Sociologie

1/2025

ISSN Online 2724-6078

edizioni altravista

Sociologie

VOL. VI, N.1 • 2025
ISSN Online 2724-6078

Foto di copertina tratta da Perreault I., Cellard A., Corriveau P., Quesnel C. (2020), *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde. Le suicide scénarisé au Québec depuis 1763*, Moelle Graphik.

Published by
Edizioni Altravista
Via Albericia 17, 27040 - Campospinoso (Pavia)
www.edizionialtravista.com

edizioni altravista

Sociologie

VOL. VI, N. 1 • 2025

Indice

The University between State and Market: what Kind of University, for what Type of Knowledge, and for Whom?

Silvia Pezzoli, Stefano Becucci

Introduction

The title of this monographic issue stems from the idea that, in recent decades, public university systems in various regions of the world have progressively oriented themselves towards market logics, revising, transforming, and at times even betraying shared and taken-for-granted conceptions of the public university (Walker 2025). This collection of articles thus presents itself as a space for reflection aimed at observing the ongoing reconfigurations of university governance, in terms of centre–periphery relations, inclusion–selection, equality–ranking and, of course, public–private dynamics. Although these transformations have unfolded differently depending on national contexts and their respective starting points, they have produced a progressive convergence around similar conceptions of quality, mission, and impact within university systems (Calhoun 2006; Council of Europe 2007; Walker 2025).

A possible entry point into the topic, therefore, lies in identifying a shared notion of the public university, a concept that is far from univocal. In a first, juridical-institutional sense, it is understood as an entity of the State, defined by public ownership, funding, and regulatory framework; nevertheless, Article 33 specifies its institutional framework by safeguarding the freedom of teaching and the organizational autonomy of universities, while Article 34 emphasizes the right to education and open access to the highest levels of instruction for all (Constitution of the Italian Republic 1948; see also Council of Europe 2007). A second, economic-functional interpretation instead conceives the public university as a producer of public goods – knowledge, education, and research – characterized by collective benefits that cannot be reduced to market logics. Hence the emphasis on the public origin of funding as a distinguishing criterion, as well as the definition of higher education as a "public good" and a "public responsibility" in UNESCO documents and in European debates on the public role of the university (UNESCO 2015, 2019; Council of Europe 2007; Walker 2025). Alongside these perspectives, a sociological approach considers the public university as an institution that contributes to the reproduction and transformation of society through the formation of elites, social mobility, and the production of knowledge in relation to the State and civil society (Bourdieu, Passeron 1964; Bourdieu 1996; Marginson 2016). Finally, a normative–value-based definition emphasizes that a university is public not only by virtue of its legal status or sources of funding, but because it is oriented towards the common good, the promotion of equity, access, and social responsibility. In this direction also lies

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 5-19
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.01

the position of UNESCO, which defines higher education as a "public good and a public responsibility," regardless of the legal nature of its providers (UNESCO 2009; Locatelli 2018; Marginson 2011).

1. *University between State and Market*

Starting from these different conceptions of the university, the contributions collected here broaden the analytical focus to the university as such, investigating how the public/private distinction today cuts across contexts, practices, and forms of academic subjectivation. The essays gathered in this volume represent, at different levels of generality and depth, a systematic analysis of the university and of what it means to conduct research and teaching within public and private institutions devoted to the production and circulation of knowledge. The opening article, by Polat S. Alpman, is devoted to a re-examination and interpretation of the thought of Michael Burawoy, a sociologist of international standing who passed away following a tragic accident in February 2025. In line with the irresolvable opposition between society and the self-regulating market brought to light by Karl Polanyi (1974), Alpman recalls that the university, much like other spheres of life and work, has been progressively subsumed within market logics, resulting in a substantial transformation of its institutional mission oriented towards the free production of knowledge.

Not that, in the past, universities – both public and private – were exempt from having to confront issues such as financial sustainability, budget accountability, and the search for funding. In this sense, the image of the "ivory tower," a kind of Hegelian "life of the spirit" that is said to have characterized the work of academic staff, as a sign of a wholly snobbish detachment from real life, may have been possible at the individual level, but it has never been the condition of the public or private governance of the university, which has had to confront, in the past as in the present, problems of financial sustainability. Rather, what has been observed since the last decades of the twentieth century is the progressive homogenization, through neoliberal economic globalization, of research and teaching according to entrepreneurial logics. Paraphrasing a saying dating back to the social movements of the 1970s, "it's capitalism, baby." Or rather, with Fernand Braudel, capitalism operates as a megamachine that, in its progressive trajectory of expansion, not only expunges forms of life incompatible with it, but is also capable of "crushing men [and women], bending them to the will and to the superior demands of the dominant societies" (Braudel 1978, 10). After all, if the capacity of capitalism consists in bringing social relations and institutions back within its own economic rationality, going so far as to incorporate even the most intimate spheres of individual life, how can we think that, under such conditions, universities are exempt from the progressive commodification of knowledge?

But let us examine in detail what, at the turn between the twentieth century and the present, have been the main developments that have shaped an entrepreneurial vision of the university. The closing decades between the 1970s and 1980s mark a shift in the political paradigm. The presidency of Ronald Reagan in the United States and the long period of Conservative government in the United Kingdom under the leadership of Margaret

Thatcher represent an ideal watershed in relation to the preceding period. Alongside the overcoming of the Fordist model of production centered on the large factory, in favor of a fragmentation of production according to a networked and globally integrated productive organization, a broad process of deinstitutionalization of social citizenship was set in motion, no longer characterized, as in the past, by the safeguarding of a series of protections (Raniolo 2012).

The respective political leaders, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, advocated a minimal conception of the State, privatized public services, and initiated a progressive dismantling of the welfare system (with regard to these latter two aspects, this applies particularly to the United Kingdom and much less to the United States, where at the federal level the country has never developed extensive forms of social protection) (Gallino 2012). The rhetorical arguments of the period framed state intervention in the economy as a disguised form of state socialism, reducing public services to a managerial form of governance centered on competition. This process was particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where it was applied both to public healthcare and to universities (Giubileo 2012). The latter, from that moment onward, were required to seek on the market the funding they needed (Guazzaloca 2015; Ravasio 2023). But let us proceed in order, retracing the key developments that oriented universities in the United Kingdom towards an entrepreneurial direction. By virtue of their history and constitution, autonomous from the influence of political power, universities accessed public funding, according to the logic of block grants, for those who applied. From 1984 onwards, the principle of value for money was introduced, according to which a correspondence must exist between the education provided and its cost; thus, students become customers who purchase on the market an immaterial good such as higher education. The top-level figures within each university are reconfigured in managerial terms: those occupying leadership positions, whether academic or administrative, are strongly encouraged to undertake financial management training; at the same time, internal decision-making processes within each university are to be centralized in top-level positions, in order to ensure greater alignment with the rapid changes of the economic and entrepreneurial world and to establish close collaboration with it (Jarratt 1985). Shortly thereafter, the system of public funding for universities also changes.

In 1986, a standardized mode of research evaluation based on the peer review system, the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), was introduced. From then on, public funding has been allocated on the basis of the results achieved according to the RAE. Alongside the change in the funding system, universities, as noted previously, were required to seek funding on their own outside public support. The most effective way to induce them in this direction consisted in drastically reducing state funding. Until the 1970s, public funding for universities in the United Kingdom could cover, in some institutions, up to 90% of current expenditures. Subsequently, from 1981 to 1984, the Thatcher government reduced public funding by annual amounts ranging from 14% to 17%, and by 2% in the subsequent years of Conservative government. During that period, the overall revenues of universities in the United Kingdom increased significantly, rising from £0.7 billion in 1976 to £2.2 billion in 1986. However, it was the internal composition of these revenues that changed significantly: whereas in 1976 public funding covered, overall, 76% of expenditures, by 1986 it had declined to 57% (Shallock 1989). Changes of considerable scope, inspired by the same market logic, also occurred in the forms of contractualization of university staff. While in 1981 full-time academic staff—whose costs were covered by universities—amounted to 34,297 individuals, six years later, in 1986, this figure decreased by 8.4%; over the same period, staff employed on the basis of external funding lines increased, rising from 9,795 in 1981 to 14,330 in 1986, representing a growth of 46.3%. Following the same trend, part-time staff also increased significantly, from 1,678 in 1981 to 3,247 individuals in 1986, an increase of 93.5% (Walford 1988). The university, in line with broader changes that occurred in the world of production with the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, also increased the proportion of precarious academic staff. Furthermore, the new institutional architecture overseeing the central governance of the university is endowed with new evaluation agencies. The University Grants Committee, a central body composed of academics and tasked with allocating public funding, which in the past operated primarily as a clearing house between government and universities, subsequently loses its nature as an independent agency, assuming the task of implementing, from a technical and procedural standpoint, the political choices of the government (Walford 1988; Chiang 2004; Jong 2012). With a legislative reform in 1992, the new agency becomes the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC), altering its internal composition: it now includes, alongside academics, representatives from the business sector; as regards funding, the system shifts from the original block grants to contract agreements, which provide for controls, such as audits, and the alignment between expected and achieved results (Chiang 2004). In 1993, an agency named the Higher Education Quality Council is established, tasked with monitoring the quality of teaching, later becoming the Quality Assurance Agency. Here too, through the use of audits and external academic staff, the quality of teaching is evaluated according to parameters and indicators determined by the designated agency (Jong 2012). Finally, the Education Reform Act of 1988 establishes that the governing bodies of universities must include "independent" members, that is, individuals not drawn from the academic world, in a number not less than half of the entire governing board, the body overseeing the executive management of universities. The reconfiguration of university governance is aimed at opening universities to the demands of external stakeholders. As expressions of the socio-economic world, external stakeholders are expected to orient universities towards the market (Shattock 2008). The presence of individuals from the worlds of business, commerce, and more generally civil society within decision-making bodies is intended, according to the new political reformers, to constitute a guarantee that higher education institutions respond effectively to the functional requirements of development and knowledge for the country.

From the 1980s onwards, in OECD countries, the English model began to serve as a reference for European university systems and beyond. The university is progressively shaped by the changes associated with New Public Management and redefined no longer as an institution oriented towards the public good, but as an organization to be governed through criteria of efficiency, performance, and accountability, within a rationality that takes the market as its implicit horizon of reference (Byun 2008). As Clarke and Newman (1997) observe, this does not represent a retreat of the State, but rather its reconfiguration: the State becomes a "manager-regulator" and governs at a distance through indicators, audits, and benchmarking, imposing homogeneous standards regardless of the specificities of institutions.

In this context, notions that are apparently neutral and universally shareable, such as transparency and accountability, find a concrete translation in units of measurement and technologies of governance that orient academic action towards what is measurable and comparable. As Jankowski and Provezis (2014) show, accountability takes the form of a "technology of self-governance": universities, departments, and individuals internalize external evaluation criteria, reorienting their practices in relation to rankings, attractiveness, and economic returns. The result is a substantial shift: transparency is no longer accountability towards the citizenry, but competitive visibility within regulated quasi-markets.

This process has not been opposed, but has often been consolidated also by reformist approaches of a progressive orientation. As Gewirtz (2002) and Brennan and Naidoo (2008) highlight, the transition from welfare to "post-welfarism" does not overcome the neoliberal paradigm, but rather stabilizes it, combining rhetorics of equity with instruments of competition, choice, and performance measurement. In this way, the State continues to be central, but as an architect of regulated markets rather than as a guarantor of rights. In the academic field, the scope of this transformation is captured with particular clarity by Wendy Brown (2015), who interprets neoliberalism as a "stealth revolution" capable of severing the link between the public university and democracy: the university is reshaped as a "firm-like" actor, in which value and legitimacy are defined by metrics of productivity, impact, and competitiveness, rather than by criteria of truth, justice, or critical function. In parallel, the paradigm of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter, Rhoades 2004) shows how the State itself reorganizes public funding in order to incentivize market-oriented behaviours, incorporating public resources into circuits of private valorization.

