

The long-term effect of Protestant ethics on reading. A multi-causal and comparative analysis of the relationship between religion, the state and literacy and reading rates in Europe.

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Abstract

The Weberian thesis on the effect of Protestantism on individual behaviour has been repeatedly used to discuss its effects on literacy and reading. While the culturalist interpretation of the differential effect of Protestantism is debatable, effects on literacy processes are observed in Protestant and Catholic countries in Europe. However, this *long-lasting* social process is best understood in a multi-causal framework, as discussed in Weber's later writings. Thus, the impact of Protestantism is understood in its interrelationship with the state and the educational and cultural institutions that make this effect last despite the processes of secularisation. Through a comparative analysis in various European countries and the triangulation of historical and contemporary sources, the text shows the continuity of this affinity between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of reading. In doing so, it highlights the shortcomings of diachronic comparative analyses of cultural consumption and the need to strengthen an analysis based on historical frame-sociology in order to understand the persistence of differences in European cultural practices and policies.

Keywords: Max Weber, Protestantism, Catholicism, literacy, reading, comparative sociology, Europe.

Introduction

Literacy has been the focus of attention since the 1970s because of its link to economic development (Cipolla, 1970). Thus, within the framework of decolonisation processes and development theories, international statistical studies of literacy became the subject of research by international organisations (UNESCO, 1953, 1957). Subsequent studies at the turn of the 20th-21st century note on the one hand the equalisation of literacy rates but the persistence of differences in reading rates between European countries according to whether or not they belonged historically to the Protestant area as defined in the 16th century (Mosher, 2016). These debates focus however on the debate about the effects on so-called human capital and

secondarily on the debate about reading (Becker and Woessmann, 2009). In this article we will not enter into the debate on whether Protestantism is directly linked to economic growth, as this has been debated in other works that have questioned this common interpretation of the Weberian thesis (Delacroix and Nielsen, 2001). In line with the Weberian thesis of the historical explanation of social change in the sense of the affinity between the Protestant ethic and reading, we will address another "unexpected effect" of Luther's Protestant call for direct reading of the Bible: the increase in literacy rates and its *long-lasting* effect on a cultural consumption that is basic and the gateway to other cultural consumption, such as reading (Graff, 1987). Thus, we understand that this issue has been little explored in studies of cultural consumption, which are usually more focused on other forms of consumption such as music. At the same time, we understand that comparative studies have not sufficiently developed a broad framework based on comparative historical sociology, encompassing the variables of state genesis and religious denominations to understand the interrelations between the cultural and the political (Xiaohong et al., 2010). Certainly, some comparative studies on cultural consumption have highlighted the persistence of large differences between countries (Katz-Gerro, 2017, Gavrilović et al., 2025) or have internationally compared the effect of religious affiliation on educational attainment across religions (Feldmann, 2016). However, these comparative sociological studies of cultural consumption focus on contemporary debates about snobbish patterns of cultural consumption, usually adopting relatively short time series focusing on social structure, which leaves out the causal-frame explanation of cultural change. Thus, we share the idea that macro-social processes operate as conditioners of social institutions and this is reflected in the differences in cultural consumption between countries (Fishman and Lizardo, 2013).

Thus, this article argues that the perspective of contemporary events or recent history is not sufficient to understand the dynamics of cultural consumption¹ and we must take our analysis back to the genesis of the modern era to understand cultural differences in Europe. In fact, the analysis of *The Distinction* although not explicitly stated (Bourdieu, Pierre, 1991) is

recording in the twentieth century the effects of a cultural logic, the courtly society whose genesis occurs in the seventeenth century (Elias, 1983), and thus predates capitalism and the nation-state (Fabiani, 2016). However, in studies of cultural consumption, the perspective adopted is usually short-sighted, with few exceptions. In this article, on the contrary, we propose to adopt a theoretical and temporal perspective of *longue durée* (Braudel 1958) , which traces a line of analysis beyond the short stages of the last decades usually used in studies of cultural consumption. In this way, we propose to recognise transformations and continuities beyond the superficial appearances (Burke 1987) .

Moreover, although religious institutions continue to influence European societies, their role now goes largely unnoticed (Davie 2006, Knoblauch 2003) . Here we do not analyse how an individual's religion affects his or her reading level but focus on the long-term influence of the dominant religion on the cultural and educational policies of states, which in turn affect both the type and level of literacy and reading in European countries. Therefore, to study this phenomenon, we have relied on a quantitative methodology based on a triangulation of data from different sources used for the analysis of the evolution of literacy. The data sources are the following: a) For the study of literacy data we rely on historical data collected by Buringh and Van Zanden (2009). It should be noted that historical data in relation to literacy are based on various sources explained by the cited author and that they are based on parish or court records and therefore have limited methodological validity and are not available for all European countries (Johansson, 1977). b) In relation to literacy from the 20th century onwards we rely on UNESCO data (UNESCO, 1953, 1957) and on the elaborations from its database by the World Bank (2025). In this case, although the records come from more reliable state sources, we must point out the existence of different conceptions of literacy, as recognised by UNESCO, which in some cases not only recognises the ability to read but also to write competently (UNESCO, 1953, 1957). We will not dwell on this issue developed in other studies (reference). But in order to offer a triangulation of current data beyond literacy rates, in this article we also finalise more recent and homogeneous studies on literacy and reading and writing skills such as the PIAAC

(Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) test developed by the OECD to measure literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. In this case we have selected the results of Cycle 2 carried out between 2022 and 2023 (OECD, 2023). d) To observe the relationship between religious denomination and type of cultural policies in relation to culture, we will analyse its main instrument, the library network, in a comparative way. We will use the most comprehensive study that was carried out at the turn of the century on behalf of the European Union (LibeEcon2000, 2001). e) However, these data do not contain variables relating to religious denominations and individual behaviours. This is why, finally, the article is based on an exploitation of the most recent *European Social Survey* (ESS, 2023), which includes 42,359 face-to-face surveys and 567 variables and which constitutes one of the main references for the comparison of European behaviours and attitudes (Jowell et al., 2007).

However, before entering the analysis of the data on literacy and reading, we will situate the object of study of the article within the framework of the debate on the Weberian thesis, proposing a multi-causal and not a purely culturalist interpretation. We will then briefly consider the anomalous absence (with a few exceptions) of the religious factor in the sociology of European culture, despite the interest that has been devoted to it in other fields of study such as economics, in order to approach the study of the relationship between the division between a Protestant and Catholic Europe since the sixteenth century and literacy and reading rates on the basis of a triangulation. As we shall see below, this relationship is visible in the evolution during the modern and contemporary period of literacy data by country, in the data of contemporary literacy tests and, finally, in data on the reading of the daily press or the use of libraries according to this religious factor. Finally, we will reflect on the need to rethink the approach to cultural consumption, which affects not only believers but the entire population, and we will propose a framework of multi-causal and multi-level analysis for its study from the perspective of historical and comparative sociology, taking up the tradition of Weberian sociology.

Weber and the interpretation of the division between Protestants and Catholics: from culturalism to a multi-causal framework

The idea of a division between Protestants and Catholics in Europe also on the basis of their attitude towards culture in general and reading in particular has been an intellectual commonplace for decades (MacCulloch, 2004). We can find for example mentions of this division in the study of Protestantism and modernity by the theologian Ernest Troeltsch (Troeltsch, 1925). In this case, the author refers to the influence of Protestantism on art in an indirect sense: Protestantism does not affect art precisely because it does not consider it a vehicle for knowledge of God or an expression of divine grace, unlike Catholicism, which is more akin to visual or musical exuberance (Sánchez Cano, 1976)), as manifested in Baroque art (. On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was an awareness of the influence of Protestantism, especially Puritanism, in relation to cultural creation caricatured by the well-known intellectual and writer Stefan Zweig. In this little known and controversial work (because it was considered hostile to Protestantism) Sweig opposes the influence of Calvinism to a puritanical and disciplining tendency that represses creativity and the enjoyment of cultural consumption to the flourishing of the visual and musical arts in the absolutist courts² . In this article we will obviously not start from this premise, but we do want to point out that Zweig takes up a view partly from the cultural field and from a Manichean but certainly widespread interpretation of Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and causally links, albeit erroneously as Giddens points out, religious change and the spread of rational capitalism (Giddens, 1987). However, in both cases, there was no awareness of an affinity between Protestantism, Calvinism and reading levels in the various European countries.

