

Public and Private in University History. Italian ‘Mezzogiorno’ between the 18th and 19th centuries: a case study.

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Abstract. During the 1830s and 1840s, the University of Southern Italy (Kingdom of Naples) experienced a serious decline. The main cause of this decline was the slowness with which the university curricula was adapted to the economic transformations brought forth by the industrial revolution. The modernization of university programs was an old request of the intellectual class. Antonio Genovesi, for example, the first professor of economics in an Italian university, stated the terms of the problem in the second half of XVIIIth century. During the following years, his scholars would continue to focus their attention on the connections between the economy and university programs. Grimaldi, Caracciolo, Galanti emphasized that a university was not only a center of cultural production but also a place where individuals were educated based on the modernization of the economy. During the XIXth century, when the Italian ‘Mezzogiorno’ was affected by a progressive process of alienation from the international market, the approach remained the same. Following Genovesi’s principles, the university was imagined as the apex of an educational system geared towards the market: Giuseppe Maria Mazzetti, for example, responsible for public education from the late 1830s, conceived a reform program based on these principles.

What was the political power’s position? We can state that both the Bourbons and the French - during the Napoleonic period - did not give an adequate answer. In some ways, the educational system was reformed. The number of chairs was increased by introducing new subjects, and the traditional subjects were modernized. But it was not enough. So, during the

1830s and 1840s, the University went through a period of crisis which gave rise to private schools. This crisis, in fact, did not reduce the demand for higher education. The paper focuses, therefore, on the relationship between the public and private sector in the field of university education - a very current theme in Italy, where the political debate is concentrating on the modification of the relation between public and private schools.

The University of Naples, founded in 1224 by Federick of Swabia, is one of the oldest in Europe. In its long existence, it has gone through various vicissitudes that cannot be summarized in this paper. Suffice it to say that it was repeatedly reformed by the successive dominations in Naples until 1734 when, with the rise of 'Carlo di Borbone' to the throne, the Kingdom reconquered its political autonomy.

Twenty years later, in 1754, thanks to a donation by the Tuscan mathematician Bartolomeo Intieri, the abbot Antonio Genovesi, the most well-known economist in southern Italy in the second half of the eighteenth century, was assigned the chair of political economy. It was a truly revolutionary event for three reasons. First, because one of Intieri's conditions was to teach in Italian rather than Latin. This would lead to a less elitist access to university. Furthermore, after Genovesi's death, the agreement with Intieri established that the future teaching appointments be made through public examination, so as to protect, at least theoretically, the brightest candidates and not those close to power. Finally, and this is the most important point, Intieri's initiative introduced the teaching of economics in the university curricula. Genovesi's was the first chair of political economy in Europe.

Genovesi's presence in the University of Naples had many consequences. He advanced a new concept of academic studies, whose function was, without becoming abstract speculations, to get to the root of the problems of the country. In so doing, although preserving its traditional cultural role, the University would become an institution closely connected to the needs of the society; a place where proposals to the political power were elaborated. Moreover, the subject easily offered many such opportunities. Any problem regarding the economic life of eighteenth-century southern Italy could be debated and, at the same time, practical measures could be discussed on how to increase production, develop domestic and international trade, improve infrastructures and favor the expansion of culture.

Genovesi's ideas were not abandoned. In the following decades, they would influence the Neapolitan educated class. By the end of the eighteenth century, a solid group of intellectuals, mostly students of the abbot, continued his work. These intellectuals (Caracciolo, Grimaldi, Palmieri, Galanti: all Enlightenment thinkers actively participating in the European debate) demanded that the University's curricula reflect the needs of Southern Italy's economy, which had to be modernized in order to bring it into the great processes that were under way in Europe – especially in England where the industrial revolution was applying science ever more closely to the production process.

The principle was always the same – to create a functional link between the University and the society. Later, during the French period (1806-1815), this thesis was resumed and enriched. The reform of the school system drafted by Vincenzo Cuoco had as one objective the founding of a public school closely connected to the economic and political needs of the Kingdom. This reform gave public education a double objective. On the one hand, to increase the wealth of the country by providing a more educated workforce. On the other, to exploit the public school system as a transmitter of values to create a consensus on the dismantling of the feudal regime, which, even in Southern Italy, the bourgeoisie was accomplishing in those years.

Later the debate toned down. During the 1830s and 1840s the southern educated class lowered its demands. Only in the late 1830s was there another contribution to the debate on the role of the University: the reform project drafted by the Minister of Public Education in the Kingdom of Naples, Giuseppe Maria Mazzetti. Even Mazzetti was a convinced supporter of the social function of the University. In particular, in his opinion, it meant linking university studies to the needs of the job market. In order to do so, however, it was necessary to deal with an old tradition obstinately followed by students and their families: to privilege the medical and legal faculties creating an abundance of doctors and lawyers, who often could not find a satisfying professional position. This contrasted with the lack of technical specialists – engineers, architects, chemists, agronomists. The most interesting part of Mazzetti's project therefore regarded the subjects taught. He thought that it was necessary to strengthen and expand the

scientific faculties to develop the teaching of chemistry applied to manufacturing, and to introduce new subjects as civil, military and naval architecture.

