

Librarianship, University, Education, Profession

The presence of librarianship – and more widely of book sciences – in Italian Universities goes back a long way through difficulties, flaws and only a few blissful moments of growth and effective results. As the history of Italian libraries demonstrates also regarding many other issues, precocious and far-sighted initiatives did not lack – starting from the well-known open course of “*Lectures on Bibliology*” held by Tommaso Gar at the University of Naples in 1865 – yet they were followed by very long seasons of absence and inactivity. An important initiative was also the foundation of the completion and postgraduate schools in the 1920s though in time it showed its fragility. An (almost) specific University degree for librarians was established only in the 1990s in Italy, namely the archivist-librarian specialization in “Preservation of Cultural Heritage”, started in 1979 in Udine for a specific University course, and afterwards in many other cities. Yet, if we consider that those courses, although very rich in specific contents – from Documentary information science to Preservation and History of bookbinding – simply built up a specialization under an umbrella which embraced the whole area of “cultural heritage” (both a blessing and a curse for our past forty years...), we can declare that the first-ever degree in Librarianship was established only very recently, precisely in 2001, following the “3+2” university reform, with the MA (up to 2008 defined “*laurea specialistica*”) in Archive and Library science.

There should be no need to stress the importance of a specific degree for an “almost-profession”, a “profession on the way” aspiring to a proper recognition which has not been completely achieved yet: though ISTAT (the National Institute for Statistics) classified for a long time the library profession among the “Intellectual, scientific and highly specialized professions”, actually not only in the opinion of the general public, but also in more concrete issues such as recruitment, job placement and wages, the attitude is to consider librarianship as a generic clerical job (if not a sinecure) which could be carried out by anyone without a specific cultural and technical training – someone under-categorized and badly paid, or even a volunteer.

All of the actions started by AIB since 1997 (the relations with CNEL, the institution of a register of librarians, the participation in COLAP and so on), based on the EU directives issued since 1988 - after having deemed the idea of establishing a chartered profession unfeasible, and maybe also undesirable- have always assumed a specific education not below university degree to be the pre-requisite cornerstone for the librarians’ profession. And this point is restated (though envisaging the acknowledgement of previously acquired “on the field” training) in the new regulation for Association membership, recently approved by the Associates’ assembly (20 May 2013) as a consequence of the Italian law issued on 14 January 2013 (n.4) on unregulated professions.

However, it is widely known that in the last years, also the university, no less than libraries, has undergone heavy and repeated cuts, along with difficulties of different sorts and limitations which, besides imposing a heavy bureaucratic yoke which is gradually erasing the achievements of autonomy, led to the closure of numerous specific degree courses (BA and MA as well as postgraduate) or, even worse, to a drastic reduction in their specific contents,

as well as of the human resources and competences it had been possible to count upon in the glorious reform years.

The Seminar recently held in Rome at the former Special School for Library and Archive Studies (yes, “former”...) about which Chiara Faggiolani gives in this issue an extensive and stimulating report, reviews these issues with the participation of teaching staff, librarians and qualified guests from other countries. The direct and open debate on experiences and perspectives of Library science teaching at the universities (which by the way is undergoing troubled times also in the main countries we generally look up at with “pink” glasses) brought about an undoubtedly varied landscape, rich in initiatives in numerous different directions. The most significant element emerged was, in my opinion, a dimension which is “plural” not only in scientific interests and points of view about the essence of library science and its tasks, but in the wider and less known dimension of activities and initiatives the teachers of this area are involved in – initiatives not necessarily related to teaching. Besides, it is little known that many colleagues, mostly renowned for their research in book history and bibliography, also teach librarianship courses or modules.

The research presented - mostly results of final dissertations of MA, PhDs and post-graduate studies- showed a diversified and not always predictable panorama, so that it was difficult to evaluate, as the *call for papers* foresaw, how much they properly belonged to the area of librarianship and library studies. Also because of this the most meaningful element in my opinion was the richness and variety in interests and research trends which in many cases remain hidden as they do not find a way to publication.

The differences in vision, interests, research branches and experimentation are a richness peculiar to our area, and I believe they also form the wealth of our educational offer: the university we want is one where young people can get in touch with many scholars digging in a field from different perspectives, not where a single field is monopoly of a single scholar or limited to a single point of view.

