

## Thirty Years of Higher-education Policy in Italy: Vico's *Ricorsi* and Beyond?

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*Abstract: 2010 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the introduction of a bill designed to instigate major changes in the Italian university system. During the intervening period, the legislative framework has been progressively altered and, recently, reinstated, reflecting a pattern that could most aptly be described as a ricorso. As first used by the Italian philosopher Vico in 1744, the term refers to an historical cycle in which the end state is almost identical to the initial state from whence it originated. In this article it is posited that precisely this type of historical pattern has characterised the twists and turns of Italian higher education policy over the last thirty years. By combining the personal experience of two Italian academics from different generations, this article discusses how, when compared with provisions already in place thirty years ago, the latest reform fits a pattern of ricorso. Nevertheless, the current proposals represent a new departure insofar as they strengthen the role of meritocracy – a key criterion for reform of the academic world in Italy. More important than the principle of merit itself, however, is the particular method by which merit is assessed.*

Keywords: university policy, higher-education, *concorsi*, merit

Thirty years ago, a major reform changed the university system in Italy. Since then, the Italian academic world has been subject to a roller-coaster of legislative changes and reform bills that have failed to prevent its progressive decline – a decline that has been exacerbated by limited public investment and, recently, by severe spending cuts. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of how the Italian university system has evolved in response to the legislative and political changes of the last thirty years. In our opinion, it is now reverting back to a situation analogous to that of the pre-1980s, thus reflecting a pattern of historical change that was first described by the Italian philosopher Gianbattista Vico as a *ricorso*. According to Vico's view of history (Vico, 1744), the progression of *corsi e ricorsi* does not necessarily improve situations – after all, not everything that is new is better. Indeed, the changes in the university system that are

described and discussed here may have played a role in the progressive decline – both politically and economically – of Italy's influence on the international stage over the past decade or so. It is perhaps telling that an ever increasing number of Italian academics and intellectuals have found it necessary to move abroad. The authors look back on the Italian system that educated them and wonder how the country will be able to break out of the vicious cycle of Vichian decline. We hope that our analysis will represent a small step in that direction.

### **General features of the Italian university system**

The structure of higher education in Italy may be compared to that in France and other European countries of equivalent size. There is a relatively large number of universities, distributed throughout the country, although they are particularly heavily concentrated in the central and northern regions whose boundaries once enclosed the independent states of Tuscany, Emilia, Milan, Turin and Venice. In addition, there are a handful of specialised institutions modelled on the Napoleonic *ecole normal* (the Scuola Normale di Pisa being perhaps the best example), and an increasing number of privately owned universities, some of which are specialised in e-learning (the so-called *università telematiche*). According to the latest report of the Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario (National Committee for Assessment of the University System, CNVSU, 2009), in 2008 there were over 90 universities in Italy, which together enrolled 1.8 million students and employed 62,000 teaching staff.

In Italy, the number of university students and graduates is not large relative to the population as a whole (CNVSU, 2009). Moreover, 40 per cent of the enrolled students fail to complete their courses within the prescribed time (and are therefore known as *fuori corso*), thus reducing the efficiency of the higher education system as a whole. The system is also characterised by limited social mobility. For example, about 40 per cent of students obtaining a degree in Architecture, Pharmacology and Medicine come from families in which at least one parent has the same degree (Ainis, 2009). This is because in Italy the academic world has continued to reflect and to perpetuate a form of social conservatism. As described in a popular book by Stella and Rizzo (2008), many professors belong to families that have long-standing associations with academia; in extreme, though not especially rare, cases, entire faculties appear to be dominated by the same family (Ainis, 2009; Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009). A personal anecdote will help to illustrate this point. In the early 1980s, only two out of 40+ academics belonging to the Institute of Botany in Bologna were from lower middle-class families without academic traditions. To this day, the situation has not significantly changed, since most of the academics belonging to the

institute are still active and the few who have succeeded retired professors are often relatives of other academics. The same story is repeated in other universities up and down the country (Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009).