Certainly, Max Weber does not establish in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2011) a relationship between literacy and Protestantism: certainly in his introductory chapter where he points out affinities between the presence of Protestants in Europe and the flourishing of industry he notes: (...) the notable difference in the type of

education given to their children by Catholic parents in relation to Protestant ones, phenomena which can be observed in Baden or Bavaria as well as in Hungary, for example. It is understandable - for the economic reason mentioned above (N.A. refers to the greater presence in the management of capitalist companies) that the percentage of Catholics among pupils and graduates of "higher" educational establishments does not correspond to their demographic proportion. But it also happens among Catholic baccalaureate graduates (...) because Catholics prefer the other, humanistic type of education provided by schools based on classical education (...) this phenomenon (...) which cannot be explained (...) by an economic cause (...) (Weber, 2011: 76). Thus, what Weber points out therefore is that there is no mechanical link between the influence of the context is not homogeneous, but that: (...) the causal relationship consists in the fact that the choice of the profession and all further destiny of the professional life has been determined by the education of a personal aptitude, and a direction influenced by the religious and home atmosphere" (idem: p. 77). (idem: p. 77). This therefore points to a more complex interpretative framework in which the choice of education is mediated by a family strategy and a national logic which in turn is influenced by religious denomination. In this sense, some authors argue that the causality here is that the Protestant ethic facilitates industrialisation, or that it increases the demand for education (Giddens, 1987, Becker and Woessmann, 2009). However, this seems to us to be a simplifying interpretation of the Weberian thesis, which actually fixes on family choice (which is affected by other, not purely economic variables, such as cultural capital or religious denomination) and a differentiated career strategy rather than a mechanical response to labour market demand. As Randall Collins points out, the critical view of the Weberian thesis as too culturalist does not take into consideration the fact that Weber himself, at the end of his work, refined the interpretative framework of emergence as well as the interpretation of behaviour and the causality of social and cultural change (Collins, 1987: 19-44). Especially significant is that in this new scheme Weber takes into consideration the interrelationship of the logic of theological beliefs and their affinity with rationalised economic behaviour, as well as the emergence of the notion of citizenship and its relation to the bureaucratic state (opus cit). This new interpretative framework seems to us to be more

appropriate because of its more multidimensional logic, and it is the one to which we will turn to build our framework for comparative analysis of the reading. Thus, it seems essential to us to

Literacy and Reading and Religion Studies: An Anomalous Absence in the Sociology of Culture

As we recalled at the beginning of this article, the question of the relationship between Protestantism and literacy and its effect on reading has been addressed by economic historians from the work of Carlo Cipolla (Cipolla, 1970) to the present day (Vincent, 2000). However, general sociology has remained aloof from this question, apart from Emmanuel Todd, who has taken up the tradition of the French comparative sociology of Le Play, and who has also claimed the *longue durée* but mapped history in order to highlight the continuities and frontiers of social change in Europe (Todd, 1990). Certainly, some authors such as Norbert Elias developed a sociology of the genesis of modern consumption patterns from opposing and comparing conceptions of culture in Europe (Goudsblom, 2003, Elias, 2010), but the mainstream sociology of culture in general and the study of cultural consumption has remained absent from this debate.

A prominent case is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which has influenced the analysis of cultural consumption to the present day (Coulangeon and Duval, 2013). Well, in his best known and most central work in relation to cultural consumption, *The Distinction* Bourdieu, Pierre, 1991), the word Protestantism or Catholicism does not appear even once. The mention of religion appears only five times, but always in relation to political culture, and in no case is a causal link established between religious denomination, level of religiosity and cultural consumption. Thus, references to the Weberian thesis on the influence of religious doctrine on individual behaviour (and its link to cultural taste) - which nevertheless permeates the theoretical framework of the book and its critique of the ahistorical and asocial interpretation of

taste - are indirect in two places. On the one hand, in the characterisation of the ascetic attitude of the intelligentsia with the attitude of the religious elite that promotes belief in the goods of salvation that they manage and its opposition to the more hedonistic attitude of the bourgeoisie especially in the Post-scriptum chapter (idem, pp. 495 - 512). On the other hand, in several chapters he refers to the aestheticising asceticism of the professor (idem, pp. 193 and 216). On the other hand, he also makes other indirect references to Puritanism (but always without historicising it or relating it to a religious doctrine) by characterising the Puritan attitude of the cultural taste of the old middle classes: "The rising petty bourgeoisie repeats indefinitely the history of the origins of capitalism: for this, it can only count, like the Puritans, on its asceticism. In social exchanges in which others can anticipate real guarantees, money, culture or relations, it can only offer moral guarantees; poor (relatively) in economic, cultural and social capital, it cannot "justify its claims", as it is often said, and thus grant itself the possibility of realising them, except on condition that it pays with sacrifices, with privations, with renunciations, with goodwill, with recognition, in short, with virtue (idem, p. 337)" (idem, p. 337)". A characterisation he repeats when referring to the petit bourgeois habitus: "asceticism, rigorism, juridicism and a propensity to accumulation in all things" (idem, p. 335).

Certainly, there are some exceptions in the sociology of culture such as (without claiming to be exhaustive) the comparative work of Michele Lamont in which the comparison between the consumption of social elites refers, albeit secondarily, to the importance of religious affiliation in North America and the contrast with French elites (Lamont, 1992)³. On the other hand, the link between religion and cultural consumption, although it has been accredited in comparative studies (Meier Jaeger and Katz-Gerro 2012), is still considered a minor aspect in explanations of cultural consumption. Other authors have examined the role of religious denomination and religiosity in music consumption in the USA in which they observe the association of religious denomination membership and cultural consumption (Montoro-Pons and Cuadrado-García, 2018). However, these cases do not particularly study literacy and literacy competence, nor do they differentiate between the different Protestant denominations.

There is therefore a need in sociology for the return, as Gorski states, of a dimension that was repressed because it did not fit into the logic of analysis based on the premise of secularisation as a tabula rasa (Gorski, 2001), the relationship between state, religion and culture, an element that we will explore below.

The affinity between religious denomination and literacy and reading: *longue durée* effects from data triangulation

Division in sixteenth-century Europe: the development of literacy and its long-lasting effects

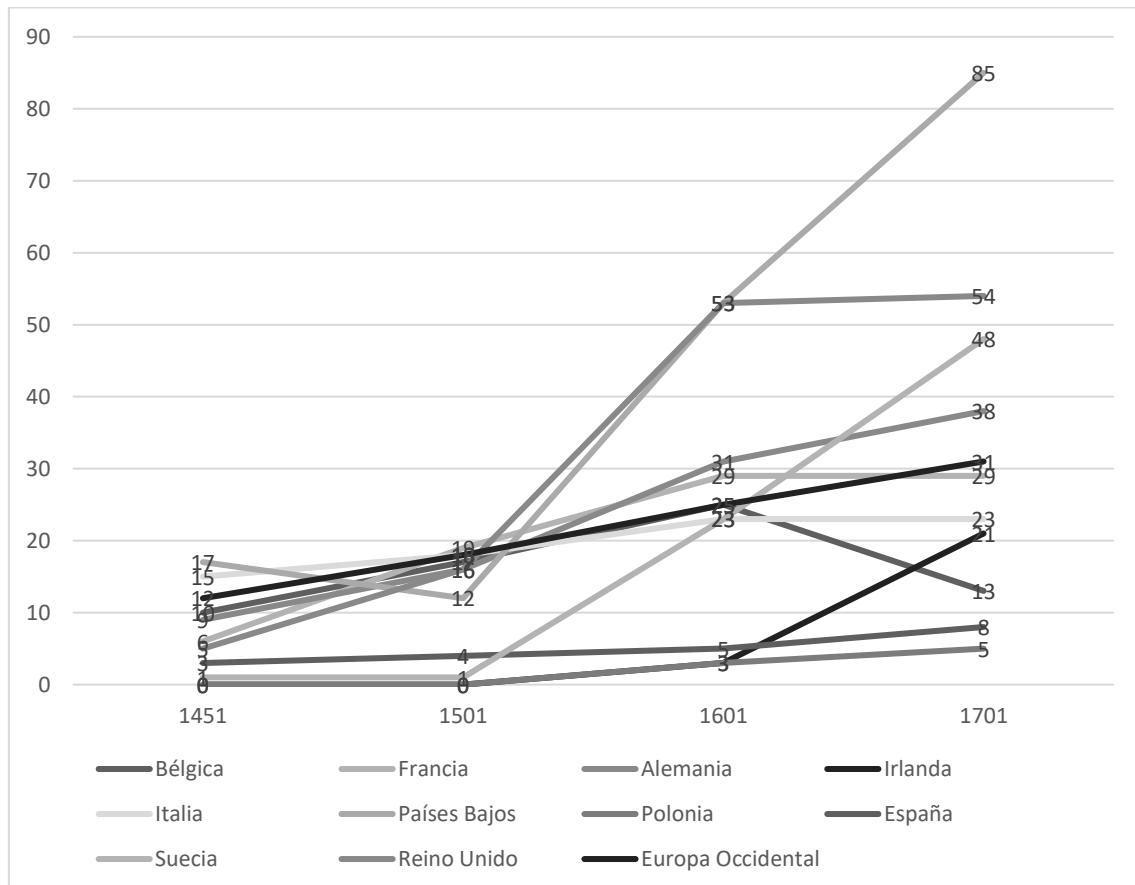
The end of the 18th century saw a definition of the boundaries between the areas that would embrace the new Protestant faith and those that would remain faithful to the Catholic Church. However, this will trigger extensive processes of social change and a growing differentiation between northern and southern Europe (MacCulloch, 2004). But not in a superstructural infrastructural logic as the mechanistic Marxist view of history would indicate, but in a logic, since developments in agriculture or trade are hardly remarkable (Trevor-Roper, 1985: 47). The same could be transferred to the question of literacy, which is not a direct consequence of advances in science, technology or an increased demand for skilled labour. Firstly, as Todd observes, the most remarkable advances occur at the cultural level, not at the level of the scientific elites as in the seventeenth century, but at the level of the masses. That is, in the advances in literacy in certain areas of the European continent. And secondly, it is not in countries where there is greater economic and commercial dynamism that the greatest progress in literacy is observed, as in England, but in relatively more agrarian and backward countries such as Scotland or Sweden. Thus, in certain regions of Scandinavia and north-western Europe, mass literacy processes developed and by the middle of the 17th century, more than 50% of the population was literate (Johansson, 1977). Thus, more than the Protestant Reformation, literacy