Genovesi, Cuoco, Mazzetti: the *fil rouge* that links the three men was their considering the University as an institution with a double function. On the one hand, in line with tradition, to produce and to disseminate culture; on the other, to tie itself dynamically to the needs of the society. But how did the state react to these requests? Despite the fact that very little was done in the eighteenth century, the interventions carried out during the French period were innovative. Above all, the University was divided into five faculties. In addition to the old faculties (theology, letters, philosophy, medicine, law) a new faculty of mathematics and physics was introduced. This responded to the need to create more technical professionals – this is exactly the faculty Mazzetti wanted to expand. The number of subjects were increased to forty. The course of studies was divided into three levels: acceptance, diploma and degree. But above all the University had the right to issue diplomas, a right that in the past belonged to a center of power of the ancien regime, ‘Il Collegio dei Dottori’, whose presence deprived the University of any form of autonomy. With these changes, the University of Naples became a modern institution, similar to the one we know today. However, the numerous problems that such a reform entailed were not solved – first of all, the financial aspect. After the Napoleonic period, the Restoration (1816) confirmed the French framework. However, during the 1820s and 1830s, the University of Naples entered a period of rapid decline. There were many reasons for this decline. First of all, the reaction to the bourgeoisie riots of 1820-21, a reaction that brought to the expulsion of many of the brightest professors, guilty of having supported the insurgents. In addition, there were the financial difficulties that the administration had to deal with, caused by an economic recession and the debts with foreign powers that had sustained the return of the Bourbon dynasty. It was difficult, given the burden of the state deficit, to increase the number of courses with the expenses it entailed. Finally, political issues were to be taken into account. It was feared that an avantgarde teaching could foment riots as in 1820.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Bourbon state kept a low profile regarding the University. Consequently, the quality of the education gradually weakened; the control on

the quality of the teaching was lax; the curricula remained the same, as well as salaries and social status. The Mazzetti project itself, after a long and controversial debate, was definitely set aside in 1842. As a result, no measure was carried out to adapt the University to the needs of the society which, in the meanwhile, was becoming more complex and exigent. However, in Southern Italy, there was a demand for higher education which was not possible to avoid. Therefore to satisfy this demand, a wide network of private schools flourished offering courses to prepare students for university exams. These schools, which in Southern Italy claimed a long tradition, has an enormous expansion in the 1830s and 1840s: suffice it to say that in the city of Naples there were many 'Studi Universitari', often held by high-standing intellectuals as Basilio Puoti, Francesco De Sanctis, Domenico Priore. It was a very successful enterprise. And the main reason for its success was the weakness of the state's supply. As a matter of fact, private schools offered what the state University didn't. First of all, many subjects could be studied: mathematics, philosophy, oratory, Greek, Italian, law physics, history, hygiene, astronomy, mineralogy, business subjects, languages, zoology, botany. Furthermore, the teaching methods were flexible in order to adapt to the demands of the market. Finally, the programs were modern and updated: for instance, in private schools Hegel could be studied while the University prohibited it.

Public and private were not complementary but in competition: where one backed off, the other advanced. In the light of this conclusion, what can the case of Southern Italy between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries teach us? As in other European countries, the public school system, with the University at its apex, was founded with a double objective: to modernize the economy intervening on the quality of the workforce (both manual and intellectual) and to re-enforce the consensus around the political power inculcating the values of loyalty. However, as regards the University, both objectives were pursued weakly.

In practice, the supply of higher education was established by the market allowing citizens, willing to pay for it, to choose the type of education they preferred. Was it a far-seeing choice? Certainly not. Cutting the funding to the University improved the condition of the state budget, but it meant giving up using the University as a rationally controlled instrument able to equip the economic system with a professionalism that the system, left on its own,

would not have required nor produced. In other words, the possibility of linking the University education to the interventions aimed at developing the economy was missing. So, at least regarding what could be influenced by school policies, the economy of Southern Italy continued along its way to a progressive marginalization from the international context. And even today, as an inheritance from those years, the imbalance between a humanistic education (excessive) and a technical education (chronically lacking) is still present.

But this is not all. The decision to neglect the state University also compromised the political stability. Even though private schools were strictly controlled by the police, they taught subjects that not always coincided with the values of loyalty that the political power would have appreciated. These schools, therefore, almost inevitably became the breeding ground of subversion. It was not by chance that the barricades in 1848 against the Bourbon dynasty were manned by the students from the private schools. And neither was it by chance that many of those students, once the revolutionary ferment ended, dedicated themselves to weakening the Bourbon regime strongly contributing to the birth of the new Italian state (1861).

In conclusion, if for public budgetary reasons (or for any other reason), a strong presence of the state in higher education was relinquished, at least two negative effects can be determined. First of all, it becomes difficult to modify the job market based on an overall project of management of the economy. Furthermore, the social tie built around cultural belonging and nationality can weaken. These are exactly the same risks today when a political class decides to increase the weight of private schools in the educational system.