

States-Generals of the professionals of cultural heritage: prospective alliances to be pursued with conviction

The States-Generals of the professionals of cultural heritage, which took place in Milan 22-23 November 2012, closed with most satisfying results: about 500 participants in two days, great interest for a completely new professional debate, but above all the awareness that it be necessary to reinforce the positions of the three associations united in MAB (Museum, Archives, Libraries) by means of a definite collaborative strategy.

These results, a payoff for the idea of reuniting the annual meetings of librarians, archivists and museum professionals, were not the fruit of improvisation. The idea, launched in 2011, was gathered and developed, nurtured during meetings held all over Italy and in inter-associative working groups. Quoting from the opening report, co-signed by the presidents of AIB (Italian Library Association), ANAI (Italian Archives Association) and ICOM (International Council of Museums) Italy, “the idea behind us is that in order to face the global crisis we need to organise and value the points of view, the experience and the proposals of the people who daily work in museums, libraries, archives and cultural institutions, both on professional and voluntary bases”.

Here is the first element worth underlining: our States-Generals gave voice to the people who actually, with competence and commitment, bottom-up guarantee the use and preservation of the Italian cultural assets; the same voice could not be heard during the mediatic-institutional merry-go-round organised only one week previously in Florence. The parade of Ministers and top experts was only dignified by the passionate and lucid speech of the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano. We regretfully acknowledge this fact, as various attempts had been made to try and establish some form of collaboration between the two events. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to increase the rhetoric about the statements on culture merely turning into wishful thinking.

On the contrary, we wish to start a partnership which we hope will be rich in positive consequences. During the two States-Generals’ days the managers and professionals of the many museums, libraries and archives which make our communities so lively were given the possibility to debate their reflections and proposals: a fruitful way of sharing the patrimony of competence and expertise, accountability and commitment, determination and enthusiasm which characterises our professions. This is not a small achievement, constituting in our opinion a positive starting point to overcome the present difficulties and look ahead towards the future.

Besides our voices, we desired to listen to that of politics, our natural and requisite interlocutor. At the round table which closed the event, the political stakeholders were represented by the president of the VII permanent commission of the Chamber, on. Manuela Ghizzoni, the assistant to the Director of Regional Culture for Lombardy, Marisa Valagussa, the chair of the Directors of Regional Culture at the Conference of the Regions, Mario

Caligiuri, and the Undersecretary of State for Cultural Heritage and Activities, Roberto Cecchi. The results were not particularly inspiring, thus proving that communication between the parts often reminds of a dialogue with the deaf: probably a taste of the difficult scenario ahead and a reminder of the necessity of effectively conveying to the establishment our priorities so that they may be understood and valued (certainly not a new problem, but strikingly urgent nowadays).

The economic crisis and the resulting cut in budgets are severely endangering the continuing existence of many cultural institutions: the grave consequences affect employment rates, working conditions and the future of many young people who have been specifically trained and educated but see no chances for a professional recognition. Facing a disaster which seems to be unstoppable, we felt a natural desire to join forces in order to give birth to a concrete proposal, which we first shared within our associations, and was later sent on to minister Ornaghi and Undersecretary Cecchi, and at last was reshaped into a policy document which was optimistically entitled "For a Re-launch of the Italian cultural system".

The critical points therein highlighted regard, in the first place, employment in the cultural sector and the valorization of human resources; the issue is more and more taking on a resemblance with a struggle for the defence of the dignity of our professions and the possibility of guaranteeing staff turnover and generational succession, above all with reference to the scientific and technical positions: apparently administrations are forgetting that without adequate management and qualified staff our museums, archives and libraries have no future.

The second point regards the theme of financial resources, which should be used for current expenses of permanent cultural institutions and the activities they do for local communities, while more and more often they are used to support festivals, mediatic or popular exhibitions, ephemeral fairs.

Furthermore, the theme of cooperation in its widest meaning (among people, institutions, administrations) brings to the forefront the cultural networks as boosters for the action of cultural institutions and as tools to test integrated management models among museums, libraries and archives serving the same communities. Besides, the dimension of the horizontal subsidiarity, meaning the voluntary participation of the citizens and the communities, and the synergy between public and private action could be given impulse by means of a fiscal reform in favour of liberal donations, and the possibility to destine "5 per mille" (0.5% of taxes destined by the State to determined non-profit organizations) also to the cultural institutions and their activities. Last but not least, professional training and development may constitute a ground for comparison among different disciplinary, professional and cultural traditions: a multidisciplinary theoretical approach could make the most of the treasure of expertise which the best staff have accumulated during a life-long working experience, two elements which help facing and bringing into perspective the problems on the borders of the various professions, without superficiality and with a clear understanding of the delicacy of the issues at stake.

The reflection developed by the States-Generals on these programmatic points – employment, profession, resources, cultural systems, cooperation, accessibility, culture-related fund-raising and tax system, cultural heritage management in emergencies – was fruitful. AIB contribution was serious and articulated into the preparation for the thematic sessions developed within the association working groups by our members (Ornella Foglieni, Rosa Maiello, Lello De Magistris, Claudio Leombroni, Maurizio Vivarelli and Vittorio Ponzani), into the opening reports by Giovanni Solimine and Claudio Gamba, but above all into the many contributions, remarks and observations by the great number of our members who participated to the debate¹. AIB can close this experience with its head held high, and I cannot but feel proud about it.

¹ Preparatory papers for thematic sessions and reports are available at: <http://www.mab-italia.org/index.php/stati-general-cultura-2012/presentazione/item/34-abstract>.

The ambition – expressed in the subtitle of the States-Generals – to give life to an agenda for a sustainable future of archives, libraries and museums will soon come true through the synthesis and proposal papers originated by the debates held during the thematic sessions at the State Archive of Milan, at the Sormani Library, at the “Gallerie d’Italia”, at the “Leonardo da Vinci” Museum of Science and Technology, at the Trivulziana library and at the “Pinacoteca di Brera”.

I personally drew from this experience a renewed awareness of the responsibility we shoulder, but also a relief at feeling this weight shared by other professionals. Nevertheless our real challenge is beginning now: once the lights are out, the enthusiasm for the positive results has cooled down, we need to start a lucid and determinate action with our institutions in order to re-launch the themes and solutions we have at heart. At the same time, it will be necessary to shape and strengthen the new-born collaboration by selecting two or three themes on which to put to test our practical capability of converging. Workplace training, digital collections, and professional recognition might be useful toolboxes, with results that will be verified during the second edition of the States- Generals, which will take place two years from now, in 2014.

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