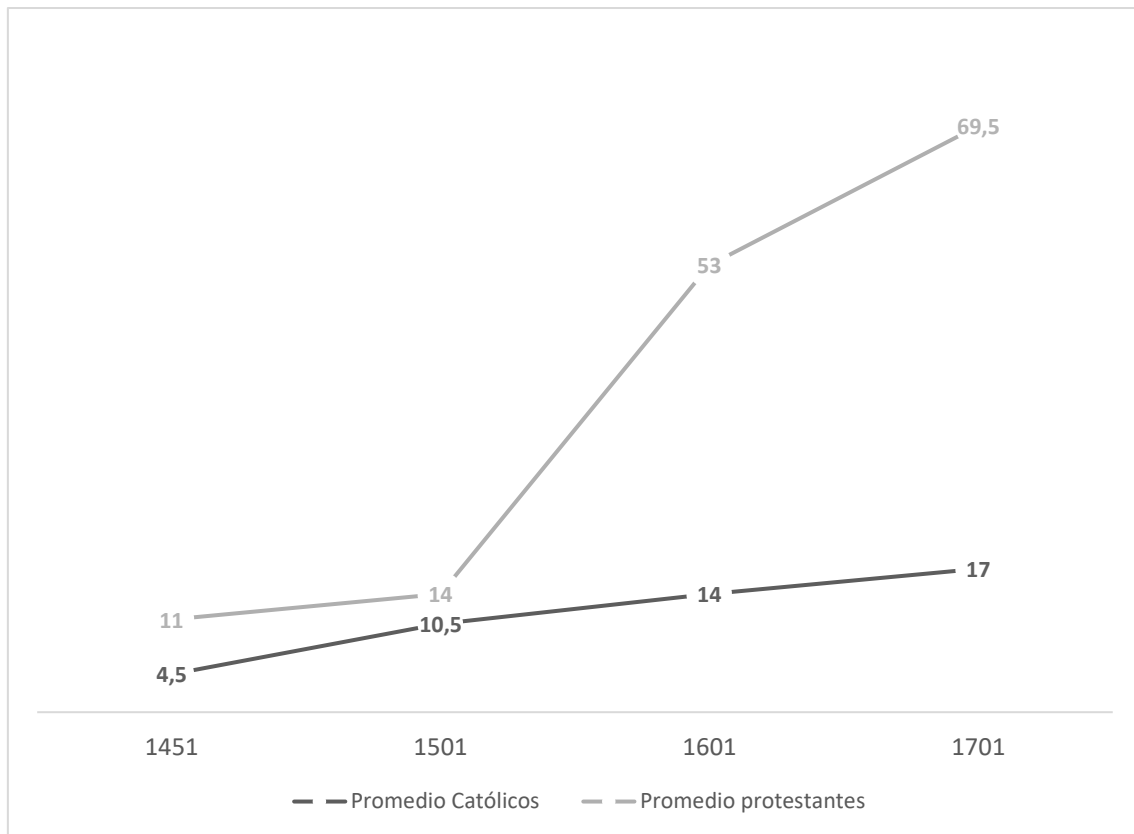
will divide Europe and define two zones, a developing pole and another that will remain from then until the beginning of the 19th century (Mosher, 2016). Thus, while in Italy in 1800, the adult literacy rate in Italy was 20%, in the Swedish case it was over 80% (UNESCO, 1953).

It is true that the influence of the Catholic Church is not uniform in all territories and evolves over the last five centuries, with actions in favour of literacy also developing as a reaction to Protestantism in central Europe (Lyons, 2009: 90) or more generally from the 20th century onwards (Vincent, 2000). However, on a general level on the European continent from the 16th century onwards, the Catholic Church did not have a mass literacy policy but focused on educating a minority, especially in monasteries and universities (Buringh and Zanden, 2009). On the other hand, during the Counter-Reformation, this logic of schooling for minorities is further emphasised by an express mention in the Council of Trent (23rd session, 15 July 1563, Chapter XVIII) and only provides for oral training in doctrine. On the other hand, Catholicism, while not formally opposed to literacy, is opposed to the public or private reading of the Bible, and to any attempt to interpret it as a path to heresy (Melton, 1988). On the other hand, while it is true that there was no ban on reading in general but only on books considered to affect religious doctrine, this was in fact an important part of book production and on the other hand by discouraging Bible reading in practice removed the main incentive for reading in the sixteenth century. It is thus an attempt to maintain a monopoly on the interpretation of the goods of salvation. This is expressed in the hostility to Bible reading at the Council of Trent and in the papal bull promulgated by Pope Clement XI in 1713 which expressly refutes the idea that everyone should read the Bible (McManners, 1998). This disincentive to literacy is thus manifested in the absence of mass literacy programmes in Catholic areas. The most prominent case is Italy, which in the 15th century was at the forefront of education in Europe, but its literacy rate was only around 15% according to Buringh and Van Zanden (2009), but for a century its rate stagnated at 23%, which contrasts sharply with 48% in Sweden and especially 85% in the Netherlands (*idem*). Thus, the development of literacy in Italy only arose in the

context of the construction of the nation state and its programme of political and cultural unification (Vincent, 2000)

Figure 1 - Evolution of adult literacy rates in Europe and average Protestant and Catholic countries*.





* Germany has not been included in these averages as it is a mixed Protestant and Catholic country and does not have data broken down by religious denomination.

Source: own elaboration based on Buringh and Van Zanden (2009).

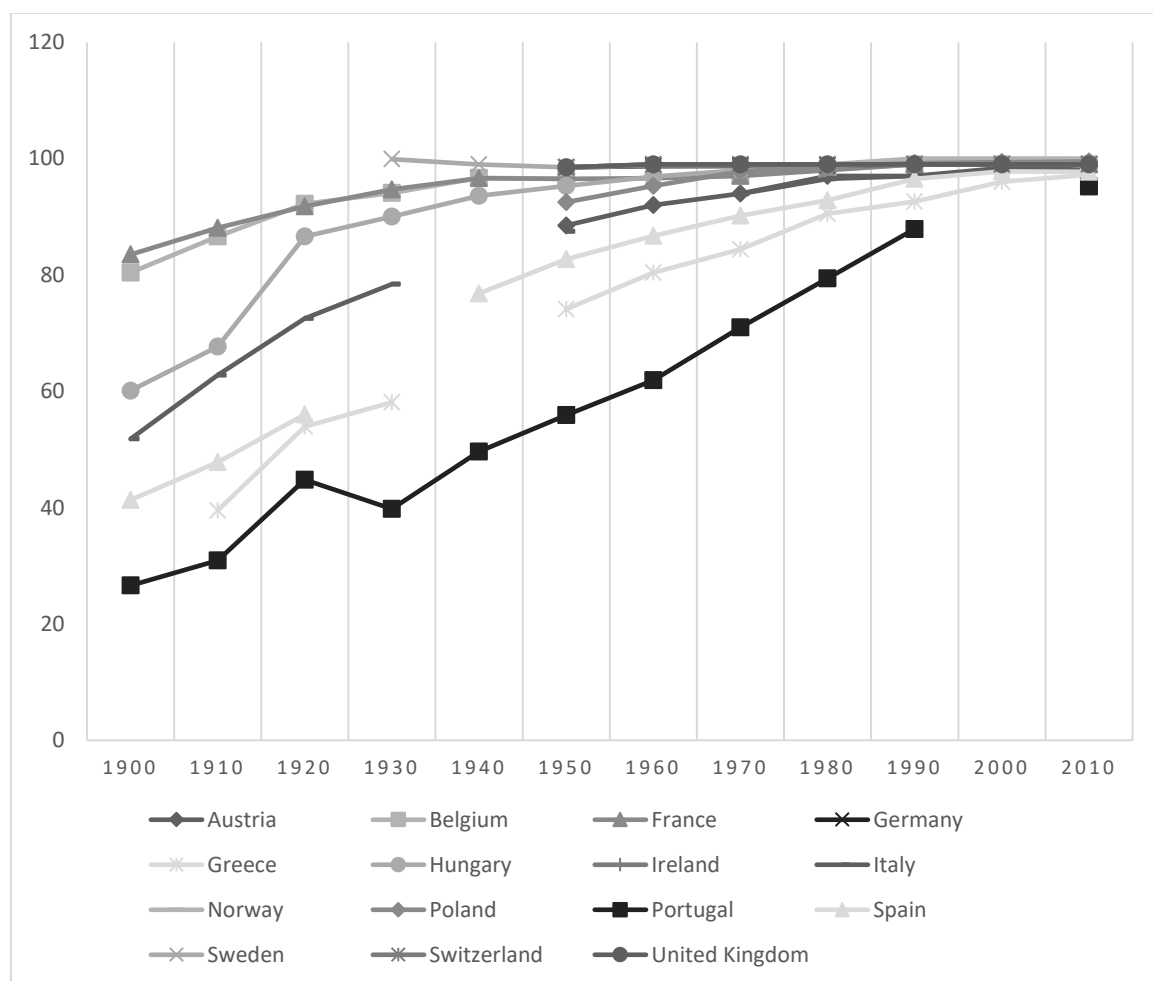
Compared to the negative effects of Catholicism on mass literacy, Protestantism had clearly positive effects. The interpretative key here was the emphasis on individual faith and direct connection to God. This reveals the effect of the two Lutheran postulates that all can be pastors (and not just an elite), of the pre-Reformation idea that pastors must be able to read, and therefore, in order to be all pastors, all must be able to read⁴. It is true that there were pre-Reformation initiatives to encourage reading, but none had the extent and consistency of Protestant initiatives (Akçomak et al., 2016), because of this reasoning of learning to read as a universal duty to know the Bible. This connection can be found in the founding texts of Protestantism, with Luther himself calling for increased education and literacy in particular.

