

# Education, job, employment: a Bermuda triangle about to engulf Italian librarians

The echo of the 58<sup>th</sup> National AIB Congress had not yet died out when the theme of employment - one of the main issues at the Rome convention – returned to the fore because of the announced call for librarians “500 young people for culture” which provoked the protest of the whole community of the professionals of cultural heritage and the stand taken by the major associations in the sector, including ours.

The story, a logical consequence of the forewarnings of the so-called “*Valore Cultura*” Decree (Culture & Value), is the more indigestible because of the entry restrictions set by a ministerial bureaucracy light years away from reality. These are the job prospects offered in Italy to thousands of cultural professionals: after having spent long years in education, and after having accepted many jobs without a future (and often without a salary) in order to gain experience and “curriculum”, they aspire to a steady job. Their hope remains, at the moment, totally unanswered.

Article 2 of Decree 91/2013, in fact, allocates € 2,5 millions, which might be integrated with EU resources, to an extraordinary program by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (MiBACT) aiming at continuing and advancing the inventorying, cataloguing and digitalization of the cultural heritage. The program should enroll 500 under-35ers with a degree in relevant disciplines or with a diploma from the “Schools for Archive Studies” who would be trained for 12 months in inventorying and digitalization. The prospective trainees are supposed to work 35 hours a week in exchange for a lump gross sum of € 416 a month - little less than € 3 an hour - and the promise of a future reward: a certificate of attendance which might be used for further selections at the Ministry and the Institutions it is controlling.

If we lived in a normal country, the initiative should be greeted with approval: through the scheme of job inclusion, introduced in the Italian legislation in 1998 by Art. 18 of Law 24 June 1997, n. 196 (“Norms regarding job promotion”, better known as *Treu Law*), five hundred young people are offered the opportunity of acquiring an actual post-degree on-the-job experience, meaning they will strengthen and enliven with the experience and support of experienced colleagues the knowledge acquired at university, before they proceed on to work as cataloguers, librarians, archivists. This would mark a physiological process of progressive and continuous replacement of the professionals, in order to guarantee community renewal, generation turnover, acknowledgement of the experience, possibility to carry out the tasks necessary for the proper functioning of the institutions.

In our topsy-turvy country, on the contrary, the last public selection for the enrollment of professionals qualified to carry out the above-mentioned activities in the Ministry libraries took place in 1983: the expert staff who were supposed to tutor those 500 young people are not there anymore because they have already retired, and there are no plans for their replacement, or, understaffed and overworked, they have little or no time for apprentices. The budgetary cuts do not allow anymore to hire external professionals to

answer staff shortage. In this occupational desert, maintaining that 500 young people face a “training” period is an insult to common sense, and the demonstration which took place on 11 January to protest against an offer which – certainly contrary to the Ministry’s intentions – resembles an exploitation of qualified labour, appears too feeble a reaction, insufficient even for the well-bred and sedate cultural workers.

Besides this particular event, circumstances highlight - if it were necessary - that some serious thought about job prospects and working conditions in libraries on the one hand, and on the relation between professional education and job perspectives on the other is unavoidable, even taking into consideration the difficulties, ambiguities and recriminations the treatment of such an issue inevitably causes - as it clearly emerged also during the two Conference days in Rome. The sclerosis of the circuit which is supposed to link curricular education and labour market entry by means of “buffer” apprenticeship periods causes distortion and disruption on the whole chain. The delicate balance between education of the future professionals and access to employment turns out to be deeply compromised.