### **Reform law no. 382/80**

A number of problems started to manifest themselves in the Italian university system during the 1970s, partly due to the opening of access to universities to those beyond the elites, a change which resulted in a doubling of the student population. Many of the problems were subsequently exacerbated by the economic crisis of 1972, which resulted in reduced government funding for the universities. To enable the great load of research and teaching tasks to be shouldered, an army of new graduates (*laureati*) was employed on short-term and poorly paid contracts (known as *precari*). Together with their sheer numbers, their social influence progressively increased during the 1970s. This situation was then consolidated thanks to the introduction of law no. 382 in 1980 whereby many *precari* were assigned to one of the two new academic grades introduced by the reform, *ricercatori* and *professori associati* (approximately corresponding to assistant and associate professors in the US system, or to junior and senior lecturers in the UK system). Although in theory appointment to these relatively well-paid positions required an evaluation of the candidate's suitability (*idoneità*) based on his or her curriculum vitae, in practice these positions became open to all *precari* who had been employed before 1979. Thus, the reform allowed, *ope legis*, the appointment to university positions of over 16,000 individuals whose teaching and research credentials had not been properly evaluated. Conversely, the same law served to open up 4,000 new posts of 'free researchers' (junior positions with a salary significantly lower than that provided to confirmed *ricercatori*) to graduates who had been left out of the university system. One of the present authors was able to obtain a position of this kind after a highly competitive local *concorso* in 1983, thereby becoming a member of a novel category of Italian academics selected predominantly on the basis of scientific merit, as in other Western countries. Thanks to the reform's provisions for the institution of large departments along with institution of the doctoral degree, these young 'free researchers', together with some fine scholars of previous generations, gave a strong positive stimulus to Italian research, enhancing its scientific quality throughout the 1980s and beyond. Fresh enthusiasm started to permeate research departments and top-class students were attracted to research projects funded by government agencies and charities like Telethon. The level of funding remained low compared to the UK and other countries and it was generally assigned in a non-selective fashion. In spite of this, it was still possible to achieve high levels of research performance, thanks also to the fact that PhD

scholarships and support personnel were provided by the universities via local funding schemes.

### **The *concorso* system following introduction of law no. 382/80**

Law no. 382/80 served primarily to consolidate a crucial change in the rules governing recruitment to new university posts. In contrast to the 'free researchers', who were recruited locally, professors (*associati* and *ordinari*) were selected via a public competition (*concorso*) conducted nationally every two or three years.<sup>1</sup> For every discipline, a committee of seven to nine members was selected from a pool of professors who were elected nationally among their peers, following the system previously introduced in 1979 by law no. 31 (which also established the Comitato Universitario Nazionale (National University Committee, CUN),<sup>2</sup> an elective body that would subsequently play a consultative role in decisions regarding the university system). The committees would then examine all suitable candidates by using criteria agreed upon by their members at their complete discretion regardless of internationally established parameters such as impact factors. No mechanism for subsequent evaluation was set in place. Strangely enough, the committees were not required to interview applicants for full professorships, whose selection was based on paper documents only, while the teaching capabilities of associate professors were examined by means of a gruelling lecture on a subject chosen publicly the day before.

The system of election was exposed to the pressures exerted by academic cliques, called *scuole* or 'schools' (Mattei and Monateri, 1993), which could direct large numbers of votes to selected candidates. Although scandals surrounding various *concorsi* have been reported in the press (see for example Ainis, 2009; Stella and Rizzo, 2008), one especially thorough analysis unveiled the details of how the *concorsi* were systematically manipulated to promote desired candidates, independently of their scientific merit. Roberto Bisson, a well known associate professor from Padua, produced a detailed report in which he analysed the 1992 *concorso* for 39 posts of full professor in biochemistry, and several previous *concorsi* in the same field. Being one of the largest in terms of the number of positions and the universities involved, the 1992 *concorso* can be considered to be representative of how academic promotions have taken place in Italy since the introduction of law no. 382/80 (for further examples, see Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009).