During the two Rome days it was possible, through free and informal presentations and discussions among the participants, to enter the actual reality of librarianship education in our universities (and also to compare it with the situation in other countries, though regretfully the German contribution had to be cancelled at the last minute). A great part of the teaching of library science at Italian universities is not devoted to the education of librarians, but often involves in large numbers students from all sorts of humanities courses who, for various reasons, decide they will attend a course or a module about library and book science. It would be reductive - and above all unreal- to classify this as “user education” (which besides should be carried out by libraries themselves), in fact this opens a window to a world (or, better to say, many worlds) which is generally unknown - even if the student might have set foot in a public or school library, if present- and, I would say even more, mostly “underrated”, which hardly anyone could imagine it might be of any interest (all teachers have numerous anecdotes and confessions about this). On the contrary, the raw reality of ministerial statistics tells us that, also because of the job crisis and the non-specificity of recruitment habits, the demand for “education for librarians”, for a dedicated course with many specific contents, is quite limited, and the low numbers of new enrollments caused many closures in the most recent years. Unlike other countries, above all Northern Europe, there are no consistent signs of a request from the job market for non-library positions in the akin area of documentation and information (but for a more detailed frame of education and job in our country see the chapter on this theme in the “*Rapporto sulle biblioteche italiane*” published by AIB, the volume covering 2011-2012 presently in press).

The reality of university activity is, therefore, very different from what is being generally imagined, and is somehow closer to that of the missionaries and “soul shepherds”, or proselytizers, besides mediators, rather than to that of the “educator” typical of the contexts of

professional education and training. We often forget that university education is a long path, years long, which for most students necessarily means also a personal development, considering the age at which it takes place, and also implies an overall cultural development, as the development during school years is generally quite limited and elementary. To give but an example, try and figure out the challenges of the practical teaching of indexing and classification to people who might never have read an academic monograph, but only school-texts and novels. And even those who are bookshop-goers may never have read or consulted the many, not only foreign, materials which libraries habitually treat but never appear on the counters and generally not even on the shelves of non-specialized bookshops.

Beyond the problem - very serious and usually underestimated by the librarians of my generation, who for the most part were educated at gymnasial high schools and humanities faculties and are habitual if not heavy readers - of the overall cultural background necessary to find one's way in the editorial offer, in cataloguing, classifying and in the reference service, it is worth underlining that the professional education, that is the initial training, the first organic building of the expertise shared by the whole professional community, is not and cannot be satisfied by merely learning the "things that need to be done" (and which obviously transform even before the education process has been completed). This is not a librarians' training programme, but something deeply different under many respects, though it necessarily includes practical aspects as well (a need I personally understand well as one of the subjects I teach is Cataloguing) and bearing in mind that the university reform has introduced into almost every course of studies an apprenticeship.

University education for an intellectual profession, even more for a profession such as ours, so varied in nature and tasks besides being subject to great changes, is mainly transmission - and more precisely a daily assessment in common - of values, methods, aims and shared criteria, which are what creates a true professional, an autonomous and accountable individual, but also a member of the community which vouches for that profession.

An actual image of Italian university nowadays, above all as regards our field, can be drawn in its outlines already from the dry figures of the AlmaLaurea survey (<http://www.almalaurea.it/>) which reaches every year the graduates of most of our universities. If we consider for example the answers given by the MA graduates in Archive and Library science of the past year (2012) - 70% of whom are females - we can observe that less than 5% declares they chose this course on mainly occupational grounds (41% on mainly cultural grounds, 38% on both cultural and occupational grounds) and that their origin and life conditions show a "real" Italy very far from the idyllic picture of those who still seem to regret the "good times" of the Gentile reform (and also the annexes, from the nomination of all managerial positions "from high up" to the apology of the truncheon). To begin with, less than one in four (24%) has a graduated parent, and less than 7% both; 30% of the families belong to the "working class" (I know it should never be mentioned again, but the tabs say so) and only 16% come from the "middle class" (ditto). Little less than half (44%) did not attend a gymnasium, but other high schools - where it is unlikely that cultural education be, let's say, very deep - and this percentage was even higher before the hopes raised by the reform were followed by the disappointments and the economic crisis. More than 60% resides (and attended secondary education) in a province or region different from the one where they attended university - notwithstanding the senseless proliferation of provincial universities which took place some years ago - but anyway 40% lodges at over an hour's journey from the campus. Costs and fatigue of commuting are of course well different from the comfort and time leisure of "college life", but only 16% could take advantage of scholarships and a negligible percentage (not reported) of lodging. Besides, almost three out of four have had a job during the course of their studies, even if prevalently temporary or part-time, and only in one case out of three connected to their courses. The easy life of the bour-

geois Gymnasium student who nonchalantly attends university in his city, or even of the *colleges* in the American films has little or nothing to do with the actual condition of the majority of our students, and we do well to always bear that in mind. Anyway, over a half of them managed to graduate within the two years' course, and three out of four within the third year (the average delay is 8 months compared to the time limit a full-time student should be able to keep).

