

5-2018

Review: The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548-1773 by Paul F. Grendler

Emanuele Colombo

DePaul University, ecolombo@depaul.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

Recommended Citation

Colombo, Emanuele (2018) "Review: The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548-1773 by Paul F. Grendler," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol7/iss1/10>

This Resource is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

**Review: *The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548-1773*
by Paul F. Grendler**

Reviewed by Emanuele Colombo
Associate Professor, Catholic Studies
DePaul University
ecolombo@depaul.edu

The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548-1773. By Paul F. Grendler. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017. 480 pages. \$34.95 (paper).

“When the first Jesuits came to Italy they encountered Italian universities, and they did not like what they saw” (29). This statement is a good starting point for describing the intriguing history of the encounters and clashes in the early modern period between the Society of Jesus, a new dynamic religious order recognized by the pope in 1540, and Italian universities.

The importance of Jesuit schools and Jesuit education is universally acknowledged: by the 1560s, just a single generation after the order’s founding, the Jesuits had become the educators of Catholic Europe. But the details making up this history, in all their chronological and geographical multiplicity, are still to be written about.

In his excellent book entitled *The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548-1773*, Paul Grendler, the leading scholar of Italian Renaissance education, tells the story of the attempts by the Society of Jesus to create Jesuit universities in various cities on the Italian peninsula, or, alternatively, to participate in the activities of existing universities. Those efforts, both of which were often unsuccessful, occurred over more than two centuries, from 1548, when the Jesuits began to erect a new university in Messina, up to the Society’s suppression in 1773.

All of Ignatius’s first companions’ university education had had a huge impact on the founding Jesuits. They studied in colleges at the University of Paris, and some of them studied at Spanish universities as well. They thoroughly endorsed the experience of learning and living in collegiate universities and believed in the curriculum and pedagogy of Paris. The author describes the differences between the model that the first Jesuits had in mind, namely the collegiate university—“a combined secondary school and undergraduate

university topped by a limited amount of graduate-level and professional training in law and medicine” (46)—and the model of the Italian universities—“graduate professional universities [that] taught law, medicine, and theology at an advanced level” (46). These differences presented recurring issues in the Jesuits’ relationship with Italian universities, causing debates, disputes, and failures.

The Jesuit emphasis on education is now well known, but even if, at the beginning of their history, education was not a peculiarly Jesuit ministry, it quickly developed into one of the order’s main activities. The book recounts, in chronological order, the Jesuits’ attempts to create universities in sixteen Italian cities. They started immediately after the foundation of the Society in 1540, when the Italian Jesuits believed they should send their recruits to the University of Padua to be educated. Disillusioned with Padua and unsatisfied by the pedagogical offerings and moral habits of Italian universities, the Jesuits decided to create new institutions or to assume major roles in existing ones. As the author states, “It was a bold decision. Neither the medieval mendicant orders nor other new religious orders of the Catholic Reformation tried to found universities in Italy” (440).

The first experiment took place as early as 1548 in Messina, Sicily, and was basically a failure: the political leaders of Messina, who valued and supported Jesuit pre-university schools, nevertheless did not support the Jesuit approach to university education and only used the Jesuits as a means of breaking the dominance of the university in Catania. Later, in the early 1570s, Duke Emanuele Filiberto tried to install Jesuits into the newly founded University of Turin, but

strong opposition from the city council forced him to abandon the plan. Another failure occurred in the 1590s, in what the author calls “the Padua disaster.” Professors and students of the University of Padua were disgruntled by the success of Jesuit schools and feared Jesuit competition, and in response to this fear, they obtained from the Venetian Senate a regulation on the Jesuits requiring them to close their schools to non-Jesuit students, the great majority of their student body.

After these first fiascos, the Jesuits changed tactics and goals, undertaking to create a new model of collaboration with civic universities. In this model, the local prince or city council provided the funds and appointed professors of law and medicine for these institutions, where Jesuits taught philosophy, theology, mathematics, and the humanities, but had no role in the institutions’ governance. This model was applied during the seventeenth century in Parma and Mantua with mixed results, while similar attempts in Palermo and Chambery were flops. In Rome, Bologna, and Perugia, the Jesuits were thought to be, for various reasons, dangerous competitors and hostile rivals of local universities. Between 1675 and 1773 the universities of Ferrara, Pavia, and Siena appointed Jesuits to teach mathematics and, for short periods, Jesuits were also appointed as professors of mathematics in Parma, Mantua, Fermo, and Macerata.

While local rulers on the Italian peninsula usually acknowledged the value and quality of the Jesuit pre-university schools, they often did not want the Jesuits to teach in their city’s university. There were many reasons for this: first, Italian civil governments did not want to share university governance with members of a religious order; second, the collegiate model proposed by the Jesuits worked well in northern Europe and Spain, but was incompatible with the existing Italian model; third, Jesuit and Italian universities disagreed about the teaching of Aristotle, the former teaching “Christian Aristotelianism” and the latter “secular Aristotelianism”; fourth, Italian universities were often concerned by the Jesuits’ success in education and feared the competition; and, finally, the Jesuits had many political and religious opponents in Italy, who often tried to block the development of their universities. This

was the case, for instance, with the Venetian Senate and the Jansenist archbishop of Chambery.

The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548–1773 is one of those books that readers love: simple and clear in its internal organization, extremely well-researched, and beautifully written. The fruit of impressive research in Italian archives and an extensive reading of the international scholarship, Paul Grendler has written a volume that addresses a topic that is crucial for the history of education, the history of culture in early modern Italy, and the history of the Society of Jesus. The picture that emerges from the book might be the basis for a reassessment of the present scholarship. “It might have been anticipated,” concludes the author, “that in a land saturated with Catholicism, and an era that many historians call the Catholic Reformation or Counter Reformation, a very learned religious order and civic authorities would work together. It did not happen, because Italian civil authorities seldom wanted the Jesuits in universities. Perhaps the traditional view that the church played an outsize role in Italian life from the middle of the sixteenth century until the late eighteenth century needs to be reexamined” (444). 