This synthetic reconstruction of the main changes that have taken place in the university system of the United Kingdom, and of its progressive diffusion, spreading like an oil stain across many countries, both Western and beyond, clearly highlights the role played by the State in orienting university governance in an entrepreneurial direction; an aspect that lies at the core of Alpman's essay, both with regard to its theoretical formulations and, in greater detail, to the analysis of case studies concerning countries located on different continents, geographically distant, and yet all reproducing the neoliberal model of the university. Similar considerations are present in the essay by Paolo Do, which specifically examines the relationship between public and private universities in certain countries of Southeast Asia. More precisely, the essay highlights how the conventional distinction between public and private universities tends, in that region of the world, to be inadequate for interpreting the processes of change affecting universities. Indeed, branches of Australian universities operating in Singapore function according to distinctly entrepreneurial logics, despite formally belonging to parent institutions classified as public universities. In this sense, it is not the formal distinction between public and private

universities that, in itself, makes the difference, but rather the concrete form of management, oriented either towards the public mission of the university or, alternatively, towards entrepreneurial logics that place greater or lesser economic returns at the forefront of internal decision-making.
In this regard, certain European examples, such as the Netherlands and England, help to clarify how, in practice, the distinction between public and private universities can be misleading. In the Netherlands, as a result of political choices dating back several decades, higher education is composed almost entirely of public universities, whereas in England universities have historically been configured largely as private associations. The Netherlands, however, was the first country in continental Europe to introduce, from the early 1990s onwards, governance reforms analogous to those of English universities (Capano 2011; Enders *et al*. 2013; Regini 2015). These internal reforms have been so far-reaching that, when a university faces the need to reduce academic staff costs, it may operate according to the principle of "restructuring," which, for example, entails that a lecturer recently promoted to associate professor may be downgraded to their previous position as a researcher, with a corresponding reduction in salary. Similarly, English universities, whose academic staff are employed under a private law contractual regime, may easily dismiss staff when the university, as is currently occurring in some cases due to Brexit and the consequent decline in enrolments from European Union countries, decides to eliminate certain degree programmes.
Furthermore, from both essays – those by Alpman and by Do – an apparent paradox emerges: at the very moment when universities are increasingly assigned a strategic role in socio-economic development processes at the national level – this applies in particular to advanced countries and to those in the process of development that orient production towards immaterial goods or goods with high added value – the more they are induced, through neoliberal state regulation, to rely on the market and on private funding, as if this were the optimal path to achieve the strategic objectives attributed to university institutions. In reality, private funders are primarily attracted to applied research, that is, to a type of research that must yield commercial results in a short time, while they show little interest in promoting basic research programmes that necessarily require many years before producing any tangible outcome (Mazzucato 2020).
The essays that follow – by Agnese Desideri and Sandro Landucci on the Italian university system, and by Federica Floridi, Federica Micale, and Silvia Cataldi on the evaluation criteria of degree programmes in Italy – constitute a critical assessment of the national university system. The former reconstructs the key stages that led, on the one hand, to the overcoming of the centralist model of the university of Napoleonic origin and, on the other, to the first tentative signs, during the 1980s, of the introduction of principles and procedures inspired by university autonomy. Subsequently, however, particularly with the most recent university reform of 2010, the so-called Gelmini law, university governance has been oriented towards market criteria. The reader, in comparison with what has been outlined regarding the changes in the university system in Great Britain, will be able to note the significant analogies between what occurred across the Channel between the 1980s and 1990s and what later took place with the 2010 reform in Italy.

All this, in any case, taking into account a fairly clear caveat from our point of view: whether it be New Public Management, as recalled by the authors of the essay on the evaluation of degree programmes, or audit culture, these new instruments of evaluation, with the introduction of new watchwords such as excellence, competitiveness, accountability, strategic plan, stakeholder, and research outputs, are nothing other than elaborate systems of concealment aimed at orienting the university in an entrepreneurial direction, presenting as neutral procedural evaluations a precise – and not even particularly hidden – political project of the commodification of knowledge.

The review of the essays collected in the monographic issue concludes respectively with the contributions of Christelle Manifet and of Andrea Lombardinilo and Paolo Brescia. The former examines the French university system, focusing on the criteria governing students' access to higher education. Although situated within a dual national system, characterized by a structure divided between "elite" universities and those of lower rank, the author highlights how the policy of open access, a traditional value reference point since the reforms of the 1960s, is today subject to revision and adjustment in response to the need, also in France, to introduce selective criteria that privilege excellence and the international reputation of universities. The latter, Lombardinilo and Brescia, direct their attention to the analysis of the European research funding programme "Creative Europe," emphasizing its potential to constitute a shared space of research and the contribution that this programme can make, with Jürgen Habermas, to the construction within the European Union of a public sphere centered on the principles of democracy and solidarity.

2. *A Tailored University?*

The selection of articles suggests that higher education systems are engaged in processes of revision according to the logics outlined above. In "Education at a Glance 2024" by the OECD, total expenditure on education (all levels) is reported to average 5.1% of GDP in 2020; in tertiary education, institutions are "mainly publicly funded, although there are substantial and growing levels of private funding" (OECD 2025). A synthetic OECD indicator on "spending on tertiary education" notes that the private share (student fees, enterprises, foundations) is "increasingly significant" and represents a way of supporting costs alongside public funding (OECD data, "Spending on tertiary education")[1].

[1] Available at www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/spending-on-tertiary-education.html, accessed 1 April 2026.

Figure 1. *Source of university funding. Source: OECD*

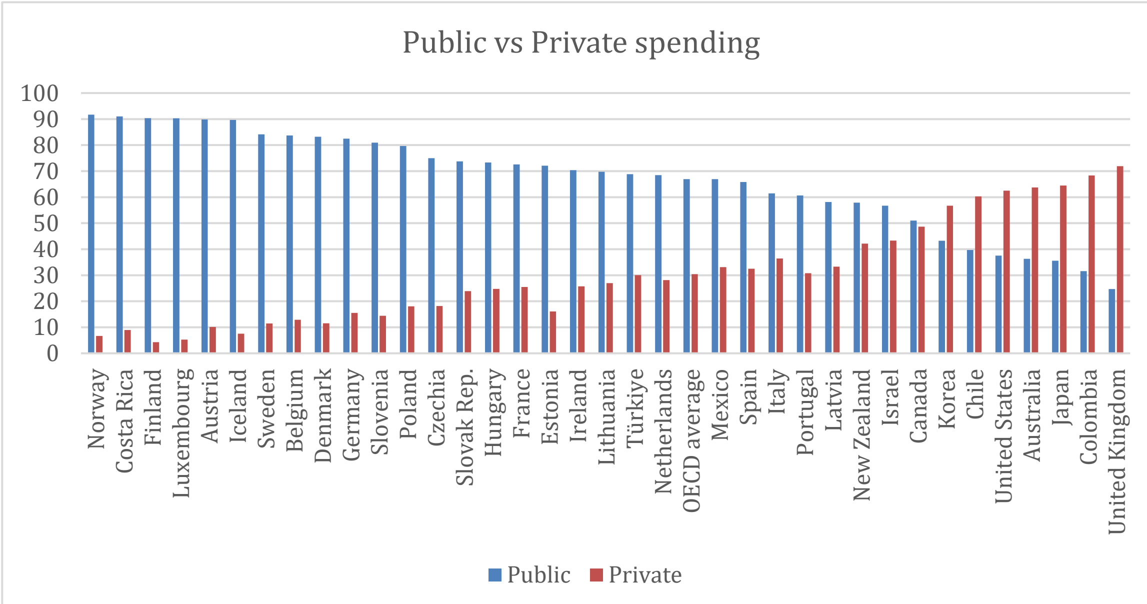
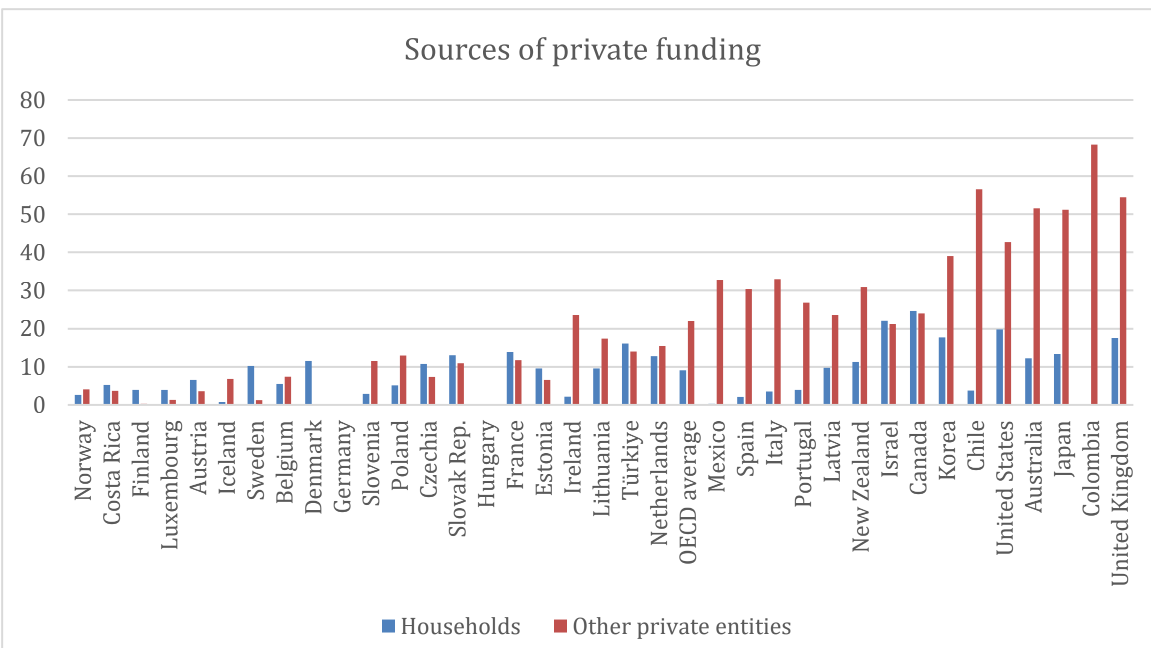


Figure 2. *Sources of private funding, distinguished between households and other private funding sources. Source: OECD*



The two figures, derived from OECD data on spending on tertiary education, illustrate the distribution of education funding between the public and private sectors across different OECD member countries. The data show that countries such as Norway and Finland rely almost exclusively on public resources, exceeding 90%. By contrast, countries such as the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom display a predominance of contributions from households and other private entities. The statistics make it possible to compare government expenditure with individual or other private investment across different national systems. In Italy, the National University Council reports that the performance-based share of the Ordinary Funding Fund – that is, the portion of funding not distributed on the basis of historical criteria, but allocated to universities according to performance indicators relating to research, teaching, and the ability to attract resources – reached €2.5 billion in 2025 (€100 million more than in 2024), accounting for 30% of the total FFO net of student-related measures and other earmarked items (Consiglio Universitario Nazionale 2025).

The document is consistent with the principles of New Public Management and places at its core the "standard cost per enrolled student," intended to reach up to 70% of the FFO, thereby confirming the idea of funding universities on the basis of measurable and comparable outputs, according to criteria of efficiency and productivity typical of corporate management. Similarly, the scale of the performance-based component (30% of the FFO), linked primarily to research evaluation, configures a system of incentives and internal competition among universities, in which resources are allocated on the basis of measured performance rather than according to needs or public missions.

These instruments – standard cost, performance-based funding, and safeguard clauses that modulate the "growth" of universities – are precisely the tools through which New Public Management constructs a "quasi-market" (Le Grand, Bartlett 1993) within the public sector: universities are formally autonomous, yet strongly steered by indicators, targets, and mechanisms of financial and reputational accountability. In this sense, the CUN opinion clearly shows how, in the Italian case, state regulation does not retreat but rather transforms into a form of remote, "at a distance" regulation (Osborne, Gaebler 1992), governing universities through numbers, rankings, and controlled competition rather than through direct political planning, in accordance with the logic of New Public Management.

This framework both fuels and complicates the pressure exerted by international rankings, which constitute one of the most visible devices through which global competition among universities is constructed and governed. Far from being mere classificatory tools, they configure a veritable regime of permanent measurement that translates complex dimensions such as research quality, academic reputation, internationalization, and even graduate employment outcomes into numbers, indicators, and comparable scores. In this sense, rankings function as cognitive infrastructures of New Public Management: they render the university "calculable," comparable, and thus governable according to market logics, introducing a shared language of performance that cuts across highly diverse national systems.

The power of these devices, in terms of differentiation and discrimination, lies not only in the numbers themselves, but in the fact that they define a global standard against which universities are called upon to position themselves, reinforcing the idea of isomorphism (Becucci *et al*. 2025). Rankings do not merely describe the university world: they perform it. Once governments, national evaluation agencies, the media, and students adopt them as reference points, ranking metrics become policy constraints and objectives; at the symbolic level, the student becomes a customer who expects the university to provide the appropriate resources to successfully enter the labour market. Many countries have introduced performance-based funding mechanisms directly inspired by these indicators, rewarding scientific productivity measured through publications and citations, the attraction of international students, the capacity to establish partnerships with firms, and the improvement of graduate employment outcomes. At the same time, universities develop branding and internationalization strategies designed in relation to their positioning in rankings: joint degrees and selective alliances, the recruitment of "star academics," aggressive publication policies in specific outlets, and targeted reputation campaigns.

From this perspective, rankings operate fully within the paradigm of New Public Management. Rather than governing university systems through direct political planning, standardized indicators are defined, data are collected on a large scale, rankings are constructed that produce visibility and comparison, and actors – universities, departments, individual academics – are left to adjust their behaviour in order to climb hierarchical positions. It is a form of regulation "at a distance": authority does not intervene by prescribing what is to be done, but establishes the framework of measurement within which all actors are incentivized to compete.

3. *Between Public University and Public Sociology*

The following table provides an interpretative matrix of the transformations currently taking place in university governance, focusing, for each dimension, on the dominant configuration, the critical effects, and the possible rearticulations inspired by an idea of a civic-collegial university.

Table 1. *Transformations of university governance: dominant devices, critical effects, and possible rearticulations*

Dimension	Dominant Configuration	Main Critical Effect	Possible Rearticulations
Governance	Strengthening of boards, management, and external actors; formal autonomy combined with control at a distance	Weakening of internal representation and marginalization of less powerful publics	Greater plurality in governing bodies; non-symbolic involvement of students, local communities, and vulnerable groups
Decision-making	Verticalization of strategic choices and reduction of collegial deliberation	Reduction of substantive transparency and concentration of power	More open deliberative procedures; accountability towards academic communities and relevant publics

Dimension	Dominant Configuration	Main Critical Effect	Possible Rearticulations
Evaluation	Centrality of standardized indicators, benchmarks, audits, and rankings	Reduction of quality to measurable performance; incentive to competitive isomorphism	Plural metrics including equity, territorial impact, participation, and long-term research quality
Educational and research strategies	Selectivity of provision, emphasis on economic sustainability and more attractive sectors	Risk of course closures and marginalization of less profitable but socially relevant fields	Protection of disciplinary pluralism; support for basic research and territorially strategic programmes
Third mission	Predominance of economic valorization and technology transfer	Reduction of public impact to brand reputation or market partnerships	Reframing in terms of social impact, citizen science, co-production of knowledge, and public engagement

In the final column, we have indicated several proposals that move in the direction of restoring a strong connection between the public university and the student community, the academic staff, and the technical-administrative personnel. The aim pursued within this number of *Sociologie* is to grasp the transformation of university institutions through a sociological perspective, but also to observe it through the concept of Public Sociology, which not only provides privileged tools for interpreting changes in university infrastructures – the forms of governance, evaluation mechanisms, internal hierarchies, and relationships with the State and the market – but does so by supporting its public dimension, that is, by taking as constitutive the relationship with differentiated publics, the translation between specialized languages and social worlds, and, above all, attention to conflicts and asymmetries of power (Burawoy 2007, 2009, 2020, 2021; Hossfeld, Brooke Kelly, Hossfeld 2021).

Within this perspective, public sociology can operate in three ways. As support, insofar as it provides conceptual and methodological tools to describe ongoing processes with precision: from the shift towards entrepreneurial governance to new regimes of access, from the transnational commodification of education to transformations of the third mission. As a framework, insofar as it re-situates these processes within a broader horizon of democracy, social justice, and responsibility towards non-academic publics: what appears technical – an indicator, a platform, a ranking, an admissions algorithm – is brought back to its nature as a device that redistributes power and voice among social groups (Power 1997; Shore, Wright 2000; Bruno, Didier 2013). Finally, as a critical stimulus, insofar as public sociology does not merely diagnose, but calls on the university to confront uncomfortable questions: who truly benefits from reforms? who remains excluded? which publics are listened to, and which, instead, are translated into mere administrative categories? (Gans 1988, 2009, 2016; Garavito 2014).

Following Burawoy's approach, the point is not simply to invoke a generic "civil society," but to recognize that publics are plural, conflictual, unequal, and traversed by different capacities for influence. Transposing this perspective from public sociology to the role of the university, it can be argued that a public university is not such merely by virtue of the funding mechanisms that characterize it, but because it is itself capable of holding together three interrelated functions. An institutional function, which guarantees theoretical and empirical rigor, scientific quality, and the autonomy of validation criteria proper to disciplinary communities. A policy function, which contributes, through data, analysis, and proposals, to the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, without being reduced to a mere executor of external mandates. And a public function in the strict sense, which participates continuously in public life by creating spaces for informed discussion on controversial issues and by recognizing the plurality of publics that may address it.

As editors, we therefore believe that the contributions collected in this issue show how public sociology offers the university not only a critical vocabulary, but also a project-oriented possibility. It helps to demonstrate that the future of the public university will not depend exclusively on the abstract alternative between State and market, but rather on the capacity to concretely redefine the relationships between governance and publics, between evaluation and justice, and between autonomy and responsibility. The public university cannot be reduced to a juridical-administrative or economic-organizational object, but requires the toolkit of public sociology to interrogate the ongoing transformations in governance, evaluation, and funding, and to assess the capacity of academic institutions to hold together scientific autonomy, responsibility towards the common good, and dialogue with plural and unequal publics – a capacity that is currently under pressure, but not yet definitively compromised.

If this perspective is adopted, the stakes immediately become more concrete and involve at least three interrelated dimensions of university life: governance, evaluation, and the institutional mission.

First, at the level of governance, the possibility remains open to counter the reduction of collegiality to a mere ritual and to build more substantive forms of participation. This does not imply denying the need for effective decision-making, but rather removing the category of efficiency from an exclusively managerial definition. More concretely, it entails interrogating the composition of governing bodies, the internal distribution of power, the role of external actors, and the possibility of including, in a non-symbolic way, students, territories, vulnerable groups, and publics that are currently marginalized in decision-making processes that matter.

Second, at the level of evaluation, what is at stake is not the abolition of all forms of accountability, but the critique of its metric monopoly. A public university cannot refuse to render account; it can, however, challenge the idea that quality coincides exclusively with what rankings, citations, audits, and performance indicators are able to capture. Hence the need to experiment with more plural metrics, capable of registering not only scientific impact in the strict sense, but also contributions to the reduction of inequalities, territorial responsibility, the capacity to create spaces for democratic learning, and the production of knowledge over the long term.

Third, at the level of the institutional mission, it is possible to move the third mission beyond the alternative between residuality and entrepreneurialization. If interpreted in terms of social impact, participation, and co-production, it can become one of the arenas

in which the university recomposes the link between research, teaching, and citizenship. In this direction, sociology – especially in its public orientation – can play a leading role, both through its capacity to interpret asymmetries of access and power, and through its ability to construct languages that are translatable across different worlds.
At a time in which the university tends increasingly to be measured by its capacity to position itself within educational markets and international rankings, the task of sociologists is to recall that another question exists, no less decisive: which university, for which knowledge, and for whom (Burawoy 2007)? The pages that follow show that this question does not belong to the repertoire of an external critique, but constitutes the very core of any serious reflection on the public university as an institution removed from mere market rationality. If this issue succeeds in reopening this question in terms of a scientifically grounded and publicly relevant discussion, it will already have contributed to freeing the fate of the university from the false self-evidence of metrics alone and of purely competitive imperatives.

References

Becucci S., Desideri A, Landucci S., Pezzoli S. (2025), *L'università su misura*, FUP, Florence.

Bourdieu P. (1996), *The State Nobility*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Bourdieu P., Passeron J.-C. (1964), *Les héritiers. Les étudiants et la culture*, Minuit, Paris.

Braudel F. (1978), *Introduzione all'edizione italiana*, in Wallerstein I., *Il sistema mondiale dell'economia mo*derna, vol. 1, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Brennan J., Naidoo R. (2008), *Higher Education and the Achievement (and/or Prevention) of Equity and Social Justice*, in "Higher Education", 56, 3: 287–302. DOI:10.1007/s10734-008-9127-3.

Brown W. (2015), *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, New York.

Bruno I., Didier E. (2013), *Benchmarking: L'État sous Pression Statistique*, La Découverte, Paris.

Burawoy M. (2007), *Per una sociologia pubblica*, in "Sociologica. Italian journal of sociology on line", 1. DOI: 10.2383/24188.

Burawoy M. (2009), *The Public Sociology Wars*, in Jeffries V. (ed.), *Handbook of Public Sociology*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham: 311–330.

Burawoy M. (2020), *Going Public with Polanyi in the Era of Trump*, in Hossfeld L., Brooke Kelly E., Hossfeld C. (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Public Sociology*, Routledge, London.

Burawoy M. (2021), *Public Sociology: Between Utopia and Anti-utopia*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Byun K. (2008), *New Public Management in Higher Education*, in "International Public Management Review", 9, 2: 190–205. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03026499.

Calhoun G. (2006), *The University and the Public Good*, in "Thesis Eleven", 84, 1: 7-43. DOI: 10.1177/0725513606060516.

Capano G. (2011), *Government Continues to Do its Job: A Comparative Study of Governance Shifts in the Higher Education Sector*, in “Public Administration”, 89, 4: 1622–1642. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-9299.2011.01936.x

Chiang L. (2004), *The Relationship between University Autonomy and Funding in England and Taiwan*, in “Higher Education”, 48: 189–212. DOI: 10.1023/B:HIGH.0000034314.77435.bf.

Clarke J., Newman J. (1997), *The Managerial State: Power, Politics and Ideology in the Remaking of Social Welfare*, Sage, London.

Consiglio Universitario Nazionale (2025), *Opinion of 9 July 2025 on the Draft Decree for the Allocation of the Ordinary Funding Fund*, available at: https://www.cun.it/uploads/7880/PARERE%20CUN%20FFO%202025ultimoper%20sito.pdf?v= accessed 1 April 2026.

Council of Europe (2007), *The Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research*, Strasbourg, available at https://rm.coe.int/the-public-responsibility-for-higher-education-and-research/168075ddd0 (accessed on 1 April 2026).

Enders J., de Boer H., Weyer E. (2013), *Regulatory Autonomy and Performance*, in “Higher Education”, 65, 1: 5–23. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-012-9578-4.

Gallino L. (2012), *Il modello sociale europeo e l’unità della UE*, in “Quaderni di Sociologia”, 59: 15–26. DOI: 10.4000/qds.555.

Gans H. J. (1988), *Sociology in America: the Discipline and the Public*, in “American Sociological Review”, 54, 1: 1–16. DOI:10.2307/2095658

Gans H. J. (2009), *A Sociology for Public Sociology*, in Jeffries V. (ed.), *Handbook of public sociology*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham: 123-134. DOI: 10.5040/9798881815851.ch-7.

Gans H. J. (2016), *Public Sociology and its Publics*, in “The American Sociologist”, 47: 311–325.

Garavito C. R. (2014), *Amphibious Sociology*, in “Current Sociology”, 62, 1: 156–167. DOI: 10.1177/001139211351.

Gewirtz S. (2002), *The Managerial School*, Routledge, London.

Giubileo F. (2012), *Il Welfare to Work*, in “Quaderni di Sociologia”, 59: 139–148.

Guazzaloca G. (2015), *Storia della Gran Bretagna (1832–2014)*, Le Monnier, Firenze.

Hossfeld L., Brooke Kelly E., Hossfeld C. (eds.) (2021), *The Routledge International Handbook of Public Sociology*, Routledge, London.

Jarratt A. (1985), *Report of the Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities*, CVCP, London.

Jankowski N., Provezis S. (2014), *Neoliberal Ideologies, Governmentality and the Academy*, in “Educational Philosophy and Theory”, 46, 5: 475–487. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2012.721736.

Jong S. (2012), *Academia’s Place in European Capitalist Systems*, in Burroni L., Keune G., Meardi G. (eds.), *Economy and Society in Europe*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham: 81–99.

Le Grand J., Bartlett W. (eds.) (1993), *Quasi-markets and Social Policy*, Macmillan, London.
Locatelli R. (2018), *Education as a Public and Common Good*, UNESCO, Paris.
Marginson S. (2011), *Higher Education and the Public Good*, Routledge, London.
Marginson S. (2016), *High Participation Systems of Higher Education*, in "Journal of Higher Education", 87, 2: 243–271. DOI: 10.1080/00221546.2016.11777401.
Mazzucato M. (2020), *Lo Stato innovatore*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.
OECD (2025), *Education at a Glance 2025*, OECD Publishing, available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en.html (accessed on 1 April 2026).
Osborne D., Gaebler T. (1992), *Reinventing Government: How The Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming The Public Sector*, Addison-Wesley, New York.
Polanyi K. (1974), *La grande trasformazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
Power M. (1997), *The Audit Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Raniolo F. (2012), *L'attacco al modello sociale europeo*, in "Quaderni di Sociologia", 59: 33–54.
Ravasio A. (2023), *The Lay Preacher*, Firenze University Press, Firenze.
Regini M. (2015), *Conseguenze non previste delle riforme*, in "Stato e Mercato", 104: 159–188.
Shallock M. (1989), *Thatcherism and British Higher Education*, in "Change", 21, 5: 30–39. DOI: 10.1080/00091383.1989.9939178.
Shattock M. (2008), *The Change from Private to Public Governance*, in "Higher Education Quarterly", 62, 3: 181–203. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00392.x
Shore C., Wright S. (2000), *Coercive accountability*, in Strathern M. (ed.), *Audit cultures*, Routledge, London.
Slaughter S., Rhoades G. (2004), *Academic Capitalism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimora.
UNESCO (2005), *World Declaration on Higher Education*, UNESCO, Paris, available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141952 (accessed on 26 March 2026).
UNESCO (2009), *Communiqué on Higher Education*, UNESCO, Paris, available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ (accessed on 26 March 2026).
UNESCO (2015), *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?*, UNESCO, Paris.
UNESCO (2019), *Global Convention on Higher Education*, UNESCO, Paris, available at www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention (accessed on 25 March 2026).
Walker M. (2025), *Higher Education and the Public Good as a Repair Project*, in "Educational Philosophy and Theory", 57, 14: 1251-1267. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2025.2531939.
Walford G. (1988), *The Privatisation of British Higher Education*, in "European Journal of Education", 23, 1–2: 47–64. DOI: 10.2307/1502964.

The University in Crisis: Michael Burawoy and the Global Remaking of Higher Education

Polat S. Alpman

This article analyzes Michael Burawoy's account of the university under neoliberalism. It explains his contrast between the market university, the bureaucratic university, and the public university, and shows how higher education has been drawn into market logics, competitive funding, and performance metrics. The discussion places Burawoy's critique within wider debates on academic labor, public engagement, and the autonomy of the institution. The article refers to selected comparative examples that indicate how market and managerial pressures on universities may vary across contexts. It sets out Burawoy's analytical framework, including public sociology as a counterforce to marketization. It also assesses the prospects of a public university in an era of rankings, managerialism, and precarious academic work. By tracing the relation between the university's public mission and market driven reforms, the article contributes to theoretical debates and to an analytical understanding of how universities relate to state and market.

Introduction

Michael Burawoy passed away in 2025 and left an intellectual legacy that continues to shape how we understand labor, the state and civil society. In the final phase of his career, he turned his attention to the university. This shift was not a departure from his earlier concerns. He regarded the university as a strategic site where wider struggles over work, democracy, and the public good become visible. Transformations within higher education therefore offered him a way to trace broader changes in market society and to examine how public institutions lose their social purpose under neoliberal conditions.

For Burawoy, the university cannot withdraw into isolation. It is embedded in society and its relationship with the public has become a decisive question. He argued that universities now face intensifying external pressures and must justify their mission and value in more explicit terms. In this setting the questions of who knowledge is for and what purposes it serves have moved to the center of debates on higher education. These questions informed the conceptual tools he developed for examining the university and for understanding its changing position within civil society (Burawoy 2007).

This article revisits Burawoy's analysis of the university. It reconstructs his typology and crisis framework and examines how market and bureaucratic models have reshaped higher education. It also considers selected examples that show how these pressures interact with different national contexts. The concluding section evaluates the contemporary relevance of Burawoy's idea of the public university and reflects on the conditions under which it might still offer a meaningful orientation. The article argues that market and bureaucratic logics do not operate as separate forces. They often work through a mutually reinforcing relation that produces a fourfold crisis affecting finance, governance, identity and legitimacy. This dynamic erodes the public mission of the university and raises the question of whether a public alternative can still be

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 21-38
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.02

sustained.

1. *The University in Crisis: Knowledge for whom and for what?*

The contemporary university, in the analysis of Michael Burawoy, is an institution in profound crisis, a condition he identifies as nearly universal. This crisis is defined by the erosion of the university's historically precarious position as an entity both inside and outside society, at once a participant in its workings and a detached observer of its dynamics. The romanticized notion of the "ivory tower," a space of splendid isolation from worldly pressures, has all but vanished. Burawoy dismisses the idea of a bygone "Golden Age of the University" as a "fool's paradise that simply could not last". The central reality of the 21st-century academy is that it has no option but to engage with the wider society. The dispositive question, which animates Burawoy's entire sociology of the university, is therefore not whether to engage, but "how, and on whose terms?" (Burawoy 2011).

This analytical point of departure is organized around two orienting questions that Burawoy first formulated for examining the division of labor within sociology and later extended to the university at large. These are the questions of "knowledge for whom?" and "knowledge for what?" The first directs attention to the audience of knowledge production and to the tension between work oriented toward disciplinary peers and work addressed to wider publics. The second turns to the aims of knowledge and differentiates between knowledge fashioned for instrumental use as an efficient means to a given end and knowledge shaped for reflexive purposes that open inquiry into the values and goals guiding society and its institutions. Together, these questions sketch a terrain on which the university is pulled in divergent directions. They expose the pressure on the institution to articulate the grounds of its existence and to specify its purpose in a time marked by heightened external demands and scrutiny (Burawoy 2017).

Burawoy's engagement with the university in his later work does not signal a break from his earlier intellectual trajectory. Rather, it follows directly from the questions and commitments that shaped his scholarship from the outset. His early research, most notably in *Manufacturing Consent*, took him into factories in varied political and economic settings including Zambia, Chicago, Hungary and post-Soviet Russia, where he examined how labor was lived under capitalism and state socialism (Byles 2003). From these grounded encounters he elaborated the *Extended Case Method*, an approach that links everyday experience to wider historical and structural formations. This approach rests on the premise of a "reflexive science" that recognizes the researcher as "inherently part of the world we study" and that relies on dialogue with participants to revise and strengthen social theory (Burawoy 2009; 1998). This reflexive epistemology ultimately redirected his critical gaze toward his own institutional location. The university itself became an object of inquiry, to be subjected to the same labor-process analysis and structural critique he had long applied to the political economy of work.

For Burawoy, the university becomes a strategic vantage point from which to apprehend a broader societal transformation that he, drawing on Karl Polanyi, conceptualizes as the "third wave of marketization" (Burawoy 2017a; 2015a). Unlike earlier waves, this current phase is marked by the deep penetration of market rationality into domains once safeguarded as public goods, and it unfolds not in opposition to the state but through its active orchestration (Burawoy 2005). Just as Burawoy once traced the commodification of labor on the factory floor, he now interrogates the "commodification of knowledge and the increasingly exploitative and extractive use of intellectual and manual labor" within the academy itself (Tuğal 2025). The crisis of the university, then, is not an isolated institutional dysfunction. It crystallizes a wider crisis of civil society, shaped by the tightening convergence of market imperatives and state governance over spheres of life once presumed to be autonomous or protected.

Anatomy of the Neoliberal University: Competing Real Utopias

In Burawoy's account, the university cannot be understood as a single, unified institution that merely absorbs external pressures. It is better conceived as a site of struggle among "competing real utopias". Drawing on Erik Olin Wright, he uses this notion to name visions of the future that are not idle fantasies but are "rooted in real tendencies" already at work within the institution. Burawoy locates two dominant and thus "hegemonic" models shaping the neoliberal refashioning of the university and sets them against two alternative visions that underpin his conception of a public university. The first hegemonic model is the *Market or Entrepreneurial University*. Grounded in neoclassical economic reasoning, this model imagines the institution as a "profit center" and a "revenue generating machine" (Burawoy 2017). Its guiding principle is commodification, turning knowledge from a shared public good into a private asset with exchange value (Rose, Dustin 2009). The effects are visible in continual increases in student tuition and fees, the strategic pursuit of corporate sponsored research, the intensified patenting of intellectual property, a trend given new force in the United States by the 1980 *Bayh-Dole Act*[1], and the redirection of curricula toward vocational aims in response to student consumer demand for employable credentials. In this configuration, the university's mission becomes narrowly instrumental and oriented to whoever is willing and able to pay (Burawoy 2011).

The second hegemonic model is the *Bureaucratic* or *World-Class University*. It is driven by a regulatory rationality that elevates measurement, benchmarking and global rankings to the status of unquestionable authority (Burawoy 2017). This model reshapes academic life through increasingly elaborate systems of oversight and evaluation. Burawoy draws a parallel with Soviet style central management to capture the extent of this top-down governance, exemplified by the United Kingdom's *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE) which introduced intricate procedures for auditing and scoring faculty research through quantifiable indicators meant to capture "quality" and "impact". Promising greater efficiency, productivity and accountability, this managerial regime extends bureaucratic control deep into the everyday life of the university. The broader consequence is the homogenization of higher education across national contexts. The Bologna Process in Europe shows this dynamic by refashioning the university into a "tool rather than a motor of the knowledge economy" (Burawoy, 2011) and rewarding institutions that follow a single template of excellence, typically

[1] The *Bayh-Dole Act* (Patent and Trademark Law Amendments Act of 1980) granted universities and other research institutions the right to own and commercialize inventions derived from federally funded research, marking a major shift toward the marketization of academic knowledge (Eisenberg, Cook-Deegan 2018).

modeled on Anglo American norms, with little regard for local histories, missions or intellectual cultures (Burawoy 2017).
Against these dominant visions, Burawoy advances two alternative "real utopias" that together form his ideal of the public university. The first is a *Community of Critical Discourse*. This is an inward facing vision that imagines the university as a lively arena of conversation across disciplinary lines. Its aim is sustained reflexive inquiry that questions the basic premises of research agendas, institutional arrangements and the wider social world in which the university participates. Burawoy treats this vision as the most effective response to the "identity crisis" that marks the neoliberal university (Burawoy 2017).
The second is a *Deliberative Democracy*. This is an outward facing vision that anchors the university within civil society. It envisages ongoing and reciprocal engagement with diverse publics over the values and trajectories guiding collective life. Such engagement is not a one-way delivery of expert knowledge but a "process of mutual education" (Arribas Lozano 2018). Burawoy presents this vision as a response to the "legitimacy crisis" and as the foundation of a renewed public mission for the university (Burawoy 2017; 2010).
These competing models are not abstract ideals removed from institutional life. They point to concrete pathways with far reaching consequences for how universities are governed, how knowledge is produced and circulated, and how the institution relates to society at large.

Table 1. *Comparison of university models in Burawoy's framework (adapted from Burawoy 2017; 2011)*

Dimension	Market/Entrepreneurial University	Bureaucratic/World-Class University	Public University (Burawoy's Ideal)
Primary Logic	Commodification	Regulation	Deliberation & Critique
Core Mission	Revenue Generation & Profit	Efficiency, Productivity, Ranking	Creation of Public Good, Critical Citizenship
Funding Model	Tuition, Corporate Partnerships, Patents	State Funding Tied to Performance Metrics	Public Funding as a Public Good
Governance	Corporate, Managerial, "Spiralists"	Bureaucratic, Top-Down Auditing	Collegial, Deliberative, Faculty-led
View of Knowledge	Private Good, Intellectual Property	Quantifiable Output, Metric	Public Good, Reflexive & Critical
View of Student	Customer, Consumer	Product, Data Point	Citizen, Co-producer of Knowledge
Key Threat	Servitude to the Market	Servitude to the State/Bureaucracy	Irrelevance or Populism

A central dimension of Burawoy's analysis is the relationship between the two hegemonic models. Marketization and regulation are not opposing or mutually

exclusive forces. They often operate in a condition that Burawoy calls “antagonistic interdependence” (Burawoy 2017). They present themselves as distinct pressures yet frequently reinforce one another rather than neutralize each other.
The United Kingdom offers a clear illustration of this dynamic. The Thatcher government’s introduction of the RAE was a major act of state regulation that established an extensive system of bureaucratic auditing across universities. This regulatory regime did not protect higher education from the market. Burawoy (2011) argues that this top-down rationalization became a “vehicle for effective commodification”. By creating a standardized and quantifiable system for assessing the “performance” and, implicitly, the “profitability” of academic departments, the state supplied the tools and arguments that later advanced market-based reforms. Audit culture, through the ranking of disciplines, made it politically easier to justify cuts to fields deemed less profitable, such as the humanities and social sciences, and to replace direct public funding with systems of student fees and loans. In this way the *bureaucratic model* prepared the ground for the *market model* and showed that state regulation can open the door to deeper market encroachment rather than act as a barrier to it.

The Fourfold Crisis Cascade

The combined force of marketization and regulation does not strike the university in isolated fragments. It sets off a systemic and cascading series of crises in which each stage prepares the ground for the next. Burawoy shows across his work that what begins as a financial difficulty expands into a deep institutional and existential deterioration (Burawoy 2017).
The first stage is the *Fiscal Crisis*. It begins with the steady and often sharp withdrawal of public funding by the state (Burawoy 2011). As government support declines, universities face chronic budget shortfalls that push them to seek new sources of income and to reorder their financial priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this situation and revealed how decades of privatization had already weakened the economic foundations of higher education (Burawoy 2021).
The Fiscal Crisis is followed by a *Governance Crisis*. As the university shifts its focus from its educational mission to financial survival, authority is steadily “expropriated from faculty” and concentrated in an expanding administrative layer (Burawoy 2021). This managerial group is often recruited from the corporate sector and brings a corporate mindset that places revenue generation, brand management and cost cutting at the center of institutional priorities (Burawoy 2021a). Burawoy describes many of these leaders as “spiralists”, individuals who arrive with little understanding of academic culture, introduce high profile initiatives to advance their own careers and then spiral upward and onward, leaving the consequences of their decisions to others (Burawoy 2016). The movement from shared academic governance to hierarchical corporate management signals a deep crisis over who directs the university and toward what ends.
This development then produces an *Identity Crisis*. Once financial calculation becomes the primary “arbiter of disciplinary survival,” the university’s sense of purpose begins to dissolve (Burawoy 2021). Distinctions grounded in scholarly contribution give way to competition among departments for student enrollment and

external funding. A slow vocational drift replaces the ideal of a broad liberal education as students facing high tuition increasingly choose programs with direct employment pathways (Burawoy 2021a). The "previously taken for granted assumptions" about the meaning and worth of higher learning lose their hold, leaving faculty, students and staff uncertain about the institution they inhabit. The university's identity becomes fractured and instrumental, with little shared understanding of its aims beyond market value (Burawoy 2017).

Finally, the internal erosion produces a *Legitimacy Crisis*. As the university comes to resemble a private corporation that charges high fees for what is framed as a private benefit, the wider public grows doubtful of its social worth and its claim to collective support. The notion of the university as a public good that merits taxpayer funding begins to lose traction. With declining legitimacy, political actors find it easier to rationalize further cuts to public funding. This completes a vicious cycle that returns the institution to the very conditions that sparked the Fiscal Crisis and drives it further along the road of privatization (Burawoy 2021; 2017).

2. *The Global Laboratory: Case Studies in University Transformation*

Michael Burawoy's framework is not offered as a detached theoretical scheme. It is conceived as an analytic instrument for understanding the concrete and differentiated ways neoliberal reforms are reworking higher education across the world. Burawoy stresses that the expansion of market logic unfolds through "combined and uneven" development, interacting with existing national arrangements and producing distinct local crises rather than a single global script (Burawoy 2015). The case studies that follow draw closely on Burawoy's analyses and related scholarship to highlight the varied expressions of this global transformation.

The American Epicenter: Privatization and Managerialism at the University of California

The University of California system is Burawoy's most detailed and personally situated case, and it marks an early stage in the unraveling of public higher education in the United States (Burawoy 2011). For many years, the UC system was held up as an international example of broad and affordable access to high-quality public education. Over the past three decades, it has undergone a "secular decline in funding" (Burawoy 2021a). He documents how the state of California's contribution to UC Berkeley's budget dropped from about half to only 13 percent during this period, a retreat from public responsibility that had predictable and far-reaching consequences (Burawoy 2011).

The immediate effects of this withdrawal of public funding follow closely the pattern Burawoy describes. The university has been compelled to fill the gap through sharp increases in student fees and Burawoy notes a 30 percent rise within a single year, the reduction of service staff through layoffs and a stronger focus on attracting out of state and international students who pay considerably higher tuition (Burawoy 2011). These measures reshape the composition of the student body and weaken the university's foundational commitment to educate the residents of its own state.

It is in this setting of fiscal strain that Burawoy introduces the figure of the "spiralists", a new executive class that exemplifies the governance crisis. These managers often spiral in from sectors such as finance or government and have limited familiarity with academic life or its norms. Their orientation is directed less toward institutional stewardship and more toward personal career advancement. They design signature projects intended to raise their professional profile, often financed through borrowing, and then aim to spiral upward and onward to more prestigious positions. The institution is left to spiral down as it absorbs the consequences of initiatives created for short term visibility rather than long term academic purpose (Burawoy 2016).

Burawoy's analysis of former UC Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks provides a concrete illustration of this dynamic. He notes the reported misuse of public resources to support an unusually privileged personal lifestyle, including a security fence costing 700,000 dollars around the chancellor's residence, which came to symbolize a deep estrangement from the campus community. He also highlights the administration's tendency to conceal scandals, including cases of sexual harassment, in order to "protect the Berkeley brand" and safeguard the careers of senior managers. This managerial orientation encourages what Burawoy calls "corporatist emulation", in which costly business consultants are hired to introduce "efficiency" schemes that often produce rising expenses and administrative disorder. The failed "Campus Shared Services" initiative is a case in point. One of the most visible outcomes is what he identifies as "administrative bloat". At Berkeley the number of senior managers expanded fivefold over twenty years and grew to nearly match the number of tenure track faculty whose numbers did not increase during the same period (Burawoy 2016).

The Berkeley case also reveals possibilities for resistance, a vital dimension of Burawoy's public sociology. His sustained organizing with the Berkeley Faculty Association (BFA) shows how faculty can confront these transformations. Through nearly two hundred newsletters, public interventions and rallies he "fearlessly spoke truth to power", making visible the harms produced by defunding and managerial rule. His effort to democratize the process of selecting a new chancellor, including the public endorsement of Robert Reich as an alternative, was a concrete attempt to activate the "deliberative democracy" he advocates. It represented a struggle to reclaim forms of collective self-governance within the university and to reassert a public mission against the encroachment of privatizing logics (BFA 2025).

The British Experiment: Audit Culture as a Precursor to the Market

The United Kingdom stands as Burawoy's central example of the "regulation" or "bureaucratic" pathway of university transformation, which he pointedly names the "Soviet model". The decisive shift came with the introduction of the RAE under the Thatcher government. The RAE generated an "elaborate auditing culture" intended to render the university more accountable and more productive by measuring and ranking the research output of every department in the country. This system of top-down oversight produced a series of perverse incentives and "absurd distortions" that echoed the target driven logic of Soviet planning. Academics and administrators quickly adapted to "game the system." The emphasis on countable outputs, particularly articles in high impact journals, diminished the standing of other scholarly forms, especially books. It also encouraged practices such as publishing slightly revised versions of the same research across multiple venues to inflate publication counts. In addition, the RAE fostered a competitive scramble for "academic celebrities", who were recruited at high cost in order to raise departmental scores, with damaging repercussions for collegial culture and pay structures (Burawoy 2011).

As discussed earlier, Burawoy's central insight is that this regulatory model was never intended as a final destination and did not offer a real counterweight to marketization. It operated as a kind of Trojan horse. Audit culture produced the very measures of "performance" and "profitability" that the state would later mobilize to rationalize the introduction of market forces. Once disciplines were ranked through quantitative indicators, it became politically plausible to claim that "less profitable" fields, including philosophy and sociology, merited reduced public support (ibidem). This cleared the ground for the *Browne Report of 2010* and the policies that followed, which sharply cut direct "block grant" funding for teaching and replaced it with a regime of high tuition fees underwritten by government backed loans (Holmwood 2011). The cost of undergraduate study was effectively privatized, transferring the financial load from the state to individual students. The British case thus shows how state driven regulation and managerial oversight can prepare the terrain for a fully marketized system of higher education rather than act as a barrier to it.

The Chilean Paradigm: Neoliberalism by Design and Its Discontents

Chile offers a more radical and ideologically distilled version of the market university, functioning as a laboratory for neoliberal restructuring. In contrast to the gradual erosion of public support in the United States or the regulation-first trajectory of the United Kingdom, Chile's market system was introduced rapidly and comprehensively under the Pinochet regime in the 1980s. The reforms were far-reaching and included decentralizing the system, introducing a school voucher scheme, and aggressively expanding the private sector. As a result, private institutions now educate the large majority of students, with more than 80 percent of bachelor's degree graduates enrolled outside the public sector. The state adopted a deliberately subsidiary role and reconceived education as a consumer good to be acquired in a competitive marketplace rather than a public right or collective good (Sharma 2025; Cabalin 2012).

The consequences of this far-reaching experiment have been significant and align closely with the pathologies Burawoy associates with the market university. The system displays marked stratification and deep socioeconomic segregation, producing wide disparities in both access and quality. Chilean higher education is among the most costly in the world, placing heavy debt burdens on students and their families. The absence of effective public oversight in the early decades also allowed serious weaknesses in quality assurance and created room for corruption within for-profit institutions (González *et al.* 2023; Delisle, Bernasconi 2018; Marginson 2014).

Yet the Chilean case is just so important for illustrating the power of those social countermovements which can be generated by marketization, a pattern central to Polanyi's "double movement." The large student mobilizations in 2006 and, with greater force, in 2011 constituted a clear revolt against the commodification of education (Bellei, Villalobos 2024). Protesters directly rejected "free market fundamentalism" and insisted that education be recognized as a social right rather than a consumer good (Cabalin 2012). This surge of civic activism placed the issue at the center of national politics and pressured governments to curtail the most extreme features of the market model. The introduction of the *gratuidad* policy in 2016, which granted free tuition, was limited in reach and faced implementation challenges. Even so, it marked a notable partial reversal of the neoliberal trajectory and demonstrated the capacity of public contestation to reshape policy (Delisle, Bernasconi 2018).

Recent analysis of Chilean higher education reform debates shows that despite cycles of intense contestation, policy change has largely operated through incremental adjustments that preserved core neoliberal principles (Zamorano Figueroa 2021). This reform, however, remained limited in scope and did not fundamentally transform the overall market logic governing the system. The Chilean case therefore exemplifies how countermovements may succeed in altering policy instruments without dislodging the deeper ideological frameworks underpinning the market university.

The South African Counterpoint: A Legacy of Public Engagement

South Africa holds a pivotal place in Burawoy's global analysis. His time there, both before and after the end of apartheid, played a formative role in shaping his conception of public sociology (Webster *et al.* 2024). He presents the South African experience, especially during the anti-apartheid struggle, as a near ideal example of an engaged sociology in sharp contrast to the insular and "hyper professionalized American sociology." In South Africa, sociology did not remain enclosed within the academy. It was entangled with the political and social conflicts of the period. Many sociologists, working within a Marxist tradition, acted as "organic intellectuals" for the liberation movement and sustained active dialogue with labor unions, community groups and human rights organizations (Burawoy 2004). Witnessing "sociologists making social movements" was decisive for Burawoy as it revealed a form of sociology that was publicly significant and politically effective (Cock 2009; Burawoy 2010).

In the post-apartheid period, South Africa's higher education landscape is marked by tensions that reflect the "battleground of real utopias" that Burawoy (2010) identifies. Universities are pulled in opposing directions. One pull demands that they operate as market driven "corporate enterprises" able to compete in a global economy and supply skilled graduates for the knowledge society. This pressure directs institutions toward a neoliberal path. The other pull is grounded in a moral and political claim that universities must advance the public good, address the enduring legacies of apartheid and foster critical democratic citizenship (Reddy 2006). The friction between market driven imperatives and commitments to social justice shapes the contemporary contest over the purpose and identity of the South African university.

This comparative view of the United States, the United Kingdom, Chile and South Africa brings another dimension of Burawoy's critique into focus. It challenges the geopolitical authority of Anglo-American models of the university and of sociology itself. His call for a "public sociology" responds directly to the limits of the professionalized US model, which he "provincializes" by showing that the South African tradition of engaged scholarship offers a credible alternative (Burawoy 2004). In parallel, his critique of the "world-class" university questions a global ideal modeled on the "Great American University", an ideal circulated through rankings and regulatory frameworks such as the Bologna Process, often to the detriment of local missions and institutional diversity (Burawoy 2011). Burawoy's project is therefore not only a challenge to neoliberalism. It is also a challenge to the forms of intellectual and institutional imperialism that accompany it. He calls for a “global sociology” that does not radiate from a single center but grows from the ground through dialogue between sociologists and their publics in varied local settings across the world (Burawoy 2015a; Burawoy 2010).

3. *The Lived Consequences: Precarity, Exploitation and Academic Life in the Neoliberal Academy*

The remaking of the university through marketization and regulation is not a distant structural shift. It produces immediate and tangible effects on the daily lives and labor of those within the academy. Burawoy’s analysis, grounded in a Marxist understanding of the labor process, moves from the institutional scale to the lived conditions of work experienced by faculty, staff and students.

Drawing on the same ethnographic attention he once directed to the factory floor, Burawoy examines the university as a site of labor and analyzes the “increasingly exploitative and extractive use of intellectual and manual labor” that characterizes academic work today (Tuğal 2025). He argues that the neoliberal university now resembles the capitalist corporation not only in its systems of governance but also in its treatment of labor (Burawoy 2021a). The continuous pursuit of financial efficiency and cost cutting has driven a far-reaching reorganization of the academic workforce, reflecting the broader neoliberal restructuring of the university (Raimondi 2012; Rose, Dustin 2009).

A central effect of this reorganization is the widespread precarization of academic labor and the emergence of a sharply stratified two tier order. Burawoy (2021a) describes an entrenched split between a protected “upper caste” of tenured research-oriented faculty and a growing “lower caste of dedicated teachers” employed on contingent and insecure contracts. A substantial body of scholarship on the “academic precariat” affirms this pattern and documents a global shift toward short term employment, the growth of zero-hour contracts and the normalization of prolonged insecurity for most academic workers. Precarization is not merely a material process. It also produces significant psychological strain that erodes creative and intellectual work and fosters heightened competition and individualization within academic culture (Hernandez, da Silva Canavarro 2023; Burton, Bowman 2022).

This new labor regime is maintained through practices of outsourcing and deskilling that closely resemble those of the private sector. Universities increasingly contract out service work, including janitorial, clerical and food services, to external firms that typically offer lower pay and fewer benefits. At the same time, they engage in a kind of “insourcing” by replacing higher cost tenure track positions with low paid graduate student instructors and contingent lecturers who carry much of the undergraduate teaching load (Burawoy 2021). This produces a hyper exploited workforce and contributes to the deskilling of teaching, separating it from research and diminishing its status as a professional activity (Burawoy 2015). Burawoy, both as a faculty activist and a union member, consistently defended the rights of these marginalized academic workers and treated their struggle as integral to the broader effort to reclaim the public university.

The Transformation of Teaching, Research and the "Third Mission"

The logic of neoliberalism now reaches into the core activities of the university and reshapes the meaning of teaching, research and public service. Teaching, once understood as the heart of a liberal education, has become increasingly governed by market expectations. As tuition rises, students and their families seek a clear return on what is framed as an investment, which generates what Burawoy (2021a) describes as a "surreptitious" yet forceful movement toward vocationalism. Disciplines are judged by their supposed capacity to secure high-income employment, while the humanities and non-instrumental social sciences lose standing. Within the university's own prestige economy, teaching is routinely diminished when set against grant supported research, a hierarchy that academics internalize early in their training. Burawoy (2021) highlights the striking irony that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed teaching as the "material basis of the university's existence." Without teaching, the institution could not function, a recognition that creates an opening to "recalibrate the unequal relation between teaching and research".

Research is undergoing a comparable shift, moving from a public good toward a form of private property. This transformation accelerated in the United States after policy changes that encouraged universities to patent and commercialize publicly funded research (Burawoy 2011). These reforms overturned the long-standing assumption that knowledge produced with public funding should remain publicly accessible, creating conditions in which research becomes increasingly instrumental and oriented toward the priorities of corporate sponsors and "policy clients" who finance it rather than toward scholarly curiosity or public need. In this setting, the pursuit of knowledge is subordinated to the pursuit of income, with significant consequences for the university's capacity to sustain independent and critical inquiry.

The university's "Third Mission", its responsibility to serve society, is also being recast under neoliberal conditions (Zomer, Benneworth 2011). Traditionally linked to civic engagement, public outreach, and the cultivation of democratic citizenship, this mission is increasingly absorbed into an "entrepreneurial turn". In this reconfigured setting, "service to society" is reinterpreted as service to the economy. The third mission becomes aligned with technology transfer, patent licensing, the creation of spin-off firms, and the building of regional "technopoles" (Salomaa 2019). Although some scholars and institutions seek to recover a more genuinely public orientation by advancing ideas such as the "civic university" or even a "fourth mission", the prevailing pattern is one in which the language of civic engagement conceals a deeper incorporation into market rationality (Petrushenko *et al.*, 2023; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2019).

Perhaps the most insidious dimension of this transformation is not the external enforcement of metrics and rules. It lies in the internalization of these logics by academics themselves. As precarious employment and intensifying competition are increasingly normalized, scholars describe a form of neoliberal governmentality in which individuals are conditioned to govern themselves according to market rationality. They learn to «individualize our academic careers and place productivity, accumulation and competition at the heart of our subjectivity» (Perez, Montoya 2018, 4). This produces a striking paradox noted in studies of the academic precariat. Academics feel compelled by a «desire to be part of a university that steadily churns out a precarity that permeates our bodies and our behavior» (*ibidem*). Increasingly,

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.02

they adopt and reproduce the “rules of the game”, directing their energies toward personal advancement, optimizing metrics and cultivating individual brands. In the process, they become, often unwillingly, participants in sustaining the very system that exploits them (Burton, Bowman 2022). Such internalization of neoliberal norms renders resistance far more difficult. The struggle is not only against an external managerial class of “spiralists” but also against a competitive ethos that has taken hold within academic life itself.

Conclusion: The Viability of the Public University

Michael Burawoy’s body of work on the university offers a clear and persuasive analysis of an institution at a critical crossroads (Damodaran 2025). His analysis demonstrates how the withdrawal of public funding has enabled the rise of managerial governance, the commodification of knowledge, and the expansion of precarious academic labor, which together form a coherent framework for understanding the global crisis of higher education. By tracing his intellectual trajectory from the shop floors of Chicago and the mines of Zambia to the administrative corridors of the University of California, this article has shown that his critique of the neoliberal university is the culmination of a long-standing effort to grasp the lived experience of labor and the widening reach of market society into previously protected social spheres. The question that remains is one of possibility: faced with the forces he identifies, can the ideal of a public university be sustained, and might public sociology still provide a viable framework for defending and renewing it?

Burawoy’s image of the public university as a real utopia, a site of *critical discourse* and *deliberative democracy*, remains compelling, yet its prospects in the twenty first century appear increasingly precarious. The forces traced throughout this article weigh heavily against it. The structural power of global capital seeking new arenas for accumulation, the homogenizing pull of international rankings, the consolidation of a corporate managerial stratum and the deep internalization of competitive norms among academics together form a significant obstacle to the realization of this ideal (Eggel et al. 2023). The cases of the United States, the United Kingdom, Chile and South Africa show how difficult it is to resist and even more difficult to reverse the advance of marketization. The public university, as Burawoy envisions it, rests on a commitment to knowledge as a public good, a commitment that runs against prevailing economic and political winds. Its future appears to hinge not only on institutional resolve but also on the emergence of a wider social and political counter movement capable of challenging neoliberal hegemony.

In this setting public sociology stands as Burawoy’s principal strategy of resistance. He urges sociologists to move from interpretation to engagement, calling for the defense of civil society and the recovery of the university’s public purpose. Yet the strategy carries its own difficulties[2]. The reach of market rationality has been so extensive that many within academia now participate in the erosion of the very public mission they seek to protect. The aspiration to cultivate dialogue between the university and its publics remains powerful. Still, it is uncertain whether such

[2] For critical discussions of Burawoy’s approach, see de Lagasnerie (2011), Holmwood (2007), and Inglis (2005).

exchanges can generate the political force required to confront the structural alliance between state and market that is actively dismantling public universities.
The call for a public university and the idea that the university might serve as a safeguard for society appear unlikely to be realized without organized collective action within academic life. The conditions that shape contemporary academia mean that such organizing requires more than awareness or intent. It demands a willingness to face institutional risk and to act with courage.
Recent developments in the United States and Turkey show that the coercive pressures and structural constraints limiting the university's public mission are widening and becoming more explicit. In the United States, state interventions into academic life have intensified, particularly in line with political agendas aimed at reshaping higher education. One prominent focus has been "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) initiatives. During the Trump administration, federal research agencies, including the *National Science Foundation* (NSF), the *National Institutes of Health* (NIH), and the *Department of Energy* (DOE), initiated inquiries into DEI programs and restricted funding linked to them. These actions signaled a growing willingness to subordinate academic freedom to political priorities that do not originate in the market. The Department of Justice investigation into DEI initiatives at George Mason University, justified on claims of discrimination, further illustrates how state mechanisms can be used to curtail institutional autonomy and regulate academic practices under the banner of legal oversight.
This dynamic is not confined to interventions at the institutional level. It now extends to forms of pressure directed at individual academics. Reports of visa denials and cancellations affecting immigrant and politically dissenting scholars point to new transnational constraints on academic mobility and expression (AAU 2025). Concerns have also been raised about politically initiated inquiries into scholars working in fields where there is strong scientific consensus, including climate research. Recent developments at the University of California, Berkeley further illustrate this trend. Federal investigations into foreign funding and the transmission of student and faculty information to government authorities during antisemitism inquiries have heightened concerns about the erosion of academic autonomy and the indirect involvement of the state in academic life (Levin 2025). Political influence over university administrations represents another important dimension of this development. In recent years, universities such as Harvard, Columbia and the University of Virginia have faced external pressure in relation to controversies surrounding DEI policies and allegations of antisemitism. In several cases, such pressure preceded the resignation of senior leaders. The departure of University of Virginia (UVA) President James Ryan after federal-level political intervention stands as one such example (Bellows & Mangan 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest that academic freedom in the United States is becoming increasingly vulnerable under conditions of ideological polarization and indirect forms of state involvement in university affairs.
In Turkey, where universities have not enjoyed strong institutional autonomy and academic life has long unfolded under state oversight, intervention in the academy has become more systematic and deeply rooted in recent years. Large numbers of academics have faced investigations, with many suspended or removed from public service. These actions have sharply curtailed academic freedom and produced a

broader stagnation of scholarly life. The prosecution of researchers whose work addresses public health, migration, security and related sensitive areas, when it is perceived to conflict with state priorities, shows how scientific inquiry can be reframed as a basis for legal sanction. The treatment of *Academics for Peace* offers a further indication of this erosion[3]. After their 2016 petition opposing state violence, signatories were prosecuted, dismissed and subjected to travel bans. Their experience underscores the high personal and professional costs imposed on scholars who contest official narratives and signals the tightening constraints on critical thought within the academy.

One of the most visible examples of the erosion of university autonomy in Turkey is the case of Boğaziçi University. Rectoral appointments had traditionally followed internal elections, while the introduction of presidentially appointed rectors through executive decree has come to symbolize a broader departure from academic self-governance. The removal of academics who publicly opposed these changes, the use of unemployment and disciplinary procedures as sanctions, and the deployment of police on campus to suppress protests indicate that state intervention has extended beyond administrative authority into direct forms of coercion. During the same period, pressure on academic organizing and union activity intensified. Academic unions faced constraints, critical social scientists were singled out, and freedom of expression was significantly restricted. The Boğaziçi case illustrates how the academic sphere can be securitized and reorganized to align with the ideological priorities of political power.

Michael Burawoy was sharply attuned to these tensions. He consistently drew attention to the ways global and regional inequalities shape university regimes and academic labor, as well as the professional hierarchies and injustices that emerge from them. He also recognized the immense difficulty of building collective forms of academic resistance across borders. The enduring significance of his work may lie less in the specific remedies he proposed than in the clarity of his analytic framework (ISA 2012). In this sense, as Pleyers (2025) argues, Burawoy continues to serve as a “compass” for sociology in turbulent times, orienting scholars toward public engagement and democratic responsibility. His intellectual legacy affirms the critical, reflexive and publicly engaged role that scholarship can and must assume (Samanta 2025). Through concepts such as the market university, the bureaucratic university, the fourfold crisis cascade and the spiralist, he offered a vocabulary for understanding and contesting the transformations reshaping higher education. His scholarship and activism underscored that the university is not a protected enclave insulated from historical forces; it is a central arena in ongoing struggles over knowledge, labor and democracy.

The path toward realizing the public university as a real utopia remains steep and uncertain. Yet Burawoy’s work provides a map of this contested terrain and a compelling invitation to join the struggle. His insistence that the university must serve a public mission, accountable not to the market or the state but to a democratic civil society, stands as a necessary challenge to the quietism of our time.

[3] For more information on Academics for Peace, see barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/4 (accessed 25 Oct. 2025).

References

AAU (2025), *Association of American Universities submits comment on proposed duration of status changes*, in: www.aau.edu/key-issues/aau-submits-comment-proposed-duration-status-changes

Arribas Lozano A. (2018), *Reframing the public sociology debate: Towards collaborative and decolonial praxis*, in "Current Sociology", 66, 1: 92-109. DOI: 10.1177/0011392117740348.

Bellei C., Villalobos C. (2024), *The construction of a political actor in a post-dictatorship and neoliberal context: Persistence, success, and challenges of the Chilean student movement (1990–2020)*, in Klemenčič M. (ed.), *The Bloomsbury handbook of student politics and representation in higher education*, Bloomsbury Academic, London: 328–345.

Bellows K. H., Mangan K. (2025), *The U. of Virginia's President Was Targeted Over DEI. Now He's Resigning*, in: www.chronicle.com/article/university-of-virginia-president-reportedly-resigns-under-pressure-from-trump-administration

BFA-Berkeley Faculty Association (2025). *Michael Burawoy, RIP*, in: www.ucbfa.org/2025/02/michael-burawoy-rip/

Burawoy M. (1998), *The extended case method*, in "Sociological theory", 16, 1: 4-33.

Burawoy M. (2004), *Public sociology: South African dilemmas in a global context*, in "Society in transition", 35, 1: 11-26.

Burawoy M. (2005), *2004 American Sociological Association presidential address: for public sociology*, in "The British Journal of Sociology", 56, 2: 259-294.

Burawoy M. (2007), *Public sociology vs. the market*, in "Socio-Economic Review", 5, 2: 356–367.

Burawoy M. (2009), *The extended case method: Four countries, four decades, four great transformations*, University of California Press, Oakland, CA.

Burawoy M. (2010), *Deliberative democracy in a global context: A South African model of higher education*, Conference presentation, in *Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation*, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa, in www.cput.ac.za/images/Students/Support%20Services/Documents/he_summit_burawoy.pdf

Burawoy M. (2011), Redefining the public university: Global and national contexts. In J. Holmwood (ed.), *A manifesto for the public university*, Bloomsbury Academic, London: 27-41.

Burawoy M. (2015), *Universities in crisis: Learning from Brazil*, in Unpublished manuscript (Abbreviated version in "Margem Esquerda", 25: 43–51), in: www.burawoy.berkeley.edu/Universities/Learning%20from%20Brazil.pdf

Burawoy M. (2015a), *Facing an unequal world*, in "The Sociological Review", 63, 2: 1–18.

Burawoy M. (2016), *The neoliberal university: Ascent of the spiralists*, in "Critical Sociology", 42, 7-8: 941-942.

Burawoy M. (2017), *The Public University: A Battleground for Real Utopias*, in "Southeast Asian Social Science Review", 2, 1: 139-173.

Burawoy M. (2017a), *Social movements in the neoliberal age*, in Paret M., Runciman

C., Sinwell L. (eds.), *Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective,* Routledge, London: 21–36
Burawoy M. (2021), *Living sociology: On being in the world one studies*, in "Annual Review of Sociology", 47, 1: 17-40.
Burawoy M. (2021a), *Public sociology: Between utopia and anti-utopia*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
Burton S., Bowman B. (2022), *The academic precariat: Understanding life and labour in the neoliberal academy*, in "British Journal of Sociology of Education", 43, 4: 497–512. DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2021.1937076.
Byles J. (2003), *Tales of the Kefir Furnaceman: Michael Burawoy*, in "ASA Footnotes*"*, 31, 7: 1
Cabalin C. (2012), *Neoliberal education and student movements in Chile: Inequalities and Malaise*, in "Policy Futures in Education", 10, 2: 219-228. DOI: 10.2304/pfie.2012.10.2.219.
Cock J. (2009), *Review of the book: The extended case method*, *by M. Burawoy*, in "Global Labour Journal", 1, 2: 297–298. DOI: 10.15173/glj.v1i2.1046.
Damodaran S. (2025), *Michael Burawoy (1947–2025): A scholar committed to taking sociology to the public*, in "International Development & Early Action Section" (www.networkideas.org/news-analysis/2025/02/michael-burawoy-1947-2025-a-scholar-committed-to-taking-sociology-to-the-public/)
de Lagasnerie G. (2011), *On the cunning of academic reason: About Michael Burawoy's concept of public sociology*, in: www.geoffroydelagasnerie.com/2011/11/29/on-the-cunning-of-academic-reason-against-michael-burawoys-public-sociology/
Delisle J.D., Bernasconi, A. (2018), *Lessons from Chile's transition to free college*, in "Evidence Speaks Reports", 2, 43 (https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/delisle-and-bernasconi-report.pdf)
Eggel D., Mallard G., Galvin M. (2023), *Universities in the 21st century: A changing global landscape*, in "Global Challenges", 14 (www.globalchallenges.ch/issue/14/universities-in-the-21st-century-a-changing-global-landscape/)
Eisenberg R. S., Cook-Deegan R. (2018), *Universities: the fallen angels of Bayh-Dole?*, in "Daedalus", 147, 4: 76-89. DOI: 10.1162/DAED_a_00521.
González P., Fernández A., Rojas G., Vilugrón L. (2023), *The political economy of regulation: Chile's educational reforms since the return of democracy*, in "RISE Political Economy Paper No. PE12. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE)" (www.riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/The_Political_Economy_of_Regulation_Chile's_Educational_Reforms_since_the_Return_of_Democracy_2.pdf)
Hernandez G. L., da Silva Canavarro A. (2023), *Academic precarity and its Helvetic discontents: Autoethnographic insights into the Swiss poetics of precarity*, in "Globalisation, Societies and Education", 23, 3: 795–811. DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2021.2002126.
Holmwood J. (2007), *Sociology as public discourse and professional practice: A critique of Michael Burawoy*, in "Sociological Theory", 25, 1: 46–66.

Holmwood J. (2011), *Introduction*, in Holmwood J. (ed.), *A manifesto for the public university*, Bloomsbury Academic, London: 1-11. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2007.00296.x.

Inglis C. (2005), *Comments on Michael Burawoy's ASA presidential address*, in "The British Journal of Sociology", 56, 3: 383-386. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2005.00073.x.

ISA (2012), *Public sociology discussion*, in: www.isa-sociology.org/en/publications/isa-video-resources/global-courses/public-sociology/public-sociology-blog/michael-burawoy-469

Levin S. (2025), *UC Berkeley shares 160 names with Trump administration in 'McCarthy era' move*, in "The Guardian" (www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/12/uc-berkeley-trump-administration-antisemitism).

Marginson S. (2014), *Higher education and public good: a global study*, in Goastellec G., Picard F. (eds.), *Higher Education in Societies: A Multi Scale Perspective*, Sense Publisher, Rotterdam: 51-71. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-6209-541-6_4.

Perez M., Montoya A. (2018), *The unsustainability of the neoliberal public university: towards an ethnography of precarity in academia*, in "Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares", 73, 1: 9-24.

Petrushenko Y., Vorontsova A., Dorczak R., Vasylieva T. (2023), *The third mission of the university in the context of war and post-war recovery*, in "Problems and Perspectives in Management", 21, 2: 67-79. DOI: 10.21511/ppm.21(2).2023.07.

Pleyers G. (2025), *Michael Burawoy, a compass for sociology in our times*, in "Global Dialogue", 15, 1 (www.globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/michael-burawoy-a-compass-for-sociology-in-our-times/).

Raimondi L. (2012), *Neoliberalism and the Role of the University*, in "PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning", 21, 1: 39-50.

Reddy T. (2006), *Higher education and social transformation in South Africa since the fall of apartheid*, in "Cahiers de la Recherche sur l'Éducation et les Savoirs", 5: 121–145. DOI: 10.4000/cres.1141.

Riviezzo A., Napolitano M.R., Fusco F. (2019), *From the entrepreneurial university to the civic university: What are we talking about?*, in Caseiro N., Santos D. (eds.), *Smart specialization strategies and the role of entrepreneurial universities*, IGI Global, New York: 60–80. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7078-5.ch004.

Rose J., Dustin D. (2009), *The Neoliberal Assault on the Public University: The Case of Recreation, Park, and Leisure Research*, in "Leisure Sciences", 31, 4: 397–402. DOI: 10.1080/01490400903044922.

Salomaa M. (2019), *Third mission and regional context: assessing universities' entrepreneurial architecture in rural regions*, in "Regional Studies, Regional Science", 6, 1: 233-249. DOI: 10.1080/21681376.2019.1601594.

Samanta T. (2025), *Michael Burawoy's legacy: Why sociology must engage with the public for a more just world*, FLAME University, Maharashtra in: www.flame.edu.in/in-the-media/michael-burawoys-legacy-why-sociology-must-engage-with-the-public-for-a-more-just-world.

Sharma B. (2025), *Rethinking education governance: Insights from Chile's reform journey through a systems thinking lens*, Center for International Development, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard in: www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/voices/rethinking-education-governance-insights-chiles-reform-journey-through-systems.

Tuğal C. (2025), *Michael Burawoy's Marxism for realists*, in "Jacobin", in: www.jacobin.com/2025/03/burawoy-marxism-class-struggle-obituary.

Webster E., Mosoetsa S., Pampallis K., Williams M. (2024), *Burawoy in Africa: The Influence of Southern Africa on the Sociology of Michael Burawoy*, in "Critical Sociology", 50, 6: 981-989. DOI: 10.1177/08969205231154789.

Zamorano Figueroa F. (2021), *The continuity and discontinuity of education policy: A study of change in the Chilean debate about higher education*, Doctoral dissertation, University College London.

Zomer A., Benneworth P. (2011), *The rise of the university's third mission*, in Enders J., de Boer H., Westerheijden D. F. (eds.), *Reform of higher education in Europe*, Sense Publisher, Rotterdam: 81-101. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-6091-555-0_6.

Geografie del sapere e disuguaglianze dello spazio educativo transnazionale. Ai confini dell'Università

Paolo Do

This article proposes a transnational perspective for studying the contemporary university in its relations with the market and the nation-state. Drawing on the case studies of Singapore and Hong Kong, it analyses how the university is currently configured within global and inter-institutional networks, operating along regional and transnational corridors of education, research, and mobility. In this context, the university not only loses its anchoring in national cultural construction, but also actively contributes to the disarticulation of the link between state, citizenship, and education. The emerging model is that of an institution oriented towards managerial logics and shaped by the principle of excellence, which redefines the categories of public and private, as well as the very boundaries of citizenship. Rather than reinforcing national identities, transnational dynamics accentuate inequalities and restructure forms of social inclusion within a multiscalar educational space.

1. *Università, Stato e mercato in prospettiva transnazionale*

Il rapporto tra università e mercato, così come la relazione tra questa istituzione e lo Stato-nazione, è tradizionalmente analizzato all'interno dei confini territoriali nazionali, assumendo lo Stato-nazione come unità di riferimento per lo studio dell'istruzione universitaria. Questo approccio, tuttavia, tende a ignorare le dinamiche globali e transnazionali che oggi caratterizzano in modo crescente il panorama accademico. La prospettiva transnazionale è la chiave analitica adottata in questo articolo per indagare le interazioni tra lo Stato-nazione, la mercificazione del sapere e l'università. Quest'ultima è infatti sempre più inserita in reti inter-istituzionali e transfrontaliere che si sviluppano lungo assi regionali e globali. In tale contesto, concetti come hub, corridoi e gateway diventano strumenti utili a descrivere una logistica dell'educazione che sfida le tradizionali forme di territorialità nazionale. L'università, da questa prospettiva, non è più radicata esclusivamente in uno spazio statale, ma si riconfigura nella produzione e circolazione del sapere oltre i confini delle giurisdizioni nazionali (Do 2019).

L'analisi è situata nel contesto dell'Est Asia dove, all'inizio del nuovo millennio, alcuni Stati-nazione iniziano a pensare l'università come infrastruttura regionale. Il Regional Hub of Education (RHE), che si fonda sulla crescente mobilità regionale e transnazionale non solo degli studenti, ma anche degli accademici, dei programmi di studio e delle stesse università attraverso la creazione di campus satelliti su scala globale, ridisegna lo spazio dell'istruzione terziaria e delle sue istituzioni (Ross 2006; McBurnie, Ziguras 2010). L'università diventa una leva di competitività economica e geopolitica, funzionale alla conquista di una posizione centrale nell'economia globale ad alto valore aggiunto. In questo scenario convivono modelli organizzativi eterogenei (istituzioni private e pubbliche, in franchising, transfrontaliere, orientate alla ricerca o alla formazione professionale) e regimi temporali differenziati (sistemi semestrali, annuali, biennali, triennali) (Zhang 2009). Queste configurazioni si intrecciano in

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

formazioni originali tra il territorio nazionale e l'internazionalizzazione tracciata dai principi della liberalizzazione economica.

È nella spazialità di originali assemblaggi istituzionali, forme miste, flessibili e adattive, dove risulta difficile tracciare confini netti tra pubblico e privato che si colloca l'oggetto di studio di questo contributo. Osservata attraverso la lente del RHE, l'università lascia intravedere un orizzonte in cui le gerarchie del passato vengono ridislocate e assumono nuove forme, e in cui le precedenti divisioni fondate sulla lingua e sulla cultura nazionale, pur non scomparse, si riorganizzano secondo configurazioni inedite che questo articolo si propone di esplorare.

L'analisi si concentra su Singapore e Hong Kong, due Regional Hub of Education (RHE) comparabili per il modo in cui l'università è stata incorporata nelle strategie di sviluppo urbano, economico e geopolitico. Queste due città-Stato (o quasi) condividono la centralità dello Stato come regista, pur ricorrendo in modo estensivo a logiche di mercato. In entrambi i contesti, infatti, il RHE emerge come risultato di politiche pubbliche che pianificano l'offerta formativa, selezionano le istituzioni straniere ammesse, regolano i flussi migratori studenteschi e accademici, orientano gli investimenti pubblici nella ricerca. Il mercato è presente, ma incardinato entro una governance statale forte, che ne definisce condizioni, priorità e margini operativi. In questa cornice, l'università funziona come una piattaforma regionale capace di mediare, tradurre e canalizzare flussi di formazione e lavoro qualificato su scala sovranazionale.

2. *Metodologia della ricerca e corpus dei dati*

Questo studio è stato condotto attraverso una combinazione di tecniche qualitative. I dati, di natura sociologica, provengono da appunti sul campo, registrazioni audio e conversazioni raccolte durante un lavoro sul campo svolto tra il 2009 e il 2019.

L'osservazione partecipante è stata realizzata attraverso un periodo di soggiorno presso un'università di Hong Kong, durante i quali ho preso parte alla vita accademica della Hong Kong Shue Yan University (HKSYU).

Le interviste qualitative hanno costituito lo strumento principale di raccolta dei dati. Esse sono state condotte tra Shanghai, Hong Kong e Singapore e hanno coinvolto docenti, studenti e professionisti attivi nel settore dell'internazionalizzazione dell'higher education, inclusi organizzazioni centrali nei processi di valutazione e classificazione accademica, quali l'Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), il Center for World-Class Universities (CWCU) e la multinazionale Clarivate. A Hong Kong e a Singapore sono state realizzate interviste sia in università pubbliche collocate tra le prime posizioni nei ranking regionali, sia in istituzioni private escluse da tali classificazioni. Condotte in lingua inglese, hanno seguito un modello flessibile semi-strutturato, basato su una traccia aperta piuttosto che su un insieme standardizzato di domande.

Nel complesso, il corpus empirico comprende oltre sessanta interviste. In una prima fase della ricerca (2009–2013) sono state condotte circa cinquanta interviste in presenza; nella fase successiva le interviste sono state realizzate da remoto. Sebbene non recente, il materiale empirico raccolto mantiene una piena pertinenza analitica nel contesto attuale. Le trasformazioni dell'higher education in East Asia sono state rapide e profonde (Shin 2015), ma, dalla fine degli anni Novanta a oggi, hanno seguito una

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

traiettoria complessivamente coerente (Horta 2023). Le interviste raccolte consentono dunque di ricostruire, in una prospettiva di medio periodo, il consolidamento delle strategie di internazionalizzazione e l'emersione dei primi modelli di RHE. Il loro valore risiede nella possibilità di comprendere gli specifici assetti organizzativi, discorsivi e professionali che, nel tempo, si sono stabilizzati fino a confluire nella configurazione attuale. Nel presente contributo si presenta una selezione del materiale complessivo, coerente con gli obiettivi analitici della ricerca.

3. *Analisi della letteratura*

3.1. Stato, mercato e sviluppo economico nell'Asia post-1997

L'inizio del nuovo millennio segna, nella regione dell'Asia orientale, una profonda riconfigurazione dei rapporti tra Stato, mercato e università (Do 2010). A partire dalla crisi finanziaria asiatica del 1997, i governi di Corea del Sud, Taiwan, Hong Kong e Singapore hanno progressivamente ridefinito il ruolo dell'istruzione universitaria, trasformandola in un nodo strategico per lo sviluppo economico, l'attrazione di capitali e il posizionamento competitivo su scala globale (Marginson, Rhoades 2002, 2006; Altbach, Umakoshi 2004).

L'università diviene infrastruttura produttiva per la transizione verso un'economia della conoscenza (Lee, Gopinathan 2008). In particolare, l'espansione dell'istruzione universitaria si configura come una risposta diretta, e prevalentemente orientata a finalità macroeconomiche, alla crisi finanziaria del 1997 (Adams 2006).

L'istruzione universitaria assume il carattere di politica pubblica anticiclica, orientata all'attrazione di investimenti stranieri e allo sviluppo delle competenze necessarie per integrarsi nelle catene globali del valore. Oggi le città stato di Singapore e Hong Kong sono hub regionali che promuovono servizi educativi accanto a quelli finanziari che hanno conquistato, attraverso l'educazione universitaria, una posizione dominante nell'economia globale ad alto valore aggiunto (Sassen, 2001; Chan, Ng 2008). Questo è stato possibile dalla deregulation dei servizi educativi attraverso gli accordi GATS dell'Organizzazione Mondiale del Commercio (WTO) che, a partire dal 2000 (Fujie 2005), hanno aperto il settore dell'istruzione a logiche prettamente di mercato, promuovendo una crescente liberalizzazione di diversi segmenti dell'educazione universitaria a livello transnazionale (WTO 2007a; 2007b). Questa apertura ha coinvolto cinque categorie principali di servizi educativi, connotate da un orientamento sempre più marcatamente commerciale: 1. spin-off aziendali connessi agli atenei, che offrono corsi, stage e titoli di studio attraverso partnership pubblico-privato; 2. provider for-profit, ossia soggetti privati specializzati nella commercializzazione di servizi educativi a pagamento; 3. università virtuali, strutture interamente digitali che operano oltre i confini nazionali; 4. università tradizionali che offrono corsi online, spesso destinate a studenti internazionali; 5. progetti imprenditoriali a scopo di lucro promossi da istituzioni accademiche pubbliche o private (Ross 2006).

Il principio neoliberista di deregolamentazione e liberalizzazione economica ha ridefinito radicalmente l'istruzione terziaria trasformandola in un servizio commerciabile su scala globale (Naidoo 2007). I GATS hanno incentivato gli Stati a trattare l'educazione come settore economico piuttosto che come strumento di

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

sviluppo nazionale o culturale. Oggi l'educazione universitaria costituisce uno dei comparti più redditizi del mercato globale dei servizi, il cui volume d'affari, già prima della crisi finanziaria globale del 2008, si avvicinava a quello del settore dei servizi finanziari (Knight 2002; Marginson, van der Wende 2007). Un caso emblematico di questa trasformazione è rappresentato dall'Australia, che ha progressivamente fatto dell'istruzione terziaria una delle principali voci dell'export nazionale. Nel 2024, i servizi avanzati legati alla formazione universitaria rivolta agli studenti internazionali hanno infatti rappresentato il quarto comparto economico per valore generato, superato soltanto dall'industria del ferro, carbone e gas (Olsen 2024).
In questo contesto, l'università assume sempre più i tratti di un attore economico operante in un mercato transnazionale, mentre l'espansione dell'istruzione universitaria è guidata dai principi di mercato nonché dalla capacità di intercettare flussi di studenti-consumatori in grado di sostenere economicamente l'accesso alla formazione.

3.2. Utente, consumatore, cliente: la riscrittura economica dell'esperienza universitaria

I termini consumatore e utente vengono utilizzati da molti autori per descrivere le scelte, i comportamenti e le attitudini degli studenti alle prese con lo studio: una grammatica che ha riscritto il senso dell'apprendimento nell'università trasformandolo in qualcosa di profittevole e misurabile, attribuendogli valore economico (Readings 1996). La parola utente rimanda a un'ambigua, se non contraddittoria, dimensione del suo significato; come scrive Ippolita: "La prima dimensione è quella di 'colui che usa', ossia che non produce e che semmai consuma. Il secondo significato ha a che fare con un certo grado di passività, infatti non è previsto che l'utente interagisca con il servizio, se non entro certi limiti ben definiti. Per personalizzarlo, ma non per modificarlo. 'Usa', ma in qualche modo è il soggetto attivo della propria passività, in un ambiente costruito per contenerlo" (Ippolita 2017: 268). La categoria di consumatore, piuttosto che quella di utente, sostituiscono qualsiasi riferimento alla cultura nazionale laddove quest'ultima (con i suoi valori, simboli, pratiche, narrazioni storiche) viene messa in secondo piano rispetto a una sorta di "identità commerciale globale" definita più da ciò che si consuma che dalla propria appartenenza politica o culturale.
Al di là delle differenze nazionali e regionali e delle singolari specificità locali, è l'intimo rapporto tra l'istituzione universitaria e le forze di mercato che fonda l'attuale architettura dell'istruzione universitaria in Est Asia. Secondo Yossi Shavit la dimensione sociale dell'educazione è sostituita dalla logica della valorizzazione e la ragione economica riempie l'esperienza di frequentare un corso di laurea (Shavit *et al.* 2007). Il linguaggio performativo neoliberale trasforma così quest'istituzione nel più appropriato strumento alla socializzazione della produzione, a discapito di altre forme educative possibili.
In questa prospettiva, la commercializzazione dell'istruzione è socializzazione alla proprietà intellettuale, mentre gli elementi soggettivi del processo parlano il linguaggio della valorizzazione economica (Do 2019). Se l'università, ancora oggi, preserva la sua qualità di "istituto della traduzione" capace di trasferire differenti saperi verso un idioma nazionale, tale operazione non è più rivolta a un soggetto nazionale fondato sui diritti di cittadinanza, ma è orientata verso un soggetto culturale fondato sul diritto

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

della proprietà intellettuale (Solomon 2019). In altre parole, l'università emerge come istituto della valorizzazione economica che fa dell'educazione lo strumento di socializzazione al mercato e alle sue convenzioni, dove la figura del cliente e le aspettative del consumatore trasformano l'essere studente in un'esperienza formativa che è anzitutto una relazione economica dove la riproduzione del sapere si dà attraverso le forze del mercato.

3.3. Università tra selettività e mercato: la dinamica status/clienti e la produzione di gerarchie

In questa cornice, l'università si riconfigura attraverso una dinamica duale, in cui coesistono due orientamenti distinti che modellano altrettante strategie istituzionali. È possibile definire questi orientamenti con i termini di "client-oriented" e "status-oriented" (Ballarino 2009).

Le università orientate allo status sono impegnate in attività volte ad accrescere il proprio prestigio attraverso l'esclusione sociale praticata mediante l'innalzamento dei criteri di ammissione: la selettività diventa il dispositivo per rafforzare la reputazione dell'istituzione. Quelle orientate ai clienti adottano criteri di ammissione flessibili nell'ottica di ampliare la propria base studentesca e garantire sostenibilità economica attraverso un maggior numero di iscrizioni. In questa logica l'accesso viene privilegiato rispetto alla selezione.

Questi due modelli danno vita a un processo di differenziazione del sistema universitario dove a un livello composto da istituzioni selettive e prestigiose, orientate alla competizione internazionale per lo status, ne troviamo un altro meno selettivo e dal profilo più commerciale.

In questa configurazione la cultura nazionale è sostituita dal discorso sull'"eccellenza" (Mohrman *et al.* 2008; Readings 1996) che giustifica e legittima una riallocazione differenziale delle risorse pubbliche sempre più concentrate in un ristretto numero di istituzioni per renderle competitive nel panorama accademico globale.

Un esempio emblematico di tale orientamento è offerto dalla politica universitaria cinese di fine anni Novanta. Nel 1995, il governo centrale di Pechino lanciò il Progetto 211, il cui nome richiama il XXI secolo ("21") e l'obiettivo di sviluppare almeno 100 università strategiche ("1"). Il programma ha coinvolto 106 atenei, selezionati per ricevere maggiori investimenti. A questo ha fatto seguito, nel maggio del 1998, il più selettivo Progetto 985, con il quale il governo ha individuato un numero ancora più ristretto di università dove concentrare risorse e attenzione, nella prospettiva di creare veri e propri centri di eccellenza accademica globale.

Questa è la logica sottesa al modello delle cosiddette World Class Universities (WCU), divenute elementi centrali nei processi contemporanei di massificazione selettiva dell'istruzione universitaria (Hazelkorn 2011; Mohrmana *et al.* 2008). In tale contesto, risorse economiche e finanziamenti pubblici tendono a concentrarsi progressivamente in un numero ristretto di atenei, ritenuti capaci di competere su scala globale in termini di produzione scientifica, attrattività internazionale e posizionamento nei ranking[1].

[1] Muovendo da questi presupposti è possibile spiegare la crescente importanza che hanno assunto i ranking delle università a livello nazionale e globale dove le posizioni occupate dalle università sono ordinatamente classificate, sono identificabili pubblicamente e a prima vista, legittimamente considerabili ognuna come superiore o inferiore all'altra. Pensiamo all'*Academic Ranking of World*

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

Al contrario, la grande maggioranza delle istituzioni universitarie, escluse da queste selezioni governative, si trova a operare con crescenti difficoltà nel reperire fondi pubblici necessari per sostenere le attività di ricerca e didattica (Hayhoe, Lin 2008). Questa polarizzazione interna al sistema universitario produce effetti significativi in termini di disuguaglianza tra atenei: se da un lato si affermano poli altamente finanziati, dall'altro emergono università costrette a sviluppare strategie autonome di autofinanziamento per garantire la propria sopravvivenza nel mercato dell'istruzione (Bok 2003). Queste università si sono trovate costrette a ripensare il proprio modello finanziario adottando logiche di mercato, stringendo partnership con attori privati o internazionali, o diversificando le fonti di reddito. È in questa cornice che si spiega l'aumento dei corsi autofinanziati all'interno delle università pubbliche (Cao 2005; Healy 2006), così come l'emergere di atenei che, pur mantenendo formalmente la propria natura pubblica, adottano un orientamento profit-oriented e una configurazione *corporate-like*. Da queste formulazioni istituzionali dell'università emergono forme ibride e transnazionali che mettono in crisi la tradizionale dicotomia tra settore pubblico e settore privato che si sovrappongono e si compenetrano in modi sempre più sofisticati (Francis 2001; Sassen 2001; Hardt, Negri 2009).

3.4.Dallo Stato-nazione alla regione: i RHE

La formazione di istituzioni educative ibride, collocate all'intersezione tra la geografia dello Stato-nazione e i principi della liberalizzazione economica, trova una materializzazione particolarmente evidente nel Regional Hub of Education (RHE).
Nel dibattito sociologico sull'internazionalizzazione dell'higher education, il RHE non è trattato come una semplice etichetta descrittiva, ma come una forma di governo territoriale dell'istruzione che si fonda su tre assunzioni:
a) lo Stato mantiene una posizione centrale di governo del settore, pur operando secondo logiche di mercato e di competizione globale. Autori come David Chan e Tee Ng Pak (2008), Kris Olds (2007; 2009), Jane Knight (2004) hanno mostrato come l'hub non sia l'esito spontaneo di dinamiche di mercato, poiché l'istruzione superiore

---

Universuty (*ARWU*) di Shanghai, al *Quacquarelli Symonds World University Eanking* (*QS*) piuttosto che al *Times Higher Education World University Ranking* (*THE*), solo per citare i più conosciuti. Si tratta, di gerarchie fatte per misurare e paragonare varie istituzioni in competizione tra loro (Usher, Savino 2006). Questa distinzione «antagonistica» è la base convenzionale di un confronto fra istituzioni al fine di classificarle e graduarle, e «che colpisce con più secca disapprovazione ogni inferiorità» (Veblen 1999: 30). L'educazione viene definita a partire dallo *status* che un'istituzione occupa nell'ordine gerarchico prodotto da questi ranking, mentre il suo valore è necessariamente comparativo, relativo quanto reciproco e, per questa ragione, valutato in relazione alla posizione occupata da altri (Veblen 1999). Da questo punto di vista i ranking dell'università possono essere considerati come una sorta di gestione disciplinare delle molteplicità nello spazio (Foucault 2009) dove l'eterogeneità è organizzata secondo il principio della stratificazione piuttosto plastica e flessibile, mai data una volta per tutte. Infatti le divisioni e le posizioni nel sistema educativo sono piuttosto mobili e aggiornate continuamente da nuove versioni dei ranking rilasciate annualmente per misurare i miglioramenti e i peggioramenti della performance di un'università; sono