciplinary organizations, becoming one of the promoters of the Italian Geographical Society constitution.

Hence, De Luca led the chair of full professor with great awareness devoting his energy to writing books that clarified the epistemological statute of the discipline, that he considered to be the science of man, and identified its methodological characteristics (*Il Metodo Geografico,* 1873; *Il Concetto della Geografia*, 1880; *Storia, Concetto e Metodi della Geografia*, 1881[2]). In line with his way of thinking, he published books on geographic didactics with the aim of improving its teaching (*Atlante Geografico ad uso delle Scuole Ginnasiali, ILceali e Tecniche,* 1881; *Nozioni Elementari di Geografia ad uso nelle Scuole Primarie*, 1884; *Le Prime Nozioni di Geografia ad Uso delle Scuole Elementari, degli Istituti Rurali, delle Scuole Parrocchiali, delle Scuole Operaie e Reggimentali*, 1887[3]).

Among his works, the most important book is *Storia, Concetto e Limiti della Geografia*[4] (1881) given that it synthesizes his epistemological and methodological point of view. This book is the result of a speech that he delivered at the third international congress in Venice in 1881 and, still today, it has elements useful for reflecting on the teaching of geography. In particular, it develops the concept of building the spatial idea in primary school students ***with the support of geographic maps.***

In fact, after having highlighted the acquisition and development of geographical knowledge, he concentrated on the teaching modalities, challenging the following

[1]He completes a trial initiated by Antonio Genovesi and his school. See E. Sarno (ed), *Della Terra e del Mare, La Geografia di Antonio Genovesi*, Roma, Aracne Editrice, 2012.
[2]The Geographical Method (1873); The Concept of Geography (1880); History, Concept and Methods of Geography (1881).
[3]Geographic Atlas for High Schools (1881); Basic Notions of Geography for Primary Schools (1884); First Notions of Geography for Primary Schools, for Christian Schools, Military Schools and Schools for Workers (1887).
[4]History, Concept and Limits of Geography (1881).

pedagogical principle: "The pursuit and knowledge of the truth surely happen when we move from the known to the unknown so that we acquire a whole knowledge". [5] De Luca criticized the usefulness of such a didactical method, developed by the famous pedagogist Angelo De Gubernatis, given that he argued that it can be functional for learning in the mathematical sciences where, starting from known information, it is possible to address unknown problems but, when "places and cities have their own characteristics" and "the land changes at every step", [6] the acquired knowledge cannot enable to understand what is unknown. Furthermore, by this way of thinking, students should draw up a "full written text" concerning every place or geographical phenomenon. This monograph is like "a stone of a great building which represents the cognition of the entire world". [7] According to his opinion, the study of every place imposes a work of "seriousness" [8] given that several aspects must be deepened and, then, unified in a coherent totality. Such a method does not seem useful to primary school students who, because of their age, have not already developed a capacity for synthesis and abstraction. Furthermore, this method is even not functional to geography itself because every place has its peculiarity and, consequently, starting from what is known, the understanding of what is unknown is not something that should be taken for granted. He adds that proceeding from the known to the unknown is mistakenly considered to be an appropriate method for geography because the process of geographical cognition is confused with the development of its history. Moreover, the student's limited knowledge of cartography, who hardy knows his village, makes the teaching of this discipline difficult. In conclusion, he pointed out that, while history gains advantage from the art of narration, geography is reduced to be merely a descriptive list of notions.

From his fierce criticism, he developed his methodological proposal: it is important not to proceed from what is known and move to the unknown, but we have to start from the simple in order to reach the complex: "It is necessary to start from what can be easily understood and, then, move to what is complex and must be researched". [9] The knowledge a child can acquire must be of easy and immediate understanding, while complex notions, more abstract, are subsequently submitted to him. He reminded his readers that "The idea of Geography is the idea of space, the where, and it is necessary to circumscribe and determine it. The only way is making use of good maps". [10] Therefore, thanks to simple information about the morphology of the Earth', the sense of space must be developed and the principal tool to do it is represented by cartography. He suggests providing the overview idea of the Earth, hemispheres and continents by using the artificial globe. Teachers should guide students to discern the principal regions of the Earth identifying, for each of them, both the presence of the most important geographical features (mountains, rivers, seas, etc) and the characteristics of every population. Thereafter, during their study, pupils will deepen their knowledge of geographical areas and, consequently, they will work, according to him, "for circles[11]". Hence, they will firstly focus on their local area to move, later, to other regions, nations and, finally, to the continents and the world.

[5] G. De Luca, History, Concept and Limits of Geography, Naples, 1881, p. 78.
[6] Ivi, pp. 78-80.
[7] Ivi, p. 79
[8] Ivi, p. 80
[9] Ivi, p. 82.
[10] Ivi, p. 86.
[11] Ivi, p. 83.

In this way, from what is general we move towards the particular, given that, according to De Luca, the first coincides with what is simple while the latter with the complex. Even books should conform to such a principle, and those used in primary schools should not include complex notions. He considers it useful for students to draw up maps on the understanding that they have practice in drawing given that there is a risk of altering the morphology, acquiring a wrong mental image of it. At the same time, even relief maps must be used with caution because they are imprecise. According to him photo-topography and wall maps are useful. Moreover, when maps are submitted to students, it is necessary to add historical and scientific information in order to make the examined environments alive. De Luca theorized also a sort of vertical *curriculum*, according to which the general description of the Earth must be studied in the primary school while, in the secondary, in-depth analysis on cosmographic, physical and social aspects must be conducted. Furthermore, he considers fundamental a close connection between history and geography in the tuition of secondary school students, and for this reason, an evolutionary interpretation of civilization must be presented in those courses. He hoped for a special *diploma* in geography and, highlighted the peculiarity of geography as a discipline that requires both scientific and humanistic competences.

The point of view of De Luca is surely stimulating. First, he criticized the teaching model (the passage from what is known to the unknown) given that it does not take into account the problems pupils can experience in inferential reasoning. Furthermore, he criticized the manuals of his time for being full of information concerning the structure and the morphology of the Earth. His proposal is stimulating, especially when he put forward the concept of developing the idea of space in primary school students and not burdening them with a heavy and arid list of cartographic and geophysical knowledge. The limit of his point of view is that he did not get to a further consequence: the idea of space must be acquired by analyzing the near and local scale. On the other hand, he argued that it is necessary to provide a knowledge of the Earth and, then, make its differences understandable. Summing up, he encouraged a teaching model starting from a faraway space.

In his manual for primary schools (*Nozioni Elementari di Geografia ad uso nelle Scuole Primarie*, 1884[12]), De Luca described Italy in detail, after having provided students with general information. The most interesting aspect is his will to identify a specific geographical method in the aim of strengthening the discipline's independence even in teaching. In conclusion, he understood that Geography is little appreciated because it is mainly reduced to a list of information and he aimed to the immediateness of teaching in order to make it more interesting. Given that such a hope is still actual, reading some papers of De Luca can be extremely useful to Italian geographers.

[12]Basic Notions of Geography for Primary Schools (1884).