Thus in the Admonition he calls for the teaching of Christian doctrine in German, including poor children .⁵ In this sense, Protestantism has two positive effects on the increase of literacy, namely the promotion of individual Bible reading and the development of mechanisms for institutionalised Bible reading in the churches and in the development of the educational system, two elements that often go hand in hand in Scandinavian countries. This is the case in Sweden, where the Lutheran Church, together with the municipalities, has promoted a very successful literacy programme which has enabled Sweden to go from having a very low literacy rate typical of an eminently rural area to being in the 19th century one of the countries with the highest literacy rates in the world (75% in 1820 and 80% in 1870 (Johansson, 1977)). However, its action is also to a certain extent disciplinary in that the parish priests pass the children and can deprive those who do not pass of communion and publish the results in writing. This model was imitated by Finland and by Denmark and Norway, which added compulsory schooling to this strategy, achieving the practical universalisation of literacy in the mid-19th century (Tveit, 1991). It is also worth noting the particular universalist logic of literacy that aims to include everyone and is at the basis of the development of a welfare state that is not limited only to workers as in the case of Bismarck's Germany (Lindmark, 2009). It can be observed that literacy rates are high in all strata of society including the most excluded such as prisoners, who have similar rates to the rest of the population (Johansson, 1977).

We can thus see a Lutheran path to literacy that is based on coordination between the national Lutheran Church and the state and that will have a universalist and integrative logic, which will be continued in the Nordic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1993). As Philip S. Gorski points out, the Calvinist and Puritan variant⁶ promotes through the new bureaucratic state a disciplinary revolution in the population, which is reflected in the processes of disciplining the poor and with an emphasis on work as the way to salvation (Gorski, 1993, 1995), but without the universalist and integrative character of the Nordic models. This orientation is at the basis of a liberal state orientation and a logic of internalisation of discipline through the infrastructures of power, including educational institutions (Gorski, 2001, Manow,

2004). Despite the low level of state intervention observable in the Netherlands, Switzerland or the United Kingdom, these countries achieved high levels of literacy that also lasted from the 17th century onwards. In contrast, in the Catholic countries of southern Europe, there was a very fragmented cultural development in which courts such as Brussels, Paris, Rome or Madrid concentrated economic and cultural wealth from the 16th century onwards (Trevor-Roper, 1985). Thus the centralist and segregating dynamics of absolutist and Catholic countries is also an explanation for the differential in literacy rates, a fragmentary logic that will also occur in the de facto fragmentary nature of the welfare states in these countries (Ferrera 1996) .

Figure 2 - Evolution of Literacy Rates in European Countries (1900-2010)



Source: UNESCO (UNESCO, 1953, 1957), World Bank (2025)

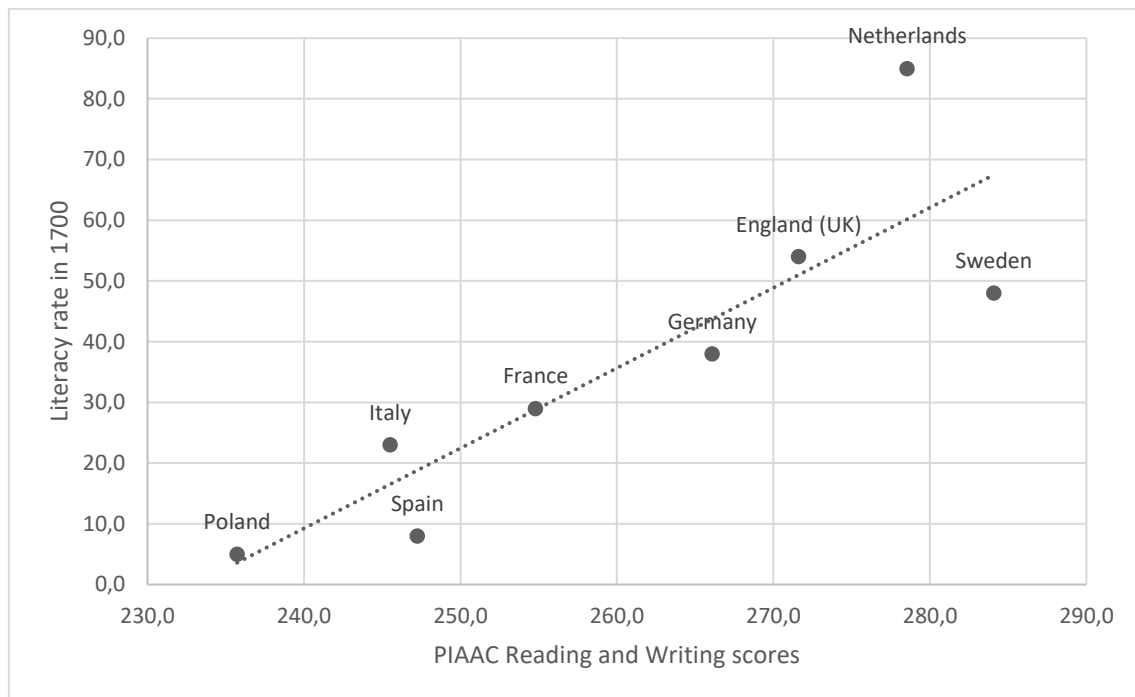
As we can see, the differences between Protestant and Catholic countries remained between the 18th and 19th centuries, and these differences lasted until the middle of the 20th century. The difference, then, is the time of the push for mass literacy in Protestant and Catholic countries. In the latter, the mass school systems set up by the nation-states from the 19th century onwards, and in some cases only effectively until the second half of the 20th century, as in the case of Spain, Greece and Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Italy. Thus, we find that the lowest literacy rates correspond to the countries of southern Europe which have remained Catholic or orthodox and which Cipolla described in the 1950s as the bastions of illiteracy in Europe (Cipolla, 1970: 90). There is, it is true, one clear exception among the countries currently identified as Catholic: the Irish case. However, here again we must remember the logic of *longue durée*: in Ireland a long predominance of Presbyterian Protestantism developed in the education system, given that it was a mixed Protestant and Catholic society until its division in the 20th century (Barnard, 2006) and in which English dominance has led to an institutional isomorphism in cultural policies in the Irish state (Rius-Uldemollins and Pizzi, 2020).

Religious denomination and literacy skills in Europe today.

Nevertheless, the data indicate that literacy rates are close to 99% in all European states for which we have data (UNESCO, 1953, 1957, World Bank, 2025). Does this mean that the European divide and the differential effect of the Protestant literacy impulse has disappeared? In the same way that Bourdieu argues in relation to the distinction of tastes and cultural capital (Bourdieu, Pierre, 1991), the emergence of mass education systems makes some differences disappear but makes other differences emerge, in this case, in the degree of literacy competence. Thus, if we relate literacy rates to 21st century literacy scores from the PIAAC tests, we observe

an almost linear relationship in which the ordinality and the difference between countries is preserved three centuries later.

