Some thoughts on the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale

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I would like to share some of my thoughts on the recently implemented procedure in the Italian university system known as the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale (ASN). Following a decree from the last Berlusconi administration, in order to be able to apply for positions roughly equivalent to those of associate or full professor (associato or ordinario) at any Italian university, a person must not only have the minimum formal qualifications, but must also be judged suitable (abilitato) by a nationwide committee constituted for the academic field in question. The committee consists of five members whose profile is considered outstanding: four full professors from Italian universities and one from a foreign institution. It is worth emphasizing that the committee’s task is simply to decide whether individuals can or cannot apply for positions that have been or will be advertised. Those who receive the abilitazione are guaranteed nothing, in other words, other than the permission to apply when a position at an Italian university is advertised. Those who do not receive it are prevented from applying.

These small, centralized committees have great power, then, and a type of power (to state the obvious) that is quite openly hierarchical and paternalistic in nature. All the more pressing is the question of the criteria which the committees are supposed to apply when exercising this power. Even more surprising is the answer: solely an evaluation of the candidates’ CVs and publications. There is no interview, no lecture or presentation, no evaluation of teaching.

Those familiar with the Italian university system will immediately recognize that this procedure takes its place in a long tradition: that of the concorso, the Italian academic specialty famous (or notorious) all over the world. Until very recently, university positions, from doctoral fellowships to professorial appointments, were – at least theoretically – awarded on the sole basis of a “contest” (concorso) which consisted of oral and written examinations and, in the case of faculty positions, a review of candidates’ publications which was heavily skewed toward quantity. The system takes no account of candidates as teachers and colleagues, but evaluates them on the basis of the quantity of their publications along with their performance on an examination – one which tests their knowledge of the field with no particular emphasis on
interpretive methods or intellectual creativity. Recent changes in the process have meant that some attention is now paid to quality as well as quantity – yet the former is a notoriously subjective matter, as leading scholars in a given field regularly issue radically different judgments on one and the same work of scholarship.

The problem is exacerbated by the new process: a small nationwide committee is expected to read the entire scholarly production of all candidates (in the case of the committee for Latin literature, there were about 200 of them!) and on that basis to produce brief written evaluations, usually no more than a paragraph each. And the system continues to take no account whatsoever of candidates’ strengths as lecturers, public speakers, teachers, and colleagues. Those criteria, which are directly built into the hiring processes in most other European and North American university systems, are in the Italian system considered potential areas of corruption and are legally excluded from the process!

For my Italian colleagues, a brief word on the hiring practices as I have witnessed and experienced them in other countries may be helpful. A hiring department creates a committee consisting mostly or entirely of department faculty members. This committee reviews all applications received for an advertised position, and arrives at a list of finalists, typically ranging in number from three to five. (Procedures for this first-level screening vary, but the criteria are largely established by the hiring department itself in combination with the respective university’s policies and procedures.) This small group of finalists is invited to visit the university, which covers most or all of the costs for these visits. The finalists are formally interviewed and deliver a lecture, and may also teach a seminar; in many places there is provision for informal time with faculty and students, including a dinner with faculty members. Another key part of the process is the opinion of colleagues from other universities, in the form of reference letters which are expected to comment, to the extent possible, on the candidate’s qualities not only as scholar but also as teacher, colleague, and member of the profession.

The theory informing these practices is that the decision should lie primarily or exclusively in the hands of the department and university which seek to fill the position, and that the appointment should be made on the basis of the department’s and university’s needs as they see them: because an applicant’s scholarship fills a gap in the department’s profile or increases the visibility of a given focus, for example, or because an applicant is a particularly strong teacher. The theory informing the Italian system, by contrast, is not that a given department determines which candidate best suits its current needs, but rather that centralized committees determine which candidates are the most “qualified” -- as researchers. Thus, a professor from, let’s say, the University of Ostuni may end up playing the most important role in deciding who is going to be hired at the University of Bustarsizio, a decision that she or he will (at least in theory) make solely on the basis of the applicant’s formal qualifications and demonstrated knowledge in the field. All other factors – those which are best evaluated by
means of interviews, lectures, and classroom presentations – are shunned as opening the door to potential mechanisms of “favoritism” and “corruption.” Yet the open secret is that those very mechanisms, especially in connection with patronage networks, are active indeed in Italy, indeed more active than in some other systems which build interpersonal interactions into the hiring process.

Let me pose a deliberately simple question. Why cannot the University of Bustarsizio decide who is the person most appropriate to join its intellectual community? That question is self-evident to members of most European and North American scholarly communities, where the rigid, abstract, and (theoretically) impersonal procedures of the Italian concorso system usually provoke bemusement or puzzlement -- and not infrequently a disinclination to participate. For it is a commonly told story among my colleagues across Europe and North America that the Italian system is closed on itself, not welcoming to outsiders.

The results published by the committee appointed for my own field, Latin literature, have already received extensive commentary, and the consensus seems to be that the outcome was nothing less than disastrous. It has been pointed out, for example, how unrealistic and unfair it was to expect a single committee of five to thoroughly read and carefully judge the immense amount of publications produced by nearly 200 scholars in their field, working on a wide range of topics with an equally wide range of intellectual styles. To this extent the committee deserves both respect and pity. On the other hand, a review of the reports published by the committee reveals that many or even most of the evaluations contained in them have the nature of brief, impressionistic reviews, in many cases expressing a generic enthusiasm or bitter criticism in strikingly subjective ways and (as was only to be expected given the mass of material and range of subject and method) with not a few imprecisions and inaccuracies.

What do I mean by “strikingly subjective”? In some cases the committee’s report simply describes a candidate’s approach as “inadequate” or “not persuasive” with no further detail; whether implicitly or quite openly, many of these criticisms are voiced because the scholar’s approach is new and innovate, often apparently because the review simply does not agree with the basic assumptions of the approach. In other cases, scholars who have published work influenced by and relevant to related fields (say, Greek literature or cultural anthropology) are penalized because their work does not fall entirely within the field of Latin literature -- although it is not clear what the delimitations of that field are, or who determines them. Here I take the liberty of referring to a detail from the brief comments on one of my own publications. The Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, a text to which, like an increasing number of scholars over the past decades, I have dedicated some attention, includes what purports to be the prison diary of Perpetua as she awaited her execution. Not surprisingly, this text has been of particular interest to those working on gender in ancient literature and culture; but precisely this approach, which now belongs to the mainstream of
scholarship on the *Passio*, is summarily dismissed in the report produced by the *ASN* committee. I need say no more!

I hope it is clear that my critique is not aimed at the vibrant Italian intellectual style and the high level of scholarship it has sustained over the generations across a wide range of disciplines. My wish, as an Italian scholar who has spent most of his career outside of Italy, would be that the Italian university system finally upgrade to the hiring practices that have long been standard in other European and North American countries. With regional variations in detail, these practices are in principle designed in such a way as to take into account an applicant’s overall profile as scholar, teacher and potential colleague. To me it seems that the solution for the much-lamented Italian impasse is as simple as it is radical: to abandon the entire apparatus of the *concorso* with all its pernicious effects, as a first step in building a new hiring system which -- in what is after all a quintessentially Italian spirit -- respects the individual, human qualities of scholarly profiles.

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