### **The example of the 1992 *concorso* for biochemistry professors**

Historically, the field of biochemistry in Italy has been dominated by a handful of powerful *scuole* based in Rome, Naples, Bologna, Milan and

Genova, which have extended their influence to practically all faculties and universities throughout the peninsula. For instance, the Bologna school controlled the biochemistry departments at the universities of Bologna, Modena, Parma, Ancona, Urbino, Pisa, Sassari, Catania and Roma Cattolica, accounting for over one-tenth of all the candidates for any given *concorso* in the field of biochemistry. The Bologna school was then able to secure enough eligible candidates to ensure the presence of at least one committee member per round of *concorsi*. Another influential *scuola* was that of Rome La Sapienza, which had a good scientific reputation. This questionable mechanism worked flawlessly: once members of the committees had been chosen by lot among those who had agreed to be elected, they would discretely meet with the representatives of the various *scuole* to pre-determine the winner of each post. This process occurred even before the applicants' CVs had been seen. Subsequently, the committees would define selection criteria so as to favour those candidates whom the national and local academic powers had agreed upon. Therefore, practically all of the 168 candidates participating in the 1992 *concorso* were appointed as full professors – the consequence of two years of committee work aimed at eliminating all the undesired candidates and promoting all the pre-selected ones (cf. Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009).

Although this unofficial (and technically illegal) way of selecting candidates was allowed to continue undisturbed for many years – partly because candidates' curriculum vitae were not made public – things finally started to change in 1994. In that year, the academic Roberto Bisson, having been turned down during the 1992 *concorso*, decided to evaluate the scientific profiles of those of his competitors who had been appointed as professors in his place. By using the new tools offered by the online databank Medline/Pubmed, which gathers together the great majority of the scientific publications in biochemistry and related biomedical fields, Bisson found that several of the winning candidates had fewer and less prestigious publications than many unsuccessful candidates (including one of the present authors, who had participated in the same *concorso*). At his personal expense, Bisson went to the Ministry of Education in Rome and photocopied all the publicly available submissions to the committees overseeing the 1992 and previous *concorsi*. He then conducted a rigorous analysis of both the official documents and the documents resulting from his online searches. The results were published privately and then distributed nationwide.

The conclusions drawn from Bisson's analysis were astonishing in many respects, exposing a world of discreet and unfair practices that disregarded merit and, ultimately, broke the law. By comparing the 39 successful candidates with the best 20 among the unsuccessful ones, Bisson estimated that the average number of citations (67) for the first group was about half the average number of citations (130) for the latter. Moreover,

there were only five established group leaders among the successful candidates, a number much smaller than that among the best unsuccessful candidates. When looking at individual cases, Bisson also found that one particular candidate with an outstanding profile (752 citations and a cumulative impact factor four times as high as the average of that of the successful candidates) was deemed unsuitable to become a professor; while three of those who were appointed as professors had fewer than ten scientific citations. This was not an isolated case. In terms of a combination of internationally established parameters of scientific production, only 14 of the winners figured among the top 40 of the entire group of candidates participating in the 1992 *concorso* for the appointment of biochemistry professors. Consequently, two thirds of the best Italian biochemists in the early 1990s were denied appointment to a top academic position, thus consolidating the low international profile of biochemical research in the country.

### **The transition to the Berlinguer reform: from national to local *concorsi***

Bisson's report and other scandals affected the entire academic community in Italy in the mid 1990s. Members of the committees overseeing incriminated *concorsi* were fearful of the judicial consequences of their actions, and in some cases they were actually taken to court by resentful candidates who had been unfairly declared unsuitable. However, the political tide had already turned against the unconditional support previously given to legal action against the unfair practices and corruption that were widespread in the Italian system. As a consequence, the recruitment and promotion of academics was limited and delayed. Appointees to new professorial posts were more frequently selected according to their academic strengths than before, partly because their research outputs could be retrieved from online databases (Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009). However, the system continued to hamper fair competition, producing a form of passive resistance that effectively served to discourage worthy candidates from applying in the first place. Indeed, law no. 382/80 left open a significant loophole in the recruitment procedure in that there was no process of automatic assignment of winning candidates to the positions made available. Instead, successful candidates had to apply to the local faculties that had been granted vacant positions by the nationwide *concorsi*; these faculties then chose the applicants to fill their positions, generally after complex inter-university negotiations. However, in cases where the negotiations were unsuccessful, or where a successful outsider was not interested in a leftover place (for example, in a small and peripheral university for which powerful groups had no local candidates), a position could remain vacant indefinitely (Carlucci and Castaldo, 2009).