Figure 3 - Literacy rate in 1700 and literacy score in the PIAAC test by country

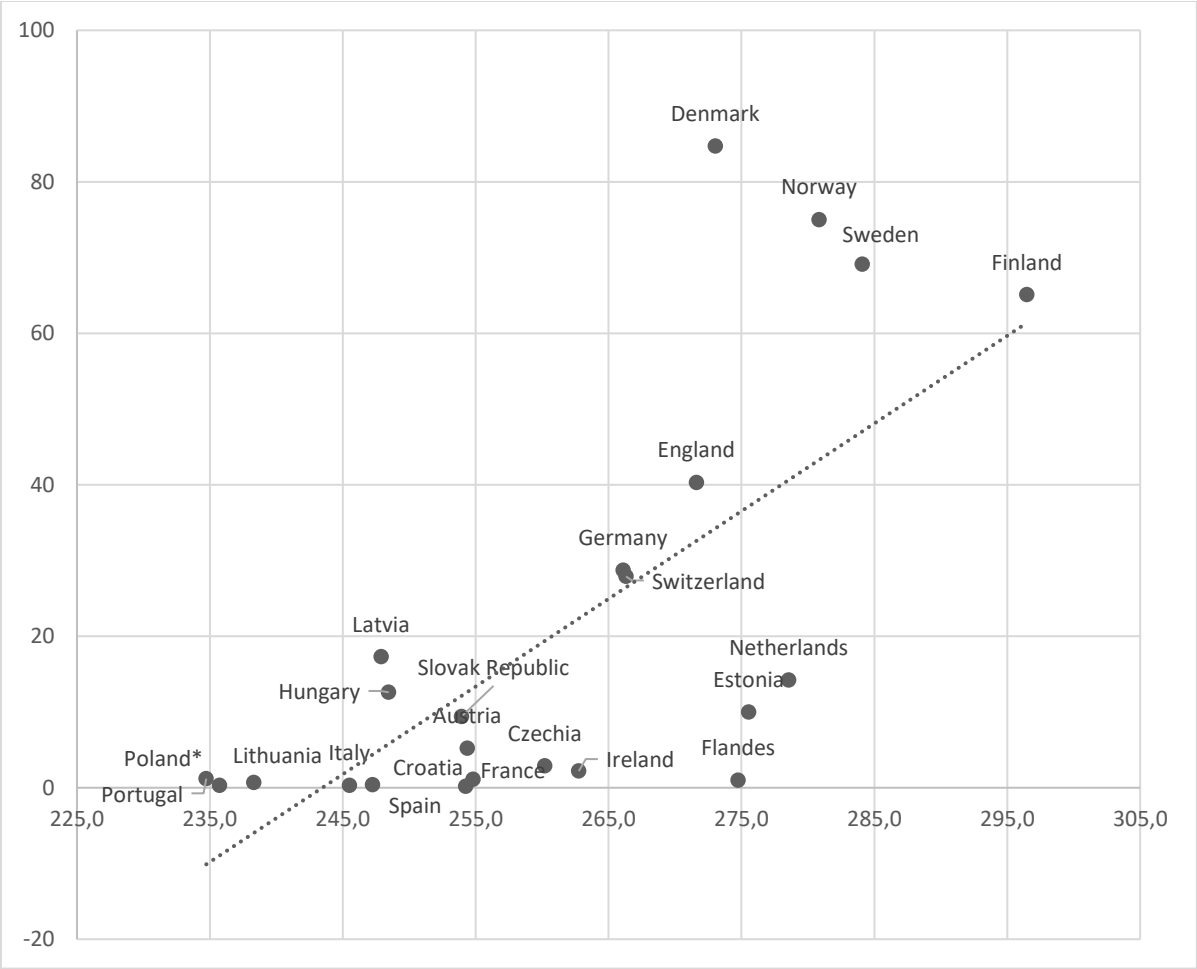


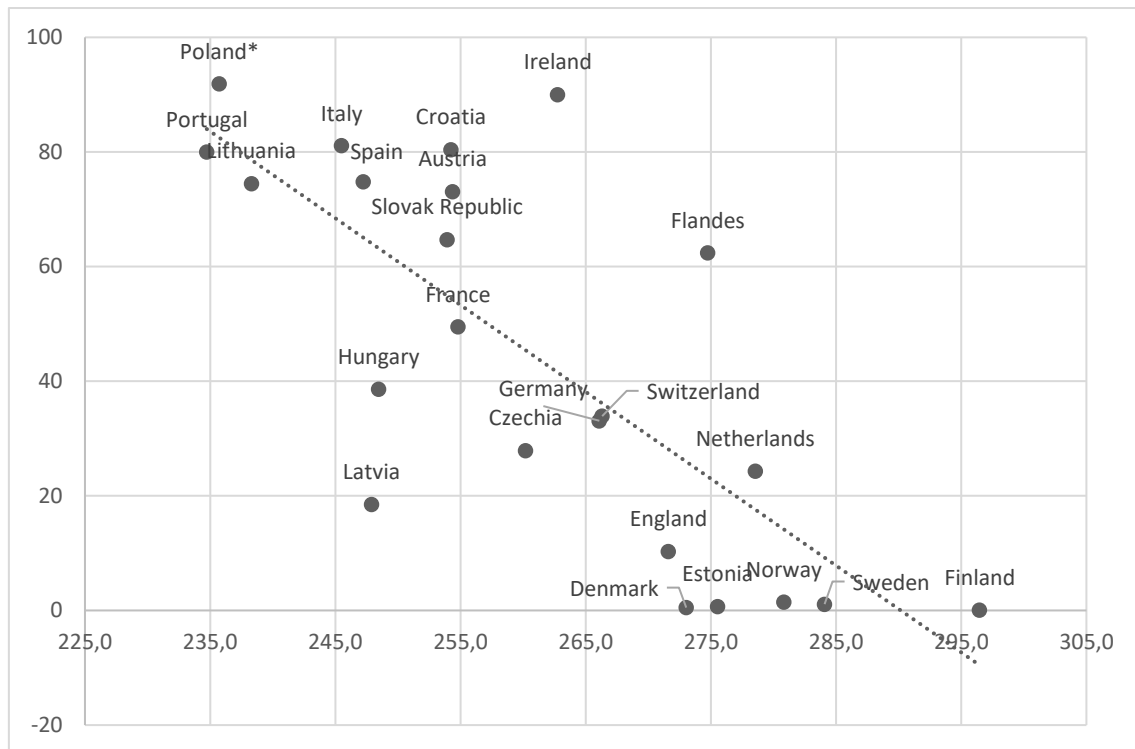
Source: PIAAC (OECD, 2023)

In this way, we can observe that the differential effects of literacy are observable over time, including at the beginning of the 20th century, when, despite the development of educational systems, the differences are important in a central and northern European axis where the rates are over 90% and a south in which half of the population, although with regional differences, does not reach 50% (Todd, 1990: 161). In this sense, it should be noted that some Catholic countries occupy an intermediate position, although some analyses attribute this to geographical proximity and to the Germanic world, and in fact literacy is higher in the north than in the south (Furet and Osouf, quoted in Todd). On the other hand, there is the German case, which has the

singularity of its mixed Catholic and Protestant composition, which requires a more detailed analysis because of the relationship between religious denominations and the state.

Figure 4 - PIAAC and percentage of Protestants and Catholics in perspective bought in Europe





Source: own elaboration based on PIAAC (OECD, 2023) and European Social Survey (ESS, 2023).

Some authors such as Emmanuel Todd have questioned the Weberian hypothesis of the influence of Protestantism, pointing to the case of Belgium, which was relatively literate in the 19th and 20th centuries (Todd, 1990) and, above all, as we have pointed out, the German case, in which Catholic and Protestant areas hardly differ in their literacy rates. In doing so, he points to the inadequacy of the Protestant effect thesis. However, he overlooks an important element: the configuration of the German state and its unification at the end of the 19th century led by a kingdom, Prussia, which was not only Protestant but also heavily influenced by Calvinists in its king and high officials (Gorski, 1993).⁷ At the same time, more recent analyses have pointed to the relationship between the Protestant core of the Prussian state and the network of Hanseatic cities as the engine of German literacy (Becker and Woessmann, 2009). In this sense, the disciplinary revolution from the state to the whole society - and especially the poor - experienced by some countries influenced by periods of Calvinist or Puritan dominance (as in

