

From centralized governance to site-based governance: space for subsidiarity in the Italian University?

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“A reform trajectory is ... a set of trends which involves searches, discoveries, borrowing and struggles... and not a single conscious, explicit project”¹.

Looking for a title in my presentation, I was tempted to call it “*the resilience of routines*”: my opinion, in fact, is that the reform trajectory, as defined by Stephen Ball, in Italian higher education has been slowed down, not to say actively impeded, by the traditional model, where the State was the universities’ (and schools’) monopolistic owner, the sole employer of personnel and the only decision maker.

From 1996 to 2001 Italy promoted policies designed to reform the educational system; this process of reform was included in a wider process of reorganization that interested the whole of the public administration, judged as ineffective and too expensive. In the university, this process was improved by the accord of European ministries of education in 1999 (the so called *Bologna process*), whose aim was to coordinate higher education national systems to build a real knowledge society. The central aim of the reforms was to guarantee a greater degree of opportunities for each student, and improve the quality of higher education as a tool for personal and social competition², but in my opinion (and not only in my opinion) it has failed. The reforms have produced a further differentiation between the provision of higher education, and the family social and cultural capital still plays a central role in the quality of education. The gap between highly performing universities and “weaker” universities has increased. No new models of governance or financing have substituted the old one, nor autonomy neither subsidiarity. The resilience of routines has won.

I’m only considering a particular aspect of the reform process, connected to the form of governance: site based management, or autonomy, and emphasis on partnerships in the governing of education were considered basic to improve the quality of education. The possibilities of a bottom – up governance opened by the introduction of site-based management could have contradictory results: the spread of competitive practices, in a new form of *bureau-professionalism*, and consequently a further differentiation of the stratification between courses (as in the building of *league tables* and in the successful ranking of universities), or the empowerment of collaboration.

¹ S.BALL, *Education PLC*, Routledge, London 2007, p. 6

² E.GRIMALDI, R.SERPIERI, *The reforming trajectory of the Italian educational system. Site-based management and decentralisation as a challenge for democratic discourse*, in “Journal of Educational Administration and History”, vol.42, N.1, February 20120, pp.75-95

Grimaldi and Serpieri in their paper start from a theoretical framework, using the concept of *discourse* as defined from Ball “a set of regulated practice that accounts for statement, and produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about³”. In their opinion, in Italian educational reforms there has been three discourses, influenced (even if not determined) by historical, political and cultural settlements (*path dependency*)⁴:

- *welfarist*, aiming to combine bureaucracy as vehicle of rationalization and guarantee of control with professional autonomy and responsibility. The State is the educational system’s only and monopolistic owner, and the decision maker regarding educational matters. Hierarchically structured public administrations define the main traits of the educational context, by establishing standardized rules and procedures, institutions were regarded as State bodies, terminal of a hierarchical chain, subject to a formal accountability. The academic freedom was individual, and – in a way – anarchical ;
- *neo liberal*, which sees the educational world in a quasi-market perspective: there is a passage from “interventionary” to “facilitating” State⁵, where the State fixes an environment where universities can work autonomously. Markets are seen as self-regulated and competition provides high quality services. Individual freedom is guaranteed by reduced control. Professionals are required to be “entrepreneurial”, and universities are assessed also by their ability in fund raising ⁶ ;
- *democratic*, a discourse opposed to welfarist and neo liberal, because it aims to enhance forms of democratic participation in the governing of education, and promotes social goals, as equity and justice, through collaboration. Beneficiaries are included in decisional processes and actors are expected to strive for the common good and be active contributors to the creation of the institution they inhabit. In this model, national states take general decisions, in particular financial decisions, assigning to the universities growing responsibilities for innovation and didactics⁷. (Goedegebuure et al.,1994:1).

