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Italy's Cultural Resistance to Non-university Higher Education

Andrea Potestio

L'intenzione di questo articolo è indagare le ragioni che hanno prodotto le resistenze culturali e ideologiche che, in particolare nella tradizione italiana, hanno reso difficile la piena diffusione di percorsi educativi di alta formazione non accademici basati sul principio pedagogico dell'alternanza formativa, come i dottorati industriali e l'apprendistato di ricerca.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the reasons that caused the cultural and ideological resistances, particularly in Italy, to the spread of non-university Higher Education based on the pedagogical principle of alternation between school and work, like industrial PhDs and apprenticeships for research purposes.

Affording a shared definition of “higher education” is a challenging task. Certainly, it is not possible to regard higher education as the final stage of one's development and growth, i.e. the time that marks the end of the educational process. This holds particularly true today that our society forcefully reasserts the importance of lifelong learning¹. The expression “higher education” brings to mind the idea of pursuing advanced studies to fulfil a two-fold objective: gaining full mastery of methodologies and concepts in certain subjects or a professional field on the one hand, and enabling those who put them into practice to improve their knowledge of these disciplines, on the other hand.

In the Western tradition, higher education encompasses tertiary education and training.

It therefore differs from secondary education, as “it aims to move beyond the institutional dimension, irrespective of the field, the subject and the method concerned, to provide innovative knowledge and to assign tasks resulting from original research, although in a compulsory and time-limited fashion”².

Originality and the tendency to produce something new characterise higher education. Evidently, individuals with this educational level are not necessarily required to formulate innovative theories or methodological approaches, nor to engage in tasks to question traditional and firmly-established paradigms. What is asked of them is a propensity to put forward plans and methodologies that can modify institutional settings, even if this is done in a sketchy and non-systematic way. For this reason, higher education programmes should not only present and describe existing reality. Instead, they should be able to lay down the conditions for promoting methodologies, strate-

gies, research and action to revert established paradigms without limitations and irrespective of the field or the subject under investigation. In this connection, higher education programmes are tasked with developing new forms of awareness, whether theoretical, practical, abstract or professional, without creating any hierarchy between academic research and that related to the world of work and production.

There exist two main theoretical models that have led to the establishment and the implementation of higher education courses. The first is termed “differentiated” and gives a high profile to personal aspirations either in cultural or professional terms. This model requires the diversification of educational institutions, which should feature a higher degree of organisational and functional autonomy. The second model is labelled “uniform”, as being characterised by a lack of diversification in the teaching approach. In other words, and despite taking account of individual aspects, this second model allows students to achieve the same results.

Generally speaking, there is only one institution that provides this type of higher education courses, the offices of which are uniformly disseminated at the national level. This way, all citizens in a given country can equally access the same education programmes, which feature a cen-

1. On these topics, see M.L. De Natale, *Educazione degli adulti*, La Scuola, Brescia 2001; Id. (a cura di), *Adulti in cerca di formazione. Proposte di pedagogia familiare*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2001; S. Cortellazzi (ed.), *La formazione continua. Culture, norme, organizzazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2007.

2. G. Bertagna, *Per una pluralità di soggetti nella formazione superiore*, in G. Bertagna - V. Cappelletti (eds.), *L'Università e la sua riforma*, Studium, Roma 2012, p. 112.

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tralised management system although teaching autonomy is preserved.

This paper does not intend to afford a comparison between the two models. However, it might be useful to point out that Germany and the Anglo-Saxon countries have given priority to the first model, endorsing the creation of bodies alongside traditional universities, which offer higher education courses for the provision of professional skills. Conversely, and due to historical and cultural reasons, Italy has implemented the second model³. What clearly emerges as a distinctive trait of the Italian education system is the central, and almost exclusive, role of universities in the provision⁴ of higher education.