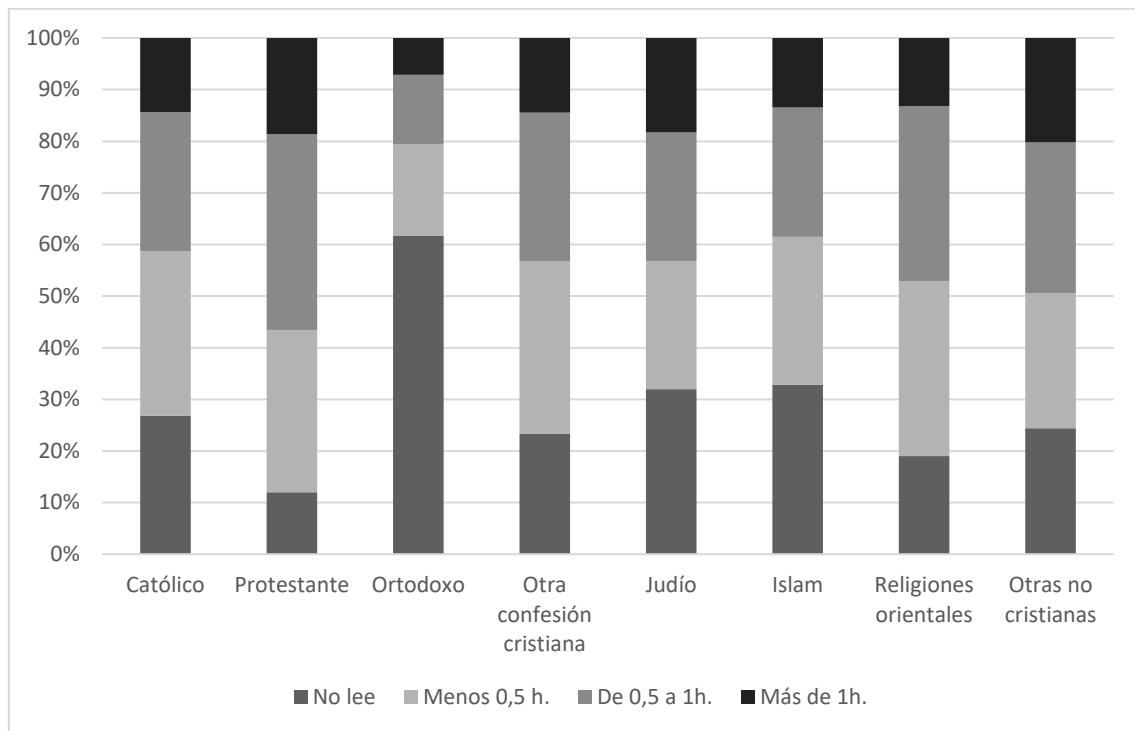
the Netherlands or Scotland), even if only for relatively short periods (as in England) or affecting only parts of the country or its elites Prussia or Estonia and Latvia is reflected in a *longue durée* effect on literacy or reading rates. Moreover, as Todd himself acknowledges, the spread of literacy also follows a logic of geographical continuity in which Catholic countries close to Protestant areas according to PIAAC evidence show similar results. This does not disprove the thesis of the relevance of religious denomination in the effects on reading, I only disprove its cultural-individual causality: thus, the effect is explained by the question of who controls the state in mixed countries (as is the case in Germany or England) and the competition between denominations to equalise the effectiveness of the educational level and thus the control of the population (Stone, 1969) and which can be observed in areas of contact and dispute between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Individual-level analysis: religious denomination and affinity for reading in Europe today

In this section we aim to close this multidimensional country analysis and answer the question of whether there is any of this effect left at the individual level today. We repeat that in our analysis we argue that since the effect of religious denomination occurs at the national level, this effect encompasses believers and non-believers since the education and cultural policy system has affected all citizens of the country and its effects are spread over generations. However, despite this observation and the fact that there is little data linking cultural consumption and religious denomination in Europe, we can use data from the *European Social Survey* which, although it does not generally ask about reading, does ask about daily reading of the press and asks about religious denomination (ESS, 2023)⁸. Thus, in this survey we can observe that there are statistically significant differences between the religious denominations taken into consideration at the overall European level.

Figure 5 - Daily press readership by religious denomination in Europe (2023)

Figure 5 - Daily press readership by religious denomination in Europe (2023)



Source: own elaboration based on *European Social Survey* (ESS, 2023).

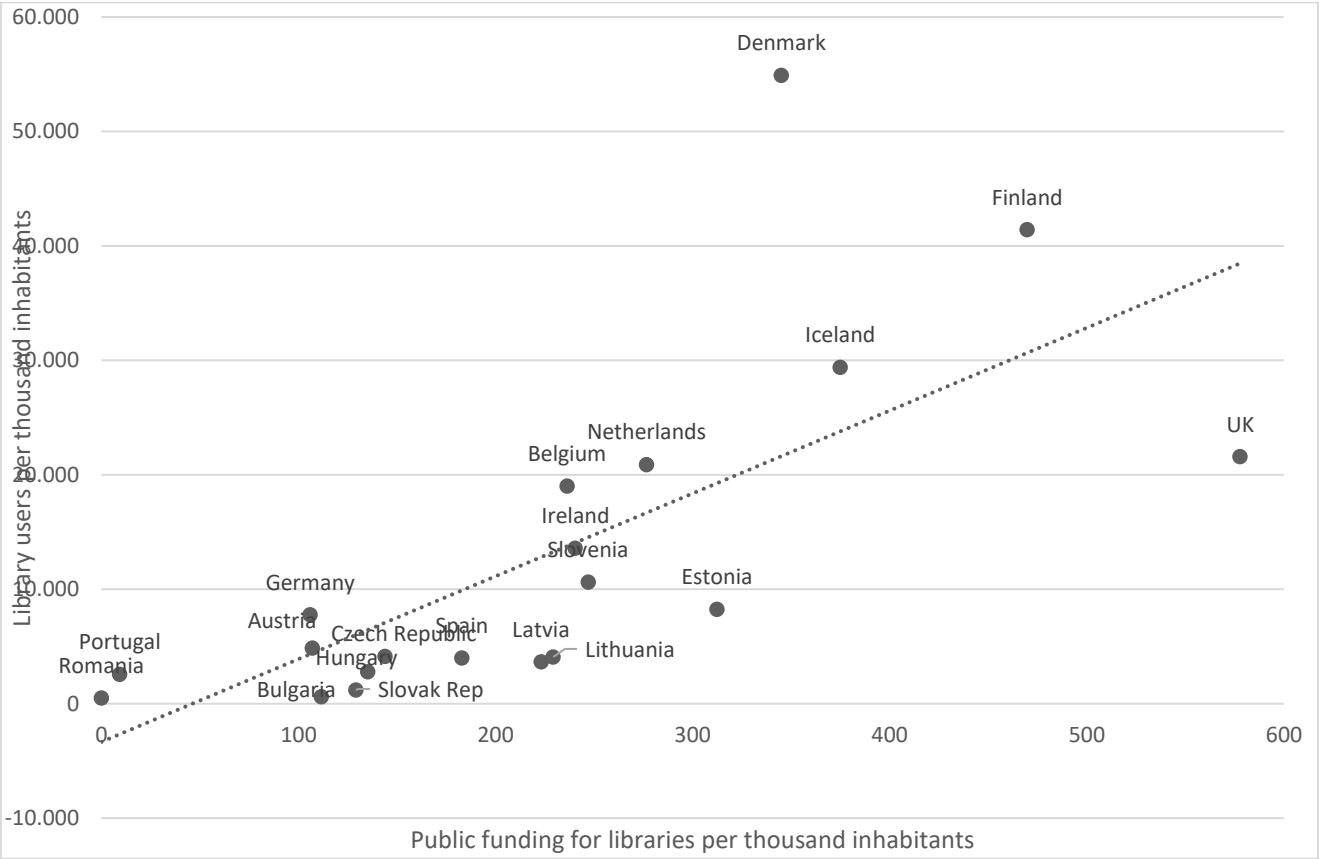
If we analyse this relationship through multinomial regression analysis with the variable daily press reading (nwsptot, recoded into four categories) by the variable religious denomination (rlgblg) and adjust it with the socio-demographic variables usually relevant for cultural consumption (age, gender, level of education, employment status, net household income) we can observe whether there is a correlation and whether it is significant. Focusing only on the division between Catholics and Protestants, which is the object of study of the article, we can see the persistence of the negative association between a high level of reading (more than 1 hour) and identifying oneself as Catholic (Exp value (B) 0,57), as well as a positive association in all categories of newspaper readership (Exp value (B) of 2.69 for less than 0.5 hours, Exp value (B) of 2.93 for 0.5 to 1 hour and Exp value (B) 1.43 for more than 1 hour, all statistically significant values with a value of $<0,001$. In short, although we consider that the effect of

denomination develops in a frame-social way and at an aggregate level, we can also observe this effect at the present time at an individual level based on identification with religious denomination.

Religious denominations by country and cultural politics: another affinity between Protestantism and reading

Finally, returning to the aggregate level, we can observe how these individual preferences are reflected and reinforced by the public policies developed by the states. Thus, if we compare cultural policies in relation to reading and its main instrument, libraries, based on the data available in the year 2000, we are offered an arrangement in line with the *longue durée* effect analysed above.