Consequently, the system of recruitment remained not only unfair, but also inefficient in filling the available positions.

The uncertainties and distortions in the *concorsi* conducted according to law no. 382/80 clearly required serious amendments in order to reconcile local interests with national requirements. The solution was simple: all *concorsi* had to be conducted locally, overseen by committees staffed by members of the same university, as in other Western countries. A legislative solution of this kind was duly implemented with the passage of law no. 210 in 1998.<sup>3</sup> The new rules effectively transferred a great deal of freedom to individual faculties and universities in choosing preferred candidates to fill professorial posts – candidates who were invariably of local extraction and could be made eligible by means of straightforward procedures. Such a transfer of power from national to local committees reflected a trend towards growing autonomy for Italian universities following the Berlinguer reform.

### **The Berlinguer reform**

The principal reform of the Italian university system in the 1990s is named after Luigi Berlinguer, a distinguished academic and politician who introduced various changes in public education. The major reform bill, legislative decree no. 509/99,<sup>4</sup> led to the effective autonomy of universities in matters regarding their teaching curricula and academic activities. The previous four-year *laurea* degrees were re-structured to produce three-year bachelors' degrees followed by a two-year *laurea specialistica*. This 3+2 degree system was slowly implemented alongside the progressive phasing out of the previous one, leading to a number of changes that were paradoxically both beneficial and detrimental to higher education in Italy.

Among the beneficial effects were increases in both the overall student population and the average pass rate (which rose from 31.9 per cent in 2001 to 56.9 per cent in 2005), while the percentage of *fuori corso* decreased from 55 per cent at the end of the 1990s to 40 per cent in 2008 (CNVSU, 2009). Thanks to their increased autonomy, universities were able to expand the number of their degree courses (from 3,234 in 2001 to 5,835 in 2007), not only in order to enhance their revenues and establish closer links with their surrounding communities, but also to open up new academic positions. This process inevitably contributed to a rise in the number of academics, who were selected by what were essentially uncontrolled *concorsi*. Combined with the concomitant increase in the retirement age of academics (who until 2008 could leave at the venerable age of seventy four), the local rounds of recruitment and promotion led to an increase in the number of full professors (*ordinari*) from 13,103 in 1998 to 19,623 in 2007 – a figure which then decreased slightly to 18,861 in 2009 (CNVSU, 2009). The increase in budget allocation to pay the full professors' salaries was

even larger than that of their number, rising by 183 per cent after 1998 (CNVSU, 2009). The apparently uncontrolled rises, together with continued scandals provoked by the results of various *concorsi*, led to a progressive loss of interest of policy makers in a university system that clearly worked within its own world (Tocci, 2009). The detachment became more evident with the return to government of the centre right, which in Italy has traditionally been seen as insensitive to the issues of higher education.

### **The attempts at reform and the disappointments of the new millennium**

With the return to government of the centre right in 2001, the new minister of education, Letizia Moratti, introduced a number of changes in the university system which appear to reflect principles of 'new public management', as recently discussed by Newell (2009). In contrast with her predecessors, Mrs Moratti came from a business rather than an academic background. Perhaps because of her managerial experience, Mrs Moratti inaugurated several novel approaches to evaluating the scientific and research outputs of academic institutions (defined as *prodotti*). She also developed a reform bill, law no 230/05, which was not implemented until the end of the 2006 legislature. The most interesting part of this law was the abolition of the position of *ricercatore*, which resulted in a return to the situation as it had existed before law no. 382/80 was introduced (see above). As will be discussed later, this would seem to constitute a telling instance of a *ricorso* as defined by Vico. In practice, the major consequence of the Moratti period was an accumulation of provisions and funding cuts that led to a progressive restriction in recruitment to the junior posts in most Italian universities. Despite this, universities continued to expand their teaching portfolios, and the internal promotion of academics, especially to the level of full professor. Consequently, in 2006 there were 51 per cent more full professors than in 1998 (CNVSU, 2009).