Finally, at the end of XX century, educational policies were less centrally planned, introduced a system of incentives, and a systematic assessment of performances: the state became an *evaluative State*, "setting higher education free from the shackles of the state and placing responsibility for shaping the fortunes of individual institutions in the hands of their leadership... the State sets down conditions and priorities, some relating to the knowledge profile and output of higher education, others to institutional performance. By

³ S.BALL, *Education PLC*, cit., p.44

⁴ E.GRIMALDI, R.SERPIERI, *cit*, p. 79

⁵ NEAVE G.,van VUGHT,F., *Government and higher education relationships across three continents: the winds of change*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1994

⁶ The concept of “entrepreneurial university” has been used by Burton Clark in his B. CLARK, *Creating entrepreneurial universities: organisational pathways of transformation*, IAU/Elsevier, 1998

⁷ GOEDEGEBUURE,L.C.J., et al., *Higher education policy: an international comparative perspective*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, p.1

switching evaluation to the output of higher education systems, so one may abandon detailed and close control over how individual institutions fulfil institutional policy⁸.

This evaluative State seems to be alternative to the bureaucracy, centred on quality and moving control from inputs to outputs: but is rationality a real innovation in governance? Or the “Prometheus university” does pass from the state chains to the economy chains, from the State ideology to the market ideology⁹? Where is, if it is, collocated the space for a forth discourse, that we call the *subsidiarity discourse*? If we use the definition of *discourse* cited in Ball, subsidiarity is no doubt a discourse¹⁰: it is a set of regulated practice and produces frameworks of sense and obviousness, and it is an heuristic tool which brings to light the logics underlying policies. In the social documents of the Church, as quoted from M. Boyancé in his paper, the principle of subsidiarity means that social actors (individuals or groups) have to be supported or aided (*subsidium afferre*) not absorbed or substituted. Decision making is based on trust: trust between actors (horizontal level) and trust between actors and the superior level, State or Region (vertical level). Trust is a part of the *general moral capital* for the community as a whole, and regulates institutions and civic networks, improving the quality of the social life.¹¹ Studies on social capital have been centred mainly on schools: we are wondering if the Bryk’s concept of *Catholic school effect* could be applied to higher education, or it can not. The fact that both the faculty and the students are part of a *functional community* could enhance motivation, increase learning, promote a better quality of research, or it does not?

There is a texture of trustful relationships, where common good is the aim both for private and State institutions. Traditionally, in Italy this common good is not attained by the cooperation of actor and the state support, but through an highly centralized structure, with a hierarchical power distribution. As a consequence, when in the political arena there is an ideological struggle, nobody can or will decide, so we have a period of “non decision making”. The professionals’ power increases, but it is not enough to innovate or change educational aims. The so called “decentralized centralism¹²”, where different decentralized actor just confront each other, does not identify with the double movement of subsidiarity (not only horizontal, *inter pares*, but also vertical).

⁸ NEAVE G., *The evaluative state reconsidered*, in “European Journal of education”, vol. 33, n.3, 1998

⁹ NEAVE G., van VUGHT F. (eds.), *Prometheus bound: the changing relationship between Government and higher education in Western Europe*, Pergamon Press, London 1991.

¹⁰ If we refer to Bernstein’s concept of discourse (B. BERNSTEIN, *Vertical and horizontal discourse: An essay in* British Journal of Sociology of Education, vol. 20, Jun 1999, subsidiarity is a *vertical* discourse, a “coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure” regulating the transmission of the knowledge.

¹¹ Putnam says that public institution results, high levels of political integration and wellness of economics are the result of an accumulation of social capital (R.PUTNAM, *Making democracy work: civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993)

¹² G.E.KARLSEN, *Decentralized centralism: framework for a better understanding of governance in the field of education*, in “Journal of Education Policy”, vol. 15, n.5, 2000, pp.525-538

Promoting social cohesion is a key challenge in educational policy: education and schools shape normative values and beliefs more than any other institution, and transmit them from generation to generation, developing and enhancing civic skills and promoting the ties through which citizens relate to each other. Schools can't be reduced to their instrumental value, undermining their very possibility to educate the future citizens. Could we say the same for universities, or at this level in some way what is done? In particular, the hostility of the main professional unions and groups makes difficult or impossible the realization of the subsidiarity model, and the lack of a real innovation project gives no ways to the state to support the innovation itself. From a different point of view, the centralist financial and human resources control and a still formal – even if changing – output control reduces the possibilities to perform significantly better in answering the social demand, which is the aim of subsidiarity. The emerging networks need forms of institutional support, because if resources are too scarce, there is nor cooperation neither competition, but a behavior that we could call, in a way, *amoral familism*.