Figure 6 - Library users per 1,000 inhabitants by public funding per 1,000 inhabitants in Europe (2000)



Source: own elaboration based on the comparative study of libraries Millenium Study LibeEcon2000, 2001).

The analysis of the cultural policies towards libraries as seen in public funding and the users of public libraries introduces us to the nexus of the institutional dimension of literacy and reading at the turn of the 20th century. In this case we can observe, from least to most, approximately four groups.

- a) In the group with the lowest number of library users per thousand inhabitants and the lowest public cultural expenditure on libraries we find
- b) In a group of medium-low users and expenditure we find Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Spain would be in an intermediate position between this group and the next one.
- c) Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia, Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands are in a more heterogeneous group of users and medium-high spenders.
- d) And in fourth place, an even more heterogeneous group at a great distance from the previous ones, comprising Iceland, Denmark and Finland. The United Kingdom is in a unique position, far behind in both variables.

It should be recalled that the study was conducted in 2000 at a time of EU enlargement towards the East, when these countries are undergoing changes in their transition to capitalism and adopting cultural policies. This article, however, will not delve into this transition, which has been analysed in other research works on European models of cultural policy (Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019). In this new analysis, we can see that there is an affinity between the countries and religious denominations that played a leading role in the literacy processes in the seventeenth centuries and a high level of cultural expenditure on libraries and library users. This is the case for countries with a historically Lutheran denomination or influence (Denmark, Finland, Iceland) or a historically Puritan Protestant denomination or influence (the Netherlands and the

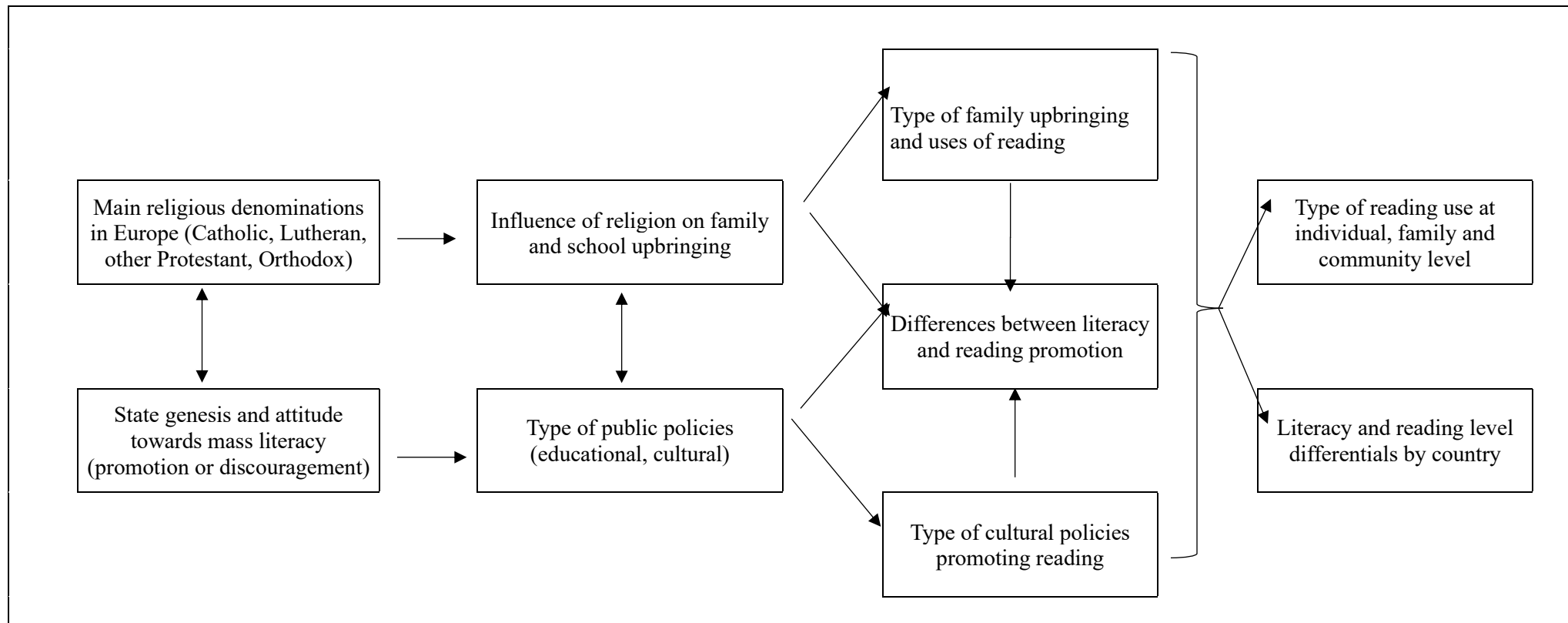
United Kingdom). In contrast, historically Catholic or Orthodox countries (with the exception of Germany) would be in a position with lower rates of library spending and library users.

Conclusions

The interest in literacy and the debate it has generated in the social sciences has focused on its educational and economic effects. However, the interest focused from the sociology of culture has been limited and in fact some central currents of the discipline have ignored it, as is the case of the Bourdieusian school among others, despite its exhortation to develop socio-historical analyses. Thus, we understand that to the consideration of the interactions between the state and cultural patterns it is relevant to add the comparison of individual behaviours, social institutions and cultural elements from the comparative micro-sociology promoted by Max Weber. In this perspective, religious denomination appears as a significant explanatory element affecting these three levels. This is what we have been able to ascertain in the effect of the division in Europe with a *longue durée* perspective from the 16th century to the present day in the following elements: a) The division between Protestants and Catholics generates a division in the attitude towards literacy, favourable in Protestant countries and hostile in Catholic countries, especially those not in geographical contact with Protestant countries. b) The development of literacy processes in Europe since the 16th century are the result not so much of a cultural effect of religious identification but of its interrelation with state control and its relationship with religious denominations and the will to shape (and control in rivalry with other denominations) education with an effect on the literacy rate in which reading is not a goal per se but a means of social and religious indoctrination and disciplining. b) This process develops in a systematic way in the Nordic countries in a universalist model integrated between churches and state and in a form of disciplinary revolution in the countries influenced by Puritan currents. c) These two sets of countries will be at the head of literacy rates and the order will no longer be altered from

the 16th century to the 21st century despite the development in Europe of welfare and educational systems with important differences but in principle, universal. D) This aggregate effect, which represents a socio-historical inertia embedded in national culture and institutions, can also be observed at the level of individual religious denominations. And e) Finally, this affinity between Protestantism is reinforced in the cultural policy priorities (and citizens' demand for them) that reinforce this continuity and differentiation between a Europe of Protestant genesis in contrast to a mixed one as summarised in the graph below.

Figure 7 - Conceptual framework for understanding the comparative longue durée effects of religious denominations in Europe (16th - 21st century)



Source: own elaboration.

Finally, returning to the Weberian thesis, we understand that the music is still the music but not the lyrics: the question is not a direct effect between a Protestant spirit and an effect on educational demand and literacy, but as other authors point out we must take into consideration the mediation of institutional effects on the Protestant churches as well as on the disciplinary revolution in the states (Gorski, 1993, Becker and Woessmann, 2009). Thus, observations on these effects are not only relevant for understanding economic development (Mosher, 2016) but also for understanding European societies in general and attitudes towards culture. Finally, this updating of the Weberian interpretative framework of affinities between religious denominations and national and individual ethos to a multi-causal logic should make sociology reflect on the need to adopt a geographical (to be able to analyse proximities and distances) and historical perspective (to be able to observe persistence and non-immediate changes) and to abandon the national and presentist framework to understand phenomena as central to cultural consumption, identity and social differentiation as reading

Annex

Table 1 - Multinomial logistic regression of the daily newspaper reading frequency question*.

