

LUIGIAURELIO POMANTE. *L'Università italiana nel Novecento. Nuovi itinerari storiografici e inediti percorsi di ricerca*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020, 205 pp.

Between the eighties and the nineties of the last century, research on the history of higher education and universities acquired new and important stimuli from the contributions and work of specialist research centres and groups, which organised interesting seminars and study meetings that, in fact, stimulated and enriched the interest of the academic world in the history of Italian universities.

In the last thirty years, a new and flourishing season of higher education studies has thus been undertaken, which has been specifically characterised by a greater methodological rigor and an increase in research on university policies and systems in contemporary times.

The recent book by Luigiaurelio Pomante, *L'Università italiana nel Novecento. Nuovi itinerari storiografici e inediti percorsi di ricerca* (Italian Universities in the Twentieth Century. New Historiographical Itineraries and Original Approaches to Research) is in line with the operational and thematic renewal which still characterises the historiographical debate on universities and higher education today.

The book, published by FrancoAngeli, can be appreciated above all for the special historiographical

sensitivity with which the Author has conducted his investigation. Using a large number of archival and printed sources, the work highlights areas of research which have scarcely, or not at all, been explored and suggests innovative interpretations of crucial themes and issues that have defined Italian university history during the twentieth century.

Thanks to an original approach and the variety of topics covered, this volume differs from most of the Author's previous monographs, but it is substantially in line with his interest in innovative themes and with the use of largely unpublished sources, elements that enhance his research in an international context and which, in general, make it possible to foster an understanding of the evolution and complex organisation of the Italian university system.

The book opens with a large chapter dedicated to the ambitious project of the Fascist regime to pursue the recovery and redefinition of the glorious Italian academic tradition. In the scenario of totalitarian modernisation started during the Fascist period, Italian universities did, in fact, play a pioneering role of cultural, scientific and social renewal; it moulded the future ruling class of the country and, as such, was the predetermined place to shape the model of the so-called fascist "new man".

Universities, which had naturally adhered to the regime's political and

intellectual conditioning, were called upon to affirm their primacy in the scientific field and to transform themselves into places of amplification of the fascist culture, which had necessarily to be buttressed by a solid theoretical base and rigorous ethical-political support.

The historiographical category of the “invention of tradition”, already theorised by E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger in the 1980s, is here applied by Pomante to the analysis of the process of ideological reconstruction of national identity, strongly desired by Mussolini and his regime. It was an operation that also automatically passed through the reclamation of the “noble traditions” and the “intellectual glory” of the Italian Academy, and that ended up outlining a real “political religion”, officiated and reiterated during countless demonstrations and gatherings.

This legendary “invention of tradition” of the first Italian universities emerged as the regime’s instrument to identify a mythical event, with which to mark the naissance, or rather the *re*-naissance, of the Italian people.

An original approach to research, as suggested by the volume’s subtitle, is offered by the Author in the second chapter, dedicated to Italian periodicals for university professors, which is particularly appreciated for the skill and systematic way in which these printed sources have been interrogated.

This type of journal has only recently attracted the attention of some scholars of higher education. In the history of Italian universities, in fact, student and goliardic journals had so far been especially analysed and, contrary to what happened to the journals for teachers and for the school, they had not been duly taken into consideration.

Professorial journals certainly constitute a rather variegated component of the university periodical press but, if properly investigated, they prove to be an indispensable source for the historical reconstruction of the characteristics of the Italian university system.

Although generally an expression of ideas and positions of individual tenured lecturers, this type of publication served as an instrument of internal communication within the academic world and as a spokesperson for university issues and problems of major national interest.

Excluding the numerous “minor” university periodicals, born as occasional editorial experiences of individual academic locations, the Author correctly sets the starting date of national publications addressed to university professors with the first issue of “L’Università. Rivista dell’istruzione superiore pubblicata da una società di professori” (The University. Journal of higher education by a society of professors), published in Bologna between 1887 and 1891.

This first national experience was followed by numerous other periodicals, among which Pomante identifies and describes the most significant and important, namely: “L’Università italiana” (The Italian University), published in Bologna since 1902, “Gli Annali della Università d’Italia. Rivista bimestrale dell’istruzione superiore” (The Annals of Italian Universities. Bimonthly Journal on Higher Education), published for the first time on 29 October 1939 by the Ministry of National Education, “L’Università italiana. Quindicinale di informazioni universitarie” (Italian Universities. Biweekly for University News), published by the University of Rome from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1946, and finally “Il Giornale dell’università. Organo degli atenei d’Italia” (The University Newspaper. Paper of Italian Universities), official publication of ANPUR (National Association of Tenured University Professors), founded in January 1951.

These periodicals emphasised the merits and defects of the multifaceted Italian academic institution, which had inevitably been influenced by the complex historical and war events that mark the history of Italy.

In addition to proposing new challenges to be undertaken in the educational-scientific field, in fact, the journals highlighted the main critical issues of the Italian higher education system, problems that had been exacerbated in the post-war period, when Italian universities had to deal

with the process of being purged of fascist ideology and with a multitude of students interested more in the conclusion of their studies than in the quality of their studies.

This was obviously in addition to the difficult material and structural conditions of the universities, and the dissolution of the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus.

The analysis of the problems related to the Italian academic environment after the Second World War continues in the third chapter, in which the Author focuses his attention on the “strong material and moral discomfort” which university professors faced at the time.

