

Non-central State libraries: the search for identity

It is common knowledge that one of the anomalies of the Italian library system, even in the European context, is the existence of two National Central libraries (National Central Library of Rome and National Central Library of Florence), seven national libraries, and another 37 libraries, all under the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities.

While the tasks of the first two, even if identical in their substance, have in time been clearly defined and detailed, both by means of historical legislative measures and through praxis, we may wonder (or, better to say, we have been wondering for about a century and a half) what role the others should play, given that their origins and typologies are the most diverse.

The most conspicuous group, both in number and collection size, comprises the libraries deriving from the old pre-unitary states and kingdoms, which mostly carry out preservation tasks. Among these are the National and University Library in Turin, the Braidense National Library in Milan, the Marciana National Library in Venice (Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana), the Palatina Library (Biblioteca Palatina) in Parma, the Estense and University Library (Biblioteca Estense e Universitaria) in Modena, the Mediceo-laurenziana Library in Florence, the State Library in Lucca, and the National Library in Naples.

Beside the already mentioned National Library in Turin and Estense and University Library in Modena, other libraries originate from the old Italian Universities, namely the University libraries in Genoa, Pisa, Padua, Pavia, Bologna (which has been recently returned to the University), Naples, Cagliari, Sassari, and the Alessandrina In Rome, all of which should – but do not – serve the Universities they historically belong to.

Three libraries were created out of private collections of important families and figures: the Biblioteca Reale (Royal Library) in Turin, the Riccardiana and Marucelliana, both in Florence. Libraries founded by religious orders which were suppressed in the XIX century are the Angelica (founded by the discalced Augustinians), Casanatense (by the Dominicans), Vallicelliana (by the Filippini), all located in Rome, and the so-called *Libraries annexed to National monuments*, belonging to ancient abbeys and monasteries (in Praglia, Montecassino, Farfa and Subiaco, the Certosa of Trisulti, the Monastery of Montevergine, the Badia of Cava dei Tirreni, the Oratory of the Girolamini in Naples). All of these hardly have any ministerial staff and are directly managed by the friars who originally founded them.

Special interest libraries are the Archeology and Art History library, the Modern and contemporary History Library and the Medical library, all located in Rome: their relations to the University faculties and departments have never been clearly defined, although they share the tasks of documenting specific disciplines.

Functioning as public libraries because they have collections of general interest, and because they are small and have limited old materials collections, are the State library in Cremona, the Isontina State library in Gorizia, the State library in Trieste, the State library

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in Macerata, the Baldini Library in Rome and the National libraries in Potenza and Cosenza, and partly also the National library in Bari, which nevertheless is larger than the aforementioned ones.

Although so varied in nature, all these libraries are governed by a single and by now outdated regulation (D.P.R. 417/1995) which, as it merely lists them in topographical order by region, instead of fostering the definition of a specific institutional role for each one of them, eventually burdens them with a forcefully equalitarian set of rules, basically encouraging them all to do the same thing.

All of them, in fact, are supposed to perform identical, difficult and sometimes impracticable tasks: collecting and preserving the Italian published output at a national and local level; preserving, expanding and enhancing their own historical collections; acquiring the foreign published output in accordance with the specificity of the existing collection and with an eye to users' needs; documenting the collection, assisting with bibliographic information needs and ensuring the circulation of documents.

Ambiguous is the terminology which binds them, "state public libraries", which contributes to increasing the identity crisis. The concept of "public library", in fact, is ill-suited to the majority of state libraries, if by "public" we mean, as in Library & Information Science, a library for everyone and for a general public interested in the most varied content, without specialist expectations. We may assume that the legislators used the term improperly to underline that these libraries are actually institutions "open to the public." Ambiguous is also the set of services, among which the "circulation of documents" which the regulation refers to in the effort of meeting the international trends of full availability of documentary resources. The latter, in fact, clashes with the tasks of preserving the country's published heritage which many institutions take on, being the repositories -often since their foundation- of legal deposit, and being therefore obliged to safeguard the material, to focus on the intact preservation of the archive, to limit the circulation of single items.

Non-central state libraries are going through a phase of great uncertainty, as a result of having been forcefully united, as we said before, by a single regulation which fails to detail their identity and peculiarity, and deprives them of locally-centered tasks such as preservation -entrusted to the Regions since the 70s. They are seriously undermined by the organizational ministry reforms (in a continuous bouncing of responsibilities from central to local administration) and are left in their eternal limbo, damaged by a continuous and indiscriminate downgrading of their managerial positions, to survive in an "end-of-the empire" atmosphere, looking for a role.

This issue of *AIB Studi*, which hosts contributions by managers of State libraries, intends to go into the issues mentioned before. The centre-periphery model needs to be reviewed, without ruling out the possibility of a transfer to local government or to universities of some libraries which little differ from other neighbouring institutions, such as the libraries of important cities or faculty libraries. The Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities should be left in charge of only those libraries which actually represent and embody, on the basis of their history and their collections, the Italian culture and the institutional development of the country, from pre-unitary courts and states to the constitution of a national identity. For such institutions it will be consequently crucial to define their relations with the National Central Libraries and the ICCU (Institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information) so as to define their reciprocal competence and the necessary connections. A reflection is needed, as well, on the criteria to be adopted in redefining managerial positions, which have often been cancelled on the basis of inscrutable grounds, most of the times indifferent to the real situation of the institutions themselves.

The present article is written at an extremely sad and painful juncture for State libraries, characterized by the scandal of thefts from the Library of the Girolamini in Naples, carried out by a true criminal conspiracy, which, according to the charges, was directed by the

institution manager himself. The incident filled with indignation and outrage the consciences of everyone, and even more so because the appointment of the manager, a person who was far from the specific scientific competence expected from a library manager, even if proposed by the administration of the Library of the Girolamini was *de facto*, if not approved, at least ratified and tolerated by the Ministry, which for some time before had counted the manager himself among its consultants. Apart from originating a reflection on the necessity for a greater safeguard of historical bibliographic heritage, the circumstance cannot help being perceived as the final straw: the moment has come to undergo, without hesitation, a deep reform of the State libraries system, starting from reassessing current staff and hiring the fresh forces, passionate and qualified, who have been left at the post for years. In this regard, it is sad to underline that the recent selection of library managers led to the employment of only two staff units, later increased by another three units, only in three regions: Veneto, Liguria and Piedmont. This constitutes the umpteenth negative sign, especially if compared with the massive enrollment of other professional profiles in the Ministry. We wish these delays will soon be dealt with, lest we have to witness the near, inevitable, paralysis of the services offered by the State libraries.

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