Higher education has of course a technical aim, transmitting competences in different fields of knowledge, but it should also re-evaluate the idea of education as common good, and universities have to perform a difficult balance between competition and cooperation, to raise standards and share best practices. But the organizational model both of school system and universities promotes the vertical loyalty of the ruler and ruled (*brand loyalty*¹³) more than the horizontal loyalty of the equal citizens. We are wondering if a concept as *subsidiarity* could synthesize the two opposite trends, enhancing the possibility of *voice*, to use the famous Hirschman's distinction¹⁴, but also promoting new forms of action.

Exit and voice are identified as two ways by which the ailing organizations could discern their deterioration. Exit is a viable solution for the customers as long as there are some outside options available to them. Then what about a monopoly market? In such a market, if the product is a necessity, exit is no longer a viable solution to the customers: no matter how low the quality is, customers still need to buy from the monopolist. The same could happen if the alternative choice is towards the private universities, as in Italy, where costs are much higher. However, the customers, with nowhere to go, could utter their discontent directly to the institutions, or to the Ministry, seen as the "owner" (or the responsible) of the universities. Hirschman calls this way of catching attention "voice".

Hirschman then discuss the interactions between exit and voice. Roughly speaking, when both exit and voice options are available to the customers, customers would probably choose exit over voice: once a better alternative is found, exit would certainly lead to welfare increase, and it requires them only to search for better alternatives, not to engage directly in some kind of action. On the contrary, voice involves calculated decisions and uncertainty, and customers would choose voice if they believe that their voice could be

13 M.HEALY, *School Choice, Brand Loyalty and Civic Loyalty*, in "Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain", vol. 412, n.4, 2007, pp. 743-756

¹⁴ A.HIRSCHMAN, *Exit, voice and loyalty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1970

seriously considered, determining some kind of improvement. Ironically, voice is more easily to be heard in a monopoly market than in a competitive market, because the presence of exit option can greatly reduce the chances that voice will be heard.

By this interaction between voice and exit, Hirschman offers a neat explanation for the worsening of the public education system. The explanation is based on the assumption that the wealthy parents are more education-quality alert than others, and they are the first to discern the quality changes. Once the quality of a public school or university falls, there are two options: moving to private system (as affluent families have the possibility to go), or acting to improve the worsening quality, through a common action, possibly supported by the state (as in the subsidiarity model). Hence, if it doesn't exist a shared system of values motivating consumers to create a better system, public education is quickly deprived of its most quality sensitive consumers and unable to hear voice from them. But voice is possible only when it exists some form of *loyalty*. Loyalty represents a feeling of attachment to an organization of which one is a member, and the presence of loyalty increases the possibility to act for the improvement of any form of common good. Loyalty is not only a kind of emotion, but also a somewhat rational behavior, because being loyal to an organization means one believes that, "over a period of time, the right turns will more than balance the wrong ones". If we view customers or members of an organization as self-interested parties whose interests are not totally in line with the organization as a whole, the opportunistic behavior will be the mode diffused. Symmetrically, organizations will aim to defend their existence, and not to respond to the users' demands. The short-term self-interest will direct every policy.

If in the Newman or Humboldt model knowledge was a value itself, and it can't be sold on the market, the mass higher education has to demonstrate its value for money. The final step seems to be that money is value, and higher education is praised only if it could produce money, or if it is a commodity with some exchange value. We have to consider, in the subsidiarity model, the role of universities in the so called *third mission*, where they are involved in the community development, not only promoting patents or spin offs, but also taking care of the cultural values and transmitting artistic and cultural traditions to the next generation. The role of Catholic universities in this sector could be a real asset for the social and personal development.