The short lived centre-left government in 2006 re-introduced a separate ministerial position for universities and research, a position that was given to the philosophy graduate, Fabio Mussi. Coming from a union background, the new minister was not particularly sympathetic to the academic world. Nevertheless, he was able to obtain additional funding for the recruitment of *ricercatori*, thus reversing the intention of the previous government, and introduced a novel evaluation agency, the Agenzia Nazionale per la Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca (National Agency for the Assessment of Universities and Research, ANVUR) which amalgamated the previously established agencies including the CNVSU. Overall, Mussi and the second Prodi government provoked considerable discontent among the staff of the increasingly sclerotic, chronically under-funded but hyper-regulated university system (Tocci, 2009). This was a



striking result for a government that was led by an eminent university professor.

### **The Gelmini reform**

With the return of the Berlusconi government in 2008, the academic world was given a clear message: the university system is old, inefficient and expensive; it needs to change. The person chosen to deliver this message and to implement change was Mariastella Gelmini, a 34 year-old lawyer with no ministerial or academic experience (Sartori, 2009: 142). Despite her inexperience, Gelmini introduced a series of controversial modifications to the education system, starting with the primary school system, modifications designed to underpin the severe spending cuts imposed by the new government (in the infamous law no. 133). The cuts provoked nationwide protests that united parents, teachers and students in all sectors of education. The minister then introduced decree law no. 180 of November 2008<sup>5</sup> which, in accordance with provisions previously introduced by Letizia Moratti, blocked the recruitment of university personnel to all but the 'virtuous' institutions (i.e. those not using most of their state funding to pay the salaries of their staff) and simplified the procedure for selecting new researchers. Decree law no. 180 also stipulated, for the first time, that 7 per cent of the funding available for universities would be distributed according to criteria of 'merit' to be established by means of an evaluation of universities' research outputs and teaching performance.

The novelties of the short decree law no. 180 were intended to prepare the ground for a comprehensive reform of the whole university system through legislation which has become known as the 'Gelmini reform'. After several announcements and numerous complex developments (described by Degli Esposti (2009) on the Gelminometer website), the bill was finally presented to the Cabinet at the end of October 2009. A government media campaign sought to highlight the 'revolutionary' aspects of the reform. The academic world, exasperated by years of institutional inactivity and progressive decadence, initially responded in cautiously positive terms (see, for example, Ricolfi, 2009). However, many of those who have analysed the bill's 170 provisions in full have drawn negative conclusions. Perhaps the most common criticism has been in reference to the excessively bureaucratic quality of a reform that could potentially produce up to 500 guidelines and 1,000 new regulations (Tocci, 2009). Many of these would add to, rather than replace, the plethora of regulations that have been accumulating in the university system over the past few decades. Other provisions are vague in terms of their detail and timing, since they are left to subsequent legislative decrees. As noted by Potestio and Rustichini (2009), the detailed nature of the reform's provisions will not serve to stop the decline of the Italian university system

but rather will enhance the potential for the most corrupt aspects of the current system to continue (Tocci, 2009). There is no doubt that the Gelmini reform aims to promote efficiency and merit – commendable objectives new to the Italian university system (Potestio and Rustichini, 2009; Tocci, 2009). However, as most experts have concluded, the crippling bureaucracy of the law will have a paralysing impact on the organisation and operation of universities for years to come (for a particularly lucid analysis of this problem, see Boeri, 2009).

Intriguingly, the impression thus emerges that the outcome of the Gelmini reform could be a complex series of alterations that will ultimately have very little impact on the Italian university system as it currently stands. Changes of this kind are considered typical in Italian politics and often labelled *gattopardesche*, or ‘leopard-like’ (Ricolfi, 2009) after the literary masterpiece, *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi da Lampedusa.<sup>6</sup> However, the underlying policy may well follow a historical cycle of changes and regressions that reinstate previous situations, of which most people have lost memory or maintain a disproportionately positive opinion. The changes introduced by the current government would therefore be emblematic of a classic *ricorso* (Vico, 1744). There are three elements of the bill that sustain this interpretation.

