Paul F. Grendler


Given the centrality of teaching to the very identity of the Society of Jesus from its earliest years, it may be a shock to discover that Jesuits enjoyed a distinctly tense and problematic relationship with Italian universities throughout the period covered by this volume. This was in stark contrast to their experience in northern Europe, where in Germany alone, during the first century of their existence the Jesuits either founded or became a significant presence in no fewer than fourteen universities. However, things were very different in Italy: on the one side, the Jesuits had a low opinion of much of the teaching carried out in Italian universities and an even lower one of the immoral behavior of many of the students who attended them. On the other, the strong civic tradition of universities in the peninsula made them jealous of their autonomy and reluctant to share governance with any religious order; least of all one which was having such conspicuous success as a teacher at pre-university level of the Italian elites. An added complication was that from the beginning the Jesuits were committed to the collegiate university model, in which colleges provided teaching and accommodation with their curriculum focused on the humanities, philosophy, and theology. This had been, of course, the experience of the founders of the Society who had attended the Sorbonne in Paris and various universities in Spain; and was in contrast to the universities of the Italian peninsula “which were all graduate, professional universities [...] [that] taught law, medicine and theology at an advanced level” (46). The most prestigious (and oldest) of these universities were Bologna (1088) and Padua (1222). Rome’s Sapienza (1303) was very much in serie B and Florence and Milan had to wait until 1859 and 1924 respectively before they could boast one, although the former city did have a *studium generale* founded in 1321 before it moved to Pisa in 1473. These civic universities all took students several years later than their
ultramontane, collegiate counterparts; at the age of eighteen in order to study for doctorates, with the bachelor’s degree having died out by the early fifteenth century.

One of the several strengths of this authoritative study, by the doyen of the history of Italian education in the Renaissance, is the author’s attention to local context matched to a peerless command of detail, based on long acquaintance with both the archival record and the secondary literature which must make this the definitive account. Accordingly, the book is arranged geographically rather than chronologically, with just the first two and final two chapters providing a thematic frame. These opening and closing chapters include an excellent survey of the experience the founding fathers had as students at Paris (and the impact this had on their own views of education), as well as an illuminating discussion of the philosophical and pedagogical differences between the Jesuit and secular teachers together with the Jesuit contribution to the teaching of theology. The clash of visions between the Jesuits and the several cities where they sought to establish a collegiate university was clearly visible from the Society’s very first attempt: which took place in the Sicilian town of Messina where they opened their first school in 1548. Encouraged by the support of the Spanish viceroy, Juan de Vega, and the interest of the civic elite to establish a university, Loyola himself secured a papal bull of foundation. However, it was soon apparent that the city fathers had used the Jesuits to secure the right to found a civic university on the traditional Italian lines and not a collegiate one as envisaged by Loyola. This negative experience appears to have reinforced Ignatius in his views of the superiority of the collegiate university model dominated by a Jesuit college, which he enshrined in the Society’s *Constitutions* (1558).

The next attempt by the Jesuits to become university professors of theology, philosophy, and the humanities occurred at the other end of the Italian peninsula, in Turin. Here things at first seemed propitious: not only had the ground been laid by the indefatigable Antonio Possevino, who had developed a good working relationship with Duke Emanuele Filiberto, but the latter was persuaded by Possevino’s fellow Jesuit, the equally proactive Achille Gagliardi, to put forward a plan to have nine Jesuit professors taken on by the University of Turin. Notwithstanding such a meeting of minds, civic opposition was such that even the duke had to back down. In Padua, the stakes were higher in the sense that, on the one hand, the Jesuits’ own school in the city was so successful that it was seen as a threat to the university and, on the other, the Venetian patriciate saw the Jesuits as a Trojan horse determined to infiltrate Spanish power and influence on the *terra firma*. This ensured what Grendler refers...
to, unambiguously, as “The Padua disaster” (115). To begin with, the Venetian Senate ordered the Society’s school in Padua to teach only Jesuits, but then deteriorating Venetian-papal relations and the close identification of the papacy with the Society inexorably led to the latter’s expulsion from the state as a whole in 1606, which lasted until 1657. In both Palermo and Chambéry the Jesuits ran foul of the local prelate, respectively the formidable Giannettino Doria and the equally doughty (would be French Carlo Borromeo) Étienne Le Camus, who in both cases were able to face down the Jesuits with complete confidence in their power as well as their authority.