	Category		Minus 0.5 h.			From 0.5 to 1h.			More than 1h.		
			B	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	Sig.	Exp(B)
Intercept			0.868	0.323	-	0.921	0.327	-	2.077	0.044*	-
Age recoded	1	15-24	0.475	<0.001***	1.609	-0.697	<0.001***	0.498	-1.779	<0.001***	0.169
	2	25-34	0.297	<0.001***	1.346	-0.835	<0.001***	0.434	-1.766	<0.001***	0.171
	3	35-44	0.355	<0.001***	1.426	-0.531	<0.001***	0.588	-1.573	<0.001***	0.207
	4	45-54	0.474	<0.001***	1.607	-0.191	0.021*	0.826	-0.927	<0.001***	0.396
	5	55-64	0.492	<0.001***	1.635	0.185	0.016*	1.203	-0.282	0.001**	0.754
	6 (Ref.)	65 +	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000
Gender	1	Man	0.222	<0.001***	1.249	0.367	<0.001***	1.443	0.653	<0.001***	1.921
	2	Woman	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000
Highest level of education	1	Less than lower secondary	-2.111	0.007**	0.121	-1.523	0.075	0.218	-1.643	0.082	0.193
	2	Lower secondary ed. completed	-1.305	0.096	0.271	-0.472	0.581	0.624	-0.645	0.495	0.525
	3	Upper secondary ed. completed	-0.966	0.218	0.381	-0.012	0.989	0.988	-0.163	0.863	0.849
	4	Post-secondary non-tertiary ed. completed	-0.903	0.262	0.405	0.160	0.855	1.174	0.195	0.840	1.216
	5	Tertiary ed. completed	-0.950	0.226	0.387	0.165	0.847	1.180	0.167	0.860	1.181
	55 (Ref.)	Other	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000
Employment status	1	Employed	0.194	0.001**	1.214	0.088	0.141	1.092	-0.189	0.011*	0.828
	2	Self-employed	0.175	0.040*	1.191	0.122	0.165	1.130	-0.330	0.003**	0.719
	3 (Ref.)	Not in paid work	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000
Household's total net income	1	R	-1.268	<0.001***	0.282	-1.797	<0.001***	0.166	-1.794	<0.001***	0.166
	2	C	-0.780	0.014*	0.458	-1.476	<0.001***	0.229	-2.165	<0.001***	0.115
	3	M	-0.593	0.057	0.553	-1.203	<0.001***	0.300	-1.806	<0.001***	0.164
	4	F	-0.395	0.201	0.674	-0.678	0.026*	0.508	-1.302	<0.001***	0.272

	5	S	-0.242	0.434	0.785	-0.480	0.115	0.619	-1.059	0.001**	0.347
	6	K	-0.131	0.673	0.877	-0.377	0.217	0.686	-0.886	0.007**	0.412
	7	P	0.008	0.980	1.008	-0.126	0.682	0.882	-0.739	0.025*	0.478
	8	D	0.023	0.941	1.023	-0.206	0.504	0.814	-0.841	0.012*	0.431
	9	H	0.033	0.915	1.034	-0.081	0.790	0.922	-0.651	0.047*	0.521
	10	U	0.133	0.682	1.143	0.049	0.879	1.050	-0.467	0.174	0.627
	11	N	0.566	0.147	1.762	0.502	0.192	1.652	0.027	0.948	1.027
	12 (Ref.)		0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000
Religion or denomination	1	Roman Catholic	0.311	0.222	1.365	0.112	0.666	1.118	-0.567	0.045*	0.567
	2	Protestant	0.992	<0.001***	2.698	1.073	<0.001***	2.923	0.360	0.206	1.434
	3	Eastern Orthodox	-0.866	0.001**	0.421	-1.172	<0.001***	0.310	-1.663	<0.001***	0.190
	4	Other Christian denomination	0.501	0.074	1.650	0.346	0.226	1.414	-0.310	0.331	0.734
	5	Jewish	-0.434	0.104	0.648	-0.417	0.124	0.659	-0.538	0.069	0.584
	6	Islam	-0.089	0.747	0.915	0.045	0.874	1.046	0.011	0.972	1.011
	7	Eastern religions	0.478	0.226	1.612	0.426	0.288	1.531	-0.055	0.904	0.946
	8 (Ref.)	Other Non-Christian religions	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000	0	-	1.000

*Reference category is Non-reader.

Source: own elaboration based on data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS, 2023).

Table 2 - Summary of the regression model for the press reading variable

Model Fitting Information

Model	Model Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	24108,165			
Final	19003,021	5105,143	93	,000

Pseudo R-Square

Cox and Snell	,250
Nagelkerke	,268
McFadden	,106

Likelihood Ratio Tests

Effect	Model Fitting Criteria	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
	-2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept	19003,021 ^a	,000	0	.
Age recoded	19925,528	922,506	15	<,001
Gender	19156,549	153,528	3	<,001
Highest level of education	19772,116	769,095	15	<,001
Employment status	19047,044	44,023	6	<,001
Household's total net income, all sources	19433,778	430,757	33	<,001
Religion or denomination belonging to at present	20072,888	1069,867	21	<,001

Source: own elaboration based on ESS (ESS, 2023).

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¹ In this sense, despite the great interest of Fishman and Lizardo's article (Fishman and Lizardo, 2013), they attribute all the explanatory weight of the differences in cultural consumption between Spain and Portugal to the development of the political transitions in the seventies of the twentieth century, without paying attention to the differential level of consolidation of high culture. Thus, in certain countries the genesis and development of the state and high culture entail high degrees of social differentiation through culture, as is the case in France (Bourdieu, P., 2002), and others in which this process has been later and less pronounced, as is the case in the USA (DiMaggio, 1992, Lamont, 1992, Bourdieu, P., 2002).

² This view is clearly stated in the excerpt from Stefan Zweig's book: "It is with good reason that Weber rightly points out in his famous study of capitalism that no element has been more favourable to industrialism than the Calvinist doctrine of absolute obedience, since it religiously prepares the masses from school to levelling and mechanisation. But the energetic organisation of a state always increases the outward dynamism of its citizens (...). This spiritual affiliation has exerted a preponderant influence on the character of the Americans (...). Meanwhile, what a nightmarish vision when we think that Calvin, Beza and John Knox, these "joy-killers", could have imposed their brutal pretensions from the beginning! What uniformity, what monotony, what drought would have descended upon Europe; with what violence would all these fanatical enemies of art and life have acted against every charm of existence, against all these little things where the creative instinct manifests itself in its divine diversity! They would have erased in favour of a cold equality all the social and national contrasts which, precisely because of their variegation, place the West in the first rank in the history of civilisation: they would have killed the sublime intoxication of creation by their frightful love of order and exactitude! Just as in Geneva they suppressed all artistic impetus for several centuries, so in England they suppressed all artistic impetus on seizing power and replaced earthly joy with the fear of God, just as throughout Europe they would have broken under their biblical anathemas all fervent efforts to approach the divine enterprise outside their canons. Would we represent the 17th, 18th or 19th century without opera, without theatre, without dance, without its lustful architecture, its feasts, its delicate eroticism, its refinement? Nothing but bare temples and their serene preaching as a means of efficacy, nothing but discipline, humility and fear of God! The preachers would have prevented the free development of art, that ray of light in the night of our existence, by branding it as pleasure, "guilty" will and "lasciviousness". Never could the prodigality and daring of

creative genius have been expressed in the extraordinary magnificence of Versailles or the style of the Directory; never could it have manifested itself in the tender pictorial and sonorous palette of Louis XV or in fashion or dance. The European spirit would have been consumed in theological disputes instead of flourishing in fruitful games." (...) (Sweig, 1936: 252-253).

³ Although Lamont rejects an influence of religion on individual attitudes as being too culturalist (opus cit, p. 73), he nevertheless recognises that unlike in France where identification as a religious individual can be the object of social rejection, on the contrary in the USA it remains part of a status sign: "Both in France and in the United States, atheists also build religiously based moral boundaries but in a reverse way. Some of them said they were very uncomfortable with strongly religious people whose understanding of the world was diametrically opposed to theirs. Several of the French interviewees said they despise the traditional Catholic bourgeoisie because they consider it to be intellectually and culturally narrow, retrograde, and elitist (...). These findings and the fact that many more French interviewees are not involved in churches lead me to believe that slightly fewer French than American interviewees take religiosity to be a moral status signal. (opus cit, Pag 80).

⁴ Martin Luther's sermon *Keeping Children in School* (1530) insists on this aspect in relation to the education of children: "I mean the common people, who formerly educated their children for a living and profit, but now keep them away from learning for a living. Although they do not need heirs, they keep their children out of school, regardless of whether the children have the ability and talent for these trades and could serve God in them without hardship and hindrance. It is necessary to keep boys of such ability in their studies, especially the sons of the poor, for all the endowments and revenues of the foundations and monasteries are earmarked for this purpose. In addition, other children should also study, even those of lesser ability. They should at least be able to read, write, and understand Latin, for we need not only very learned doctors and teachers of Holy Scripture, but also common pastors to teach the Gospel and catechism to the young and ignorant, and to baptize and administer the sacrament. Luther's Works, Vol. 46 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], pp. 213-57.)

⁵ This is the aim of several of Luther's texts, such as the 1524 *Admonition to the Aldermen of all German cities to establish and maintain Christian schools*.

⁶ We are aware that the Puritan category, typical of English and North American historiography, is broad and encompasses heterogeneous currents such as Calvinists, non-conformists, Presbyterians or Baptists, among others (Coffey, 2006).

⁷ Significantly, it was Frederick William I who, under the influence of high-ranking Calvinist officials, introduced the first education system in 1707 with the aim of establishing compulsory education (Gorski, 2001, Cano, 2015).

⁸ We are aware that the question on daily newspaper reading is not equivalent to the question on reading in general or reading for leisure or work. However, other surveys and studies show a high correlation between press readership and general readership, which can be established as a proxy variable (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 64). This can be seen in the Eurobarometer survey 79.2, which asks about newspaper reading consumption (QB6) and reading a book (QB1) and results in a significant Pearson's R correlation of 0.136.