The University reform enacted in 2010, leading Universities to a department-based reorganisation, did nothing but enhance and highlight the marginality of book- and, in a strict sense, librarianship-related disciplines teaching within the Italian Academia. The failed achievement of a strong and recognizable professional profile, the frailty of the bonds with the world of information and book professions and the slowness (or unwillingness) in receiving and developing their instances to stimulate a renewal of teaching curricula (exception made, of course, for the good practices enacted by a handful of Universities) are driving many archive- and library-oriented degree courses to closure or to a merger with other non-specialist courses, thus reducing the already scarce spaces for the education of new professionals. The latter, once they achieve their degree, are thrown in the arena of a jobless market fighting for a non-paid stage or for a contract with one of the firms of the sector, with scarce or non-existent guarantees for retention and stabilization, not even in the long run. The absence of occupational perspectives is negatively reflected on the attractiveness of the courses in the field, and creates a vicious circle: discouraging prospective students from undertaking such curricular studies reduces the number of university freshmen and weakens the disciplines in the field.

This dramatic, alarming and potentially devastating framework threatens to engulf like a Bermuda Triangle what is left of the Italian library system, and all levels (above all management in political, academic and professional environments) need to take cognizance thereof. Many professionals - who have been trying to resist for years and decades with temporary jobs – are thus led to consider the paid internship offered through the “500 young people for culture” announcement an unbearable privilege, as it can be spent for future selections at the MiBACT.

The feeling that we have shut the door to hope is undoubtedly stronger today than it was seven years ago, when AIB devoted its 53rd National Congress to the theme of the library profession. The phenomenon of “atypical” work which at the time was pointed at as a growing tendency, has now become the paradigm of job hiring in the cultural field, and has by now turned from exception to rule. At the beginning of the millennium the “atypical” work is a typical product, almost a trademark, of the Italian society. The temporariness of hiring contracts – a polished and polite term used to hide the cruelty of a profession with no opportunities in a blocked labour market – and the cutbacks in libraries cause the devaluation of competences and the exploitation of intellectual work. AIB 58<sup>th</sup> Congress endeavoured to discuss about this tangle of strongly interconnected issues – which cannot be rearranged in a linear cause-effect sequence - trying to widen the cross-sector vision in order to identify those similarities which will make librarians feel less lonesome in the struggle for their future.

There are no tailor-made recipes to solve a problem regarding our whole country and particularly the younger generations. Nevertheless, we have the moral and political obligation to look for solutions in order to avoid being engulfed in this unprecedented Bermuda Triangle. The main directions to explore are in my opinion the following:

- 1) uniting with the other professional associations to require that the turn-over be unblocked in the public cultural sector and that staff in the cultural institutions be integrated. To this purpose it is necessary to think of using all regulatory and financial instruments available, be they ordinary or out of the ordinary, such as for example the EU Structural Funds and those from the Development and Cohesion Fund, already used at the end of 2013 by the Government as a general support to development and occupation;
- 2) supporting the proposal, contained in the report by the D'Alberti Commission for the reformation of MiBACT, to bring into being a National school of Higher Studies for Culture and Heritage professions, in accordance with local authorities, universities and professional associations, to guarantee that the highest specialized education is connected to the development and concrete carrying out of the tasks in cultural institutions.
- 3) working decisively on widening the cracks opened by Law 4/2013, introducing the theme of professional acknowledgement and of continuous development of librarians as a prerequisite for access to the labour market. The professional acknowledgement introduced by Law 4/2013 may represent a turning point provided it is possible to make agreements with the associations representing the Institutions in charge of libraries<sup>1</sup> on one side and the trade unions on the other, to ratify that being a librarian means possessing certified competences and skills, derived from pre-defined educational and professional paths, continuously updated by means of in-service training, and that the above-mentioned requisites are discriminating to access library jobs and must be made binding, at least in CV evaluation, in vacancies for librarians and in the terms of contracts entrusting service management to external firms.

This commitment involves the present and the future AIB governing boards, and all those who have at heart the destiny of libraries and of Italian librarians. We can discuss about the manner of implementation and about the order of priorities, but not about the necessity for an unanimous engagement. Doubting about this would be like throwing the trowel in.

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy these Institutions are ANCI (National Association of Town Municipalities), UPI (Union of Italian Provinces), Conferenza delle Regioni (Conference of Regions), CRUI (Ministry for University and Education), MiBACT (Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism).