

“Storiografia delle università: un percorso di ricerca”. A dialogue on the Historiography of Universities in Italy - 39° meeting of the Journal *Le Carte e La Storia*, April 12, 2024 .

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A lengthy, interesting and well-reasoned *excursus* that has enabled the reconstruction of the Italian university historiography of the last forty years, thanks to the voices of those who have played a leading role in the process. The 39th meeting of the magazine *Le Carte e La Storia*, entitled ‘*Storiografia delle università: un percorso di ricerca*’, proposed by Guido Melis and streamed on 12 April 2024, featured Gian Paolo Brizzi (professor emeritus of the University of Bologna and Chair of the Scientific Committee of CISUI, and Paolo Rosso (professor of the University of Turin and expert on culture and educational institutions), who engaged in a particularly useful ‘chat’, indispensable for anyone seeking to devote their efforts to university history in Italy. Following an excellent introduction by Guido Melis, among the most appreciated professors of History of Political Institutions, who recalled how the university italian historiography scenario has evolved significantly over the last few decades, thanks to a new approach to research that is no longer the sole prerogative of legal historians and certain universities, Gian

Paolo Brizzi provided a detailed explanation of what this sea change in researching university history has consisted of in recent years. Since the last decade of the 20th century, the historiographical debate on universities and higher education has witnessed a new, fruitful period. In particular, there has been a significant increase in studies on university policies and regulations in nineteenth and twentieth century Italy and on the history of individual universities in the contemporary era. This phenomenon is in stark contrast to the scenario that emerged in previous decades, during which medievalist and modernist research dominated the scene virtually unchallenged. Specifically, historians mainly focused their attention on the golden age of the origins of universities, and thus on medieval *studia*, with a few significant but rare forays into the modern age. In this context, the specific area of studies on the history of individual universities – which remains one of the most frequently pursued and most representative research pathways in Italian and European historiography in the sector – has substantially held its ground. Since the early 1990s, on the other hand, investigation and the renewal of studies in this field has received a significant boost from the establishment of specific research groups and specialised centres focused mainly on the analysis of sources and the in-depth study of

the history of universities and higher education systems in nineteenth and twentieth century Italy and Europe. It was thanks to Brizzi and his first experiences as a university lecturer in Sassari that the first *Repertorio nazionale degli storici dell'Università* was published in 1994, a detailed directory of Italian scholars working in this area and the first systematic presentation of the studies carried out in the field in recent decades and of ongoing research; this tool would be proposed again, in an updated form, a few years later, representing, in a sense, a manifesto of the 'new direction' given to studies in the sector. The *Repertorio* offered the opportunity to glean other information that proved useful at the subsequent stages: the presence of a large number of scholars interested in engaging in lines of research regarding the history of universities; a timeline that ran through all the centuries of university history, moving beyond the traditional focus on the Middle Ages; the desire to create a participatory structure able to foster collaboration on shared initiatives; the lack of attention paid to the student element: the history of the university was an area of research occupied almost exclusively by academics intent on extolling the virtues of their own category, while neglecting the much larger student element.

It was during the very years of the *Repertorio* that new university history centres were set up in Turin,

Messina, Sassari, Ferrara and Pisa, as well as a consortium called *Unistoria*, comprising the universities of Naples, Siena and Trento, and an International Centre for the History of Universities and Science, set up in Bologna, active above all in the field of the History of Science. In 1996, at the height of this initial phase of reorganisation and revitalisation of studies on the history of universities and higher education, thanks to Brizzi and to a number of scholars from the universities of Bologna, Padua, Messina, Sassari and Turin (such as Domenico Maffei, Piero del Negro, Andrea Romano, Aldo Mazzacane and Antonello Mattone), the *Centro Interuniversitario per la Storia delle Università Italiane* (CISUI, Inter-University Centre for the History of Italian Universities) was established in Bologna, with the aim of increasing research activities in the field of university history. Since its foundation, CISUI - partly thanks also to the farsightedness of the Rector of Bologna at the time, Fabio Roversi Monaco (who provided the offices, the administrative services and the initial funding for equipment and furnishings) - sought to act as a coordinator of the various institutes and research centres operating in the field of university history at the various Italian universities, and in just a few years became a benchmark for research conducted in the sector in Italy and Europe, bringing together academics and researchers from numerous universities in Italy. Universi-

ty history was thus able to finally embark on a specific historiographical reflection, made up of connections between scholars, shared research pathways, and above all, capable of spanning various disciplinary spheres rather than remaining confined within more limited niche areas.

Another fundamental element in this change of direction, and in the establishment of CISUI, as Brizzi recalled, was the organisation of a number of conferences that to this day remain a fundamental starting point for any serious and rigorous study on the subject. Towards the end of 1993, Andrea Romano, who was in charge of study projects on the history of the University of Messina, organised a major international conference in Milazzo, entitled *Università in Europa* (Universities in Europe).

