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The History of Illiteracy in the Modern World Since 1750

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Our world has been inhabited by so many beings who are invisible to us, isolated in their poverty and misery or during wars and intense waves of migration, that history must treat them as active, feeling subjects.

—Arlette Farge, *Instants de vie*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Illiteracy Myths

THE LITERACY SPECTRUM

Throughout most of human history, the mass of the population of our planet could neither read nor write. In fact, this was still the case, globally speaking, until almost the middle of the twentieth century. In 1950, according to UNESCO, the world illiteracy rate stood at 44%.¹ In much of the Ottoman Empire, for example, 98% of the rural population could not read or write until the early twentieth century.² Even today, in many parts of the world, agricultural societies find such skills completely unnecessary. In the past, illiteracy was normal and rarely seen as a handicap. Anthropologists consider that in traditional societies, most people lived ‘on the margins of literacy’,³ but they write, as I do, as members of a writing culture. Their perspective is that of ‘graphocentric’ western intellectuals, who inevitably privilege the written word over oral transmission. In a society, however, like the Ottoman Empire just cited, where the educated, book-buying elite made up only 2% of the population, who exactly were

¹ UNESCO, *Alphabétisation 1969–1971. Progrès de l’alphabétisation dans divers continents*, Paris (UNESCO), 1972, 19–20.

² Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948*, Austin TX (University of Texas Press), 2004, 16.

³ Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge UK (Cambridge University Press) 1968, 11–24.

the ‘marginal’ ones? Our history might look a little different if we turned things upside down and read it from the perspective of the illiterate or partially literate majority.

Forty years ago, the news that millions of quasi-illiterates lived unseen in the midst of advanced industrial societies was received as a shocking revelation and regarded in some countries as a source of national shame and despair. Even historians are prone to denigrate illiterate people as social pariahs. In Kenneth Lockridge’s study of literacy in early modern New England, the author abandoned his dispassionate pose to describe, in unusually petulant language, all those who did not sign their will as ‘the hard core of uneducable persons which plagues any society’.⁴ To label illiterates as a plague was an excessively harsh and dismissive judgement to make of a group of people solely on the basis of one missing signature. There has been a common view that illiterates are doomed to a life of darkness, trapped, disabled and immobilised by their ignorance. One American literacy campaigner went so far as to consider them lacking in a basic ingredient of humanity.⁵ This book argues on the contrary that illiterate people have never been less than fully human and that they have always, if necessary, found ways to engage with literate society. I examine some significant issues in the history of literacy with illiterate and semi-literate people in mind. In offering a historical perspective on the ‘problem’ of illiteracy in the modern world, I will also question some enduring myths surrounding the phenomenon.

In one of his short but influential books, the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire asked himself the question: Why are people illiterate?⁶ He gave three answers. Firstly, people are illiterate because they don’t *need* to read. Freire focussed here on reading rather than writing, but historically people in unskilled occupations have felt no urgency to learn either to read or write in their everyday work or in their personal life. There was no need to read and write in order to plough a field or work in a coal mine. Secondly, according to Freire, people are illiterate because they have been *denied the right* to read. In many societies, literacy has been restricted to the dominant classes, and the literacy of the masses has either been

⁴Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West*, New York (Norton), 1974, 77.

⁵Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America*, New York (Plume), 1986, 148 citing Curmie Price of the Urban League of Greater Cleveland.

⁶Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, trans. Donaldo Macedo, Basingstoke UK (Macmillan), 1985, 13.

suppressed or at least strongly discouraged. Thirdly, people have remained illiterate because they have *chosen illiteracy* as a defensive strategy against the encroaching power of the state. Freire's third reason, describing illiteracy as a deliberate choice, is perhaps the most surprising, and I will return to it in Chap. 3. All these answers to Freire's question are under discussion in this book, in which I explore the nature of illiteracy in modern history, from the end of the eighteenth century up to the present day.

Freire's questions and answers are not the only ones to be investigated. I will also consider relationships between illiterates and literate society and how those relationships have evolved in modern history. In particular, it is important to interrogate some of the assumptions surrounding the interpretation of the illiteracy of marginalised people and indeed to question the very reality of their marginalisation. In doing so, I understand illiteracy as a social construction as, at any given time or place in modern history, a society or a social group has defined its own version of the phenomenon. In calling illiteracy a construction, I do not wish to imply that it does not exist. Now and in the past, millions of people have experienced genuine difficulty in approaching the literacy tasks which have confronted them—unfamiliar lettering has proved hard to decipher, the blank page has intimidated the would-be writer—and these difficulties are real. Illiteracy, nevertheless, changes its shape, as societies redefine it, reimagine it and on occasions stigmatise it.

This book sets out to question some persistent myths about illiteracy and its history. Forty years ago, Harvey Graff began this process by undermining some assumptions of modernisation theory. Progress in literacy, Graff maintained, was not necessarily a spur to economic development, although it might well turn out to be a consequence of it. Literacy, Graff also argued, has too easily been interpreted as a sign of advancing modernity, and its benefits have been taken for granted.⁷ Literacy had become so bound up with western concepts of a modern society that its advantages seemed to require no explanation. In the past they have not seemed quite so obvious to illiterate people.