1. There is a clear reduction in the autonomy of universities, since all key decisions will from now on require the approval of two layers of central government, the ministry of Education and ultimately the ministry of Finance (Tocci, 2009); the reform thus re-introduces the situation existing in the 1980s, with additional control exerted by the Finance minister.
2. The search committees responsible for the appointment of associate and full professors will operate at a national level and will be formed in accordance with essentially the same system that was introduced in 1979, but subsequently abolished by the Berlinguer reform; hence, there will be a return to the centrally controlled *concorsi* – without clear provisions designed to prevent the manipulations exposed by Bisson’s report.
3. The position of *ricercatore* will be abolished, thereby producing an academic hierarchy formed by associate and full professors with permanent positions, who will rule over young academics and researchers employed on the basis of fixed-term contracts of various kinds. This measure will throw the university system back to the same iniquitous and unstable situation in which it existed thirty years ago.

If the *ricorso* that these elements reflect is followed to its logical conclusion, it would suggest that the cyclical nature of Italian higher-education policy

can be overcome only by a complete overhaul capable of diverting the policy onto a path of progression of a more nearly linear kind. This can only occur if a more meritocratic approach to higher education is adopted, an approach that places the quality of the work of academics and their institutions at the centre of the fundamental principles guiding policy towards the university system.

### **The importance of merit and its proper evaluation**

This historical overview of the reform laws that have been introduced in Italy over the last forty years prompts us to draw the alarming conclusion that there is the potential for an undesirable return to the past. Meanwhile, the Gelmini reform, recently enacted amid great controversy (Corriere della Sera, 23 December 2010) may represent yet another wasted opportunity to endow the Italian university system with a stronger research and teaching profile, both at national and international levels. Even though the word 'competition' is never used in the legislation, the need for serious evaluation of the performance of academic institutions and their staff is widely appreciated (Tocci, 2009; Checchi and Jappelli, 2009; Potestio and Rustichini, 2009). In this respect, we believe that the reform process, in which the ANVUR plays a major role, will benefit from appropriate meritocratic considerations consistent with international standards. The allocation of resources and the selection of university staff should, therefore, be inspired by principles, and regulated by provisions, designed to avoid the unfair and counterproductive practices of the *concorsi* which, as we have seen, have contributed to the decline of the Italian university system. The Gelmini reform may just offer the opportunity for this necessary and desirable break with the past. Only time will tell whether the opportunity is actually taken.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Presidential decree no. 382/80, [www.pd.infn.it/inf\\_nric/GruppiLavoro/Stato\\_Giuridico/Stato %20Giuridico%20Universitari\\_DPR382\\_1980.html](http://www.pd.infn.it/inf_nric/GruppiLavoro/Stato_Giuridico/Stato%20Giuridico%20Universitari_DPR382_1980.html) (accessed 8 January 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Law no. 31/79, [www.italgiure.giustizia.it/nir/lexs/1979/lexs\\_265265.html](http://www.italgiure.giustizia.it/nir/lexs/1979/lexs_265265.html) (accessed 8 January 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Law no. 210/98, [www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/98210l.htm](http://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/98210l.htm) (accessed 8 January 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Actually signed by the minister for research, Ortensio Zecchino, in 1999, [www.miur.it/0006Menu\\_C /0012Docume/0098Normat/2088Regola.htm](http://www.miur.it/0006Menu_C /0012Docume/0098Normat/2088Regola.htm) (accessed 8 January 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Decree law no. 180/2008 (converted into ordinary legislation by law no. 1/2009), [www.camera.it/parlam/leggi /decreti/08180d.htm](http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi /decreti/08180d.htm) (accessed 8 January 2010).

<sup>6</sup> *Il Gattopardo*, first published in 1958 by Feltrinelli, Milan.

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