At the end of this course of studies, still according to AlmaLaurea, 80% declare they were satisfied, and the percentage went up to 94% as regarded relations with teachers (maybe not as blamable as the media picture them) and to 89% as regarded relations to other students and libraries, while it decreased to 73% as regarded classrooms; workstations, even if present according to 82% of the respondents, were deemed sufficient only by 32%. In a nutshell, more than 70% would enroll again for the Archive and Library Science course, even if 7% would opt for another site, while 10% would chose a different course (and for the majority also a different university). The remaining 19%, instead, declared they would not enroll again for a second cycle of university studies, and this overall response is heavily marked by the actual crisis and the skepticism it nurtures: in 2011 those who would have chosen the same course again were 86% and those who would have given up their second university cycle were only 7%. Even if it should be quite obvious that, when job offer is scarce, it is necessary to invest more in personal education.

The basic problems, as we can see, are essentially context-related, depending from the secular backwardness of the country which, after some healthy shakes striving to reduce the gap with the other European countries – namely the middle school reform in 1962, the liberalization of university entry after 1968, autonomy and the “Bologna process” between the Nineties and the first years of the new century – is gaining ground and enlarges the “swamp” which slows down the country, and triggers – with the backup of a manipulated disinformation – policies detrimental for public education and for a more equal and less class-related access to higher studies.

OCSE data always remind us that Italy is *not* aligned with Europe in investment for education, research, culture, and its industrial and innovation decline has been apparent as consistent policies and investments are lacking; the inevitable and tragic result is a record youth unemployment rate in the continent, and the growing flow of brain migration: for young people who have a higher education, by now the perspective is more and more often that of finding a job in other countries (Europe, America or other continents) where their education is evidently more appreciated and rewarded than it happens here.

These problems are obviously much greater than those relating to the function and position of librarianship teaching in Italian universities, but this is the context we need to bear in mind. In the same way, looking at a smaller perspective, we need to picture the context for the teaching of library sciences in our universities, and the legislative frame regulating them. Their traditional positioning in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities is certainly questionable, and even more their inclusion under the umbrella of “cultural heritage” (after all also libraries in Italy have been, since 1975, primarily linked to that area from the point of view of competences and legislative frame). Nevertheless, in a higher education system which in Italy is mainly public and democratically organized, these conditions demonstrate the interest – maybe partial and defective – which the humanities area has always shown for our disciplines, and which has not been found in other areas (which might offer alternative and maybe more stimulating positioning). Besides, the tendency (not only in Italy) to containments, unifications and integration in bigger structures made more and more an illusion of the idea of being able to build a substantially autonomous environment (the main example, and for some decades unique, has been that of the Special School for Library and Archive Studies at the “Sapienza”, with faculty status), that is basically that “library school”

we have dreamt of for a long time, and which in the past could start in the best equipped campuses. That model has been facing great difficulties for a long time, not to say it is in a desperate crisis, even in the countries where it was born (at the times of Dewey and then with higher ambitions at the Graduate Library School in Chicago), and where it reached its greater development: we only have to think of the closures of many prestigious schools in the United States from the end of the 80s (beginning with Chicago and Columbia) and the merging of others.

Therefore, the perspective of “being part” – maybe disdainfully – “to oneself” (as Dante), also in the best cases is as unrealistic as the ambition to “import” models born in substantially different contexts, and not less that of figuring the university library science education as some sort of “super-training course” magically tailored according to the specific temporary needs of a contemporary librarian.

As we have no magic wand, nor the possibility of teleporting ourselves to parallel planets better than ours, it is within these reality contexts that library science disciplines need to reinforce their presence and function and to take advantage from the richness in competences and interest trends, also across the board, which are out there and widely emerged during the Seminar last May. Two strong elements we could work on are definitely the development of collaborations at international and above all European level – a weak point emerging from AlmaLaurea data is that only a small minority of the graduates in Archive and Library science had a study experience abroad – and the opportunities which can be developed through – these are words by Luigi Crocetti in a column on “*Bollettino*” in 1986 – “a close collaboration and a reciprocal trust between the two faces of librarianship”, the one operating on the field and the one of university research and teaching.

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