Le istituzioni universitarie dal Medioevo ai nostri giorni: struttura, organizzazione, funzionamento (Universities in Europe. University institutions from the Middle Ages to the present: structure, organisation and functioning), a four-day event dedicated to examining the structures, organisational aspects and functioning of European university institutions throughout their history. The following year, Piero Del Negro organised the second conference in Padua, this time addressing the Italian situation, entitled *La storia delle Università italiane. Archivi, fonti, indirizzi di ricerca* (The history of Italian universities. Archives, sources, research directions),

which sought to take stock of the archive collections and documentary sources available, and to embark on an initial discussion among experts on the state of research in Italy and the new directions of international historiography. The conference in Padua concluded with a round-table discussion that evidenced the 'state of health' of the various university history centres operating in Italy, as well as highlighting the importance of creating a periodical that would serve as a scientific organ participated in by all the centres. Finally, the third meeting, *Le Università minori in Europa (secoli XV-XIX)* (Minor universities in Europe (15th-19th centuries)), took place in 1996 in Alghero, organised by Brizzi and by the Interdisciplinary Centre for the History of the University of Sassari. The conference, during which approximately sixty papers were presented and discussed, and which was attended by a large number of foreign academics, addressed a new historiographical topic: the so-called 'minor universities', to which historiographers in the sector had paid scant attention in the past, preferring to focus on the large academic centres and the best-known and most widely acclaimed universities, to the detriment of a proper focus on the characteristics and the role played by small provincial universities, in particular in Italy. For a long time, historians studying universities and higher education focused primarily on the large universities. The cultural prestige and

international reach of these academic institutions attracted increasing interest on the part of scholars, because of their powerful influence on cultural and scientific debate in the country, and their capacity to host large numbers of students, given their ability to draw on a wide catchment area. This conference thus represented a new approach to Italian historiography, also in symbolic terms. Above all thanks to the establishment of CISUI, this was destined to usher in an authentic revolution in the field of Italian university history, in both qualitative and quantitative terms (as Brizzi pointed out, in the space of fifteen years, the 35/40 contributions per year dedicated to the subject rose to around 350 in 2010).

Within the framework of the aforementioned study conferences, the role played by universities and higher education systems in the key interpretation category of nation-building processes also took on particular importance. This enabled a definitive move away from the approach based on the specific histories of individual universities, towards what could be defined as a history of the university model and its political, institutional, social and economic function in nation-building. With particular reference to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the university was regarded, in this respect, as the 'laboratory' entrusted with the task of founding national science, of selecting and training the new ruling classes,

of guaranteeing the value of the qualifications required for access to the liberal professions and, therefore, as highlighted by Paolo Rosso, as a regulating factor of the social order and of the productive structures of society.

Alongside the conferences mentioned, another leading role in the development of the 'new' university Italian historiography must certainly be attributed to the foundation and circulation within CISUI, since 1997, of the journal *Annali di storia delle università italiane* (first published by Clueb, now published by Il Mulino) which sought, on the one hand, to stimulate research into university history and, on the other, to maintain both the solid links between the present and the past and the complex relationship that connects the history of individual studies to that of the academic network as a whole. Hence the decision, applied for several years, to devote the monographic part of the *Saggi* (Essays) section to the history of a single Italian university from the outset. In addition, starting with issue no. 6 of 2002, a systematic current and retrospective bibliography on the history of Italian universities, listing all the contributions published in Italy from 1997 to the present, has been published annually in the journal, whose methodological structure has undergone substantial renewal in recent years.

Thanks to this historiographical 'revolution' and to the work of Brizzi and the national inter-university

group coordinated by him, university historians have been able to achieve significant, prestigious results at international level, such as the appointment of two members of the Scientific Committee of CISUI to important extra-national scientific posts: Mauro Moretti, elected president of the *International Commission for the History of Universities* (a post that had never before been held by an Italian), and Anna Maria Monti, director for some years now of '*CIAN-Revista de Historia de las Universidades*', rightly considered a benchmark for studies in the sector.

Another particularly ambitious scientific initiative of undeniably international scope mentioned by Brizzi began in early 2012, and remains vigorous to this day. The project *Heloïse - European Workshop on historical academic databases*, established during a conference held in Poitiers on 24 and 25 May 2012, currently involves around 60 academic institutions across Europe and over 130 Italian and foreign researchers, who share the common goal of creating a European network of databases on the history of universities, from their origins to the present day. The project was inspired by a number of similar earlier experiences, now comprised within *Heloïse*, such as *ASFE*, directed by Gian Paolo Brizzi, and *Onomasticon. Prosopografia dell'Università degli studi di Perugia*, by Carla Frova and her research group in Perugia. In continuity with

the early twentieth-century trend of recovering and publishing sources, this experience is now an effectively international and interdisciplinary research network, involving academics from a broad range of different areas (historians, mathematicians, philosophers, computer engineers), with the aim of building a shared database on academic mobility and thus conducting further investigation on interesting aspects of the social history of universities.

In Paolo Rosso's view, it is this broad network of international contacts established and the remarkable interdisciplinary dimension of the research into university history, made possible thanks to the work of Brizzi and CISUI, that continues to be the added value of this new approach to university history, which has created a permeability between studies in the sector that is difficult to find in other fields of knowledge. Thus, thanks to renewal of university historiography and the 'annotated' publication of sources previously unused or culpably neglected by more traditional scholars, new observation tools useful to historians have emerged regarding issues such as student mobility, the role of women within the university context, teaching methods and approaches, changes in university governance, subject curricula, the relationship between universities and local institutions, as well as the highly topical question of the evolu-

tion over the centuries of the principle of university autonomy. Until the 1990s, historians in the field of university history would have paid little or no attention to these questions. Thanks to Gian Paolo Brizzi, CISUI and the academics in and around it,

they have now gained appeal from a historiographical viewpoint, and are considered worthy of stimulating scientific reflection.

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