Following Harvey Graff's pioneering and myth-busting work, I will interrogate a few more assumptions about illiteracy in history. Firstly, there has been a certain blindness about both popular and elite opposition to illiteracy in modern history. We are familiar with countless graphs

⁷Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*, London and New York (Routledge), 2017, first edition 1979.

showing a constantly declining curve of illiteracy, but they obscure the persistent hostility to reading and writing found at all social levels. This tension is central to the politics of illiteracy and will be discussed in Chap. 3.

Secondly, another enduring myth conventionally associates the advance of literacy with primary school provision—an association which makes little sense before the advent of universal primary education in late nineteenth-century western Europe. There were many pathways to literacy and schooling was not indispensable for those who travelled along them. Some of those unorthodox pathways will be explored in Chap. 4.

A third questionable assumption regularly places illiterates at the social margins, defining illiteracy as a marker of a failed social integration. Yet, as Chap. 2 will suggest, illiteracy only acquired a social stigma relatively recently, and illiterates have always participated as readers and writers in literate society. The ways in which they did so will also be reviewed, and the literary culture of the illiterate forms the subject of Chap. 5.

Two more fundamental issues lie behind the questions we must ask of conventional attitudes. Historians have recently begun seriously to question the pervasive assumption that the lower classes, the poorly educated or *pau-lettrés* or *analfabetizados*, have left little written trace of their existence, because they never mastered the pen or the pencil. Their allegedly poor level of literary competence has sometimes been offered as an excuse for the marginalisation of the illiterate or semi-literate in dominant historical narratives. The writings of the barely literate, however, do exist, if historians take the trouble to seek them out. In recent years, proponents of a ‘New History from Below’ have begun to do exactly that, in order, as one Italian historian recently put it, ‘To give voice, personal identity, subjectivity, presence and dignity back to humble historical actors’.⁸ Their writings

⁸ Quinto Antonelli, ‘La Grande Guerra: l’ora dei testimoni’, in *In guerra con le parole: il primo conflitto mondiale dalle testimonianze scritte alla memoria multimediale*, eds. Fabio Caffarena and Nancy Murzilli, Trento (Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino), 2018, 35; SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing) Helsinki conference, 2010, ‘Book History from Below’; Martyn Lyons, ‘A New History from Below? The Writing Culture of European Peasants, c. 1850-c. 1920’, in *White Field, Black Seeds: Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Anna Kuismin and M.J. Driscoll, Helsinki (FLS Studia Fennica), 2013, 14–29; Ann-Catrine Edlund, T.G. Ashplant and Anna Kuismin, eds., *Reading and Writing from Below: Exploring the Margins of Modernity*, Umeå (Umeå University and Royal Skyttean Society), 2016; *European Journal of Life Writing* 7 (2018), special dossier on ‘Life Writing “from Below” in Europe’; Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750–1830s*, Montreal (McGill-Queens University Press), 2019.

may be hybrid in terms of genre, unorthodox in terms of language and syntax, imbued with traces of orality, sometimes predictably conformist and at other times stridently rebellious, but the fact that their authors were illiterate is no reason to dismiss them.

Although the idea of the illiterate author may seem oxymoronic, in practice it is perfectly logical. Matteo Russo, to take just one example, a soldier from Sicily who fought in the First World War, sent over 80 letters home to his wife even though he was almost completely illiterate.⁹ They were written in several different hands, indicating an author who had frequent recourse to delegated writers. I want to suggest that the so-called illiterate were not excluded from society but that they were integrated in various ways into print and written culture.

Behind all the conventional wisdom about illiteracy lies a question of definition—what is, or was, illiteracy? The question usually takes for granted the stark and quite inadequate dichotomy that divides literacy from illiteracy. Instead of this great divide, we need to think of a spectrum of abilities embracing a variety of competencies, each of them dictated by the specific task in hand. Instead of imagining historical worlds made up in black-and-white terms of literates and illiterates, it may be more appropriate to blur the boundaries and consider the notion of a literacy continuum, encompassing a range of different literacy competencies and functions.

This book therefore questions the clear division between literacy and illiteracy which has often been assumed by social and economic historians relying on the data of the signature test. Instead, it turns the spotlight on all those in-between, the millions who had some literacy skills, but for whom reading and writing posed difficulties. My main focus is on those we have often labelled ‘illiterates’, rather than those who enjoyed full competence in reading and writing in modern society. Even if they had some rudimentary competence, history has condemned them to the ranks of the illiterate, on the questionable grounds that they could not sign their name.

In a sense, I approach the history of literacy in reverse. Instead of analysing the relentless progress of literacy (which has been our master narrative since the Enlightenment), I am concerned with the reverse side of the

⁹Matteo Russo, *Lettere dal Fronte (1916–1917)*, eds. Sebastiano Maggio et al., Catania (Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Catanese di Magistero), 1993; Martyn Lyons, ‘The Power of the Scribe: Delegated Writing in Modern Europe’, *European History Quarterly* 44:2 (2014): 255–6.