In the twentieth century, the provisions enforced in the last decade of the fascist regime⁵ and the reforms put in place after the establishment of democracy in the 80s⁶ and the 90s⁷ featured policy strategies and other regulations reinforcing the following principle: “universities were the institutions in charge of educating and training about practically everything (research, patents, preparation for the pursuit of professions, postgraduate courses, lifelong learning, the creation of spin-offs, the provision of local services and so forth). Nothing could be conceived as being taught outside them. Every single aspect of higher education was covered and discussed at the universities”⁸. In view of the above, this brief article takes the view that acknowledging universities as the only institutions in charge of running higher education programmes has negatively affected the processes discussed above and contributed to widening the gulf between education and employment. This gap has come to be one of the most serious issues in the Italian labour market and the most likely cause of the extremely high youth unemployment rates reported in the country in the last decades.

In this connection, the following questions arise: which institutions can be tasked with working with universities on the provision of higher education courses? Or better yet, which bodies can offer these courses on an autonomous basis? An immediate answer to these questions is businesses, industry and the labour market, more generally. With one of the most contentious issues of the current Italian labour market being the separation between school and work, one solution to deal with it could be that of bridging this gap through further cooperation between these two dimensions, particularly in the planning of higher education programmes.

However, the issue at hand is more complicated than it seems and the solution suggested above fails to explain the theoretical reasons of this separation and why universities are the main, if not the only, institutions tasked with providing higher education and training. In particu-

lar in Italy, this state of affairs also gives rise to some resistance to the full development of work-related learning, which includes teaching workshops, traineeships, the alternation between school and work and apprenticeships.

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In one of his recent essays⁹, Bertagna argues that there are three types of “unconscious bias” which explain Italy's cultural resistance to non-university higher education, and which hamper the effective reform of the national education system and labour market. The interweaving of these three elements has caused the consolidation of the “uniform model” discussed above, marking the ongoing failure of the training practices to promote the educational value of work and the idea that traditional and work-related learning stand on the same footing. Here is a cursory analysis of these three forms of “unconscious bias”.

The expression “Those who work do not study and those who study do not work” best epitomises the first prejudice, as in this sentence education and work are two competing dimensions that fail to interact with one another. Education is perceived as more noble than work within society, as it is entrusted with training individuals and enabling them to fulfil their potential and aspirations. School is the site for *otium* where, while receiving education, human beings can carry forward further activities, develop their own rationality and manifest their true nature. This process ends at university, where young people complete their studies. The inference is that work is perceived as an utterly different activity that is unrelated to education and intended for those who did not complete their studies, or for those who have completed compulsory schooling but are not ready to enter the labour market.

3. A review of the theoretical paradigms of the Italian university system is provided in M. Moretti, I. Porciani, *La creazione del sistema universitario nella nuova Italia*, in G.P. Brizzi - P. Del Negro - A. Romano (eds.), *Storia dell'università in Italia*, Sicania, Messina 2007, vol. I, pp. 323-379.

4. One peculiarity of the Italian education system is that one can move to higher education after 13 years of schooling. This is an exception, since in the rest of Europe students can enter higher education programmes after undertaking 11 or 12 years of schooling.

5. Besides instilling the fascist ideology and rhetoric at school, the provisions put in place by the then Ministers of Education De Vecchi (1936) and Bottai (1938) contributed to the reduction of teaching autonomy and the establishment of a centralised higher education system marked by many bureaucratic constraints.

6. See for instance Presidential Decree No. 382 of July 1980, which entrusted the Ministry with designing plans to develop higher education.

7. The trend to conceive universities as the institutions that have to train about everything culminated in the passing of the 1999 Berlinguer-Zecchino Reform, which transformed into universities 23 academies of fine arts and 83 conservatories.

8. G. Bertagna, *Per una pluralità di soggetti nella formazione superiore*, cit., p. 133.

9. Id., *Lavoro scuola apprendistato: idee per un rilancio dell'istruzione e della formazione*, «Prospettiva EP», 3 (Settembre-Dicembre 2013), pp. 24-26.