The only exception to this litany of failure took place in Parma where, in close alliance with Ranuccio I Farnese who wished to raise the profile and prestige of his young duchy, the Society succeeded in creating an institution that was fundamentally new for the peninsula: a civic-Jesuit university in 1601, in which they taught theology, philosophy, mathematics, and the humanities, leaving law and medicine to a lay professoriate. A similar alliance between the Society and the local ruler took place in Mantua, where the intellectually gifted and genuinely devout Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga, (Grendler offers a unique compliment when he compares Ferdinando to Lorenzo de’ Medici, “Il Magnifico,” 192), created the Peaceful University of Mantua in 1625. Though innovative in several respects—including the teaching of Chemistry at a time when only two other universities in Europe (both in Germany) offered the subject—unfortunately this uniquely happy blend of Jesuit and lay teaching in the common context of a single university was not to be: the premature death of Duke Ferdinando in 1626 followed by war and plague brought about its closure. Its later re-opening in 1683 saw the Society reclaiming its previous rights, but the context was a very different one and the Jesuits found themselves effectively in control of a university that only taught the subjects they provided staff for (theology and philosophy). The Jesuits enjoyed a role that was even more restricted in the universities of Fermo and Macerata, since in neither did they teach either humanities or mathematics. Instead, metaphysics, natural philosophy, and logic were taught, with a limited role in theology. However limited their range of teaching, their experience in these two provincial universities nevertheless did show that the Jesuits could also work well in institutions even with the very Italian bias toward law and medicine. Meanwhile in Bologna, as in Padua, the Jesuits were only allowed to teach upper-level courses, plus mathematics and law, to students from their two residential schools, but they were not permitted to teach theology or philosophy to all comers.

In his chapter-length discussion of the teaching of canon law in Rome, Grendler reminds us that Loyola himself did not believe that the Jesuit schools
should teach canon law (322). This was a prohibition which lasted at the pre-
mier Jesuit center of teaching and learning, the Collegio Romano (which when 
erected in 1584 was the largest educational building in Europe) until 1695—
though in northern Europe the Society began to respond to demand a cen-
tury earlier. Grendler believes that in Italy the Jesuits hung back because they 
applied strong opposition from the existing civic universities and in fact 
taught canon law only in Genoa where there was no university. In addition to 
such endemic competitive and jurisdictional tensions, there were also funda-
mental differences of approach between the Jesuit teachers and their secular 
counterparts. These are boiled down by Grendler to disagreement over a single 
issue: the Jesuits were charged with teaching philosophy badly; they countered 
that theirs was the right way since they taught not secular but Christian Arist-
totelianism and thereby avoided the dangers which came with the separation 
of philosophy from theology. But to critics, the Jesuits “lacked originality be-
cause they dictated from textbooks, or notes from other scholars [...] devoted 
too much time to quaestiones, traditional key passages in the text on which 
important meaning hinged” (411). To this the Jesuits replied that they desired 
greater theological and philosophical uniformity. But perhaps the most effec-
tive Jesuit defense of their methods was that they provided the kind of envi-
ronment conducive to learning which was free of the violence and immorality 
which was endemic in the civic universities. However, Grendler keeps the best 
till last (so to speak): “The most important curricular innovation of the Jesuits 
was the introduction of cases of conscience” (419). When viewed in the con-
text of what has gone before, it is possible to understand the place of casuistry 
within the overall pedagogical vision of the Jesuits. Contrary to what Blaise 
Pascal and Jansenist polemicists might have led us to believe, casuistry was in 
fact regarded as an essential but lower level skill which was taught by those, 
in the words of the Ratio studiorum of 1599: “found unsuited for philosophy” 
(421). Similarly down to earth was the Jesuit view that one did not need ten to 
fifteen years of study to become a master of theology; four would suffice. As 
Grendler remarks, “Four years of theological study was a major Jesuit innova-
tion that has not been noticed [...]. They emphasised the study rather than the 
degree” (434). This is a fitting way to bring the book to a close, since it points 
directly to the distinctiveness of the Jesuit contribution to education in their 
attitude to the “Queen of Sciences.” It also points to several of the qualities of 
this exceptional and truly magisterial study—the fruit of over three decades 
spent studying the history of education in Renaissance Italy, which began with 
the landmark Schooling in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univer-
sity Press, 1989) and continued with the equally authoritative The Universities
of the Italian Renaissance (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). The wait for the completion of this magnificent triptych has been well worth it.

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