Once again, the professorial journals became interpreters of the criticalities of the academic environment and the lively debate that arose on the legal, economic and cultural *status* of Italian professors, a dispute that also resulted in numerous demands made to the Ministry of Education through trade unions.

University professors strongly reaffirmed the “absolute” independence of their role from the powers of the State, which might otherwise limit their scientific and intellectual freedom, and hoped for significant changes in the academic recruitment process.

Despite the difficult economic situation of the country, the Ministry, and specifically Minister Guido Gonella, who headed the Ministry from

July 1946, wanted to give a signal of closeness to the category of university professors, recognising the validity of their claims, promising more rapid career advancement and an improvement in the economic and legal condition of teachers.

The fourth chapter of *L'Università italiana nel Novecento* returns to the periodical press for university professors, but this time it does so through the analysis of a sample of about three thousand obituaries of professors, which have appeared in the most important national journals dedicated to higher education of the contemporary age. The obituaries have for a long time been completely neglected as a source by educational and university historiography, but they have instead revealed great heuristic potential. In fact, they provide a "real" image and a perhaps more "human" vision of the complex Italian academic system.

Through this particular and innovative type of source, with great methodological consistency, the Author tries to reconstruct the evolution of the figure and role of the university professor, going beyond the mere celebrative nature of the pieces and trying to clarify their cultural, ideological, pedagogical and educational issues.

The obituaries examined, published between 1880 and 1960, make it possible to identify the main features of the legal-economic and cul-

tural conditions of university professors as a class, and to outline their political and scientific orientations.

The chapter highlights well how such obituaries were appreciable for the richness of information and the plurality of references: the writings were never without references to the historical-social context and aimed at highlighting the quality of the scientific production and the "intellectual and moral dimension" of the deceased professor, not so much his or her academic position, but their relevance in a given scientific field.

The columns dedicated to obituaries certainly had a real pedagogical value, as they gave back to the "young" university world, models and ideals of professional conduct, but they also gave voice and resonance to the problems and criticalities typical of the contemporary Italian academic environment.

Finally, the book closes with a further valuable element, namely a chapter dedicated to Italian university history museums, a particular type of university institution unfortunately still scarcely considered but which, on the contrary, is worthy of great interest, just like the already well-known museums of education or school.

In line with the most recent orientations of historical-educational research, which advocate and encourage the preservation of the historical-educational heritage and the

enhancement of school cultural heritage, Pomante therefore focuses on the description of the only two museum facilities for universities in Italy, namely the Museum for the History of the University of Pavia and the European Student Museum (MEUS) in Bologna. These are two very different facilities, both from a thematic and a “chronological” point of view, which however respond to the common “musealisation project” of the vast object, archive-book, iconographic and photographic heritage of University history.

The first of the two museums, that of the University of Pavia, originated in 1932, when, following the exhibition set up by Professor Antonio Pensa to celebrate the memory of the anatomist and academic Antonio Scarpa, on the occasion of the centenary of his death and of the *Fourth Congress of the Italian Society of Anatomy*, the then rector, Professor Ottorino Rossi, decided to provide the Pavia institute with a permanent museum facility.

The initiative, consistent with the objectives of the “glorious” Fascist project for the recovery and enhancement of the Italian academic tradition, aimed to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the University and to allow its use to the widest possible audience.

Over time, the Museum, located in the central building of the University and officially opened in 1936, has be-

nefited from numerous and substantial donations and has become a profitable centre of study and research.

The other museum venue, MEUS in Bologna, is a more recent institution (2009) and has a less institutional character than that of Pavia, nevertheless it represents a real exception among European museums.

Pomante explains well how the Museum has, in fact, the objective of “fostering knowledge of the changes inherent in the figure of the student over the centuries”, highlighting numerous aspects of student life, such as associationism, political commitment, gender issues and access to university, sports and goliardic activities and mobility.

MEUS, housed in Palazzo Poggi, was conceived and developed thanks to the encounter between associations of former students and some historians of higher education, chief among them Professor Brizzi, today Secretary General of the Interuniversity Centre for the History of Italian Universities (CISUI) and Director of the Historical Archive of the University of Bologna.

Both museums play an important role in the Italian academic context: besides being part of the scenario of the dreamed-of third university mission, promoted both by the MIUR and by the individual universities, they also foster a commitment to enhance the academic tradition of our country, in order to recapture the

prestigious past that characterises the history of Italian universities.

The Author's wish, which also echoes that of other scholars of higher education, is to be able to finally rediscover the vast and significant literary, historical, scientific and artistic heritage of Italian universities, which is unfortunately still poorly preserved or not adequately valued.

In conclusion, *Italian Universities in the Twentieth Century. New Historiographical Itineraries and Original Approaches to Research* provides a truly innovative and significant contribution to the history of higher education and universities, and it is appreciated for the extreme sensitivity and consistency of its historiographical reconstruction.

The many different archival and printed sources, examined with great methodological rigor, have allowed

the author to critically analyse the changes undergone by Italian universities, and to enhance the richness and heterogeneity of their historical-educational and scientific heritage.

As part of the renewal of national university historiography, which has been underway for more than thirty years and is now very active and open to new international issues, the book also has the merit of having presented a plurality of questions that have so far been barely explored, which have outlined the features of the Italian academic reality between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and of having made available original and stimulating interpretations, which provide the entire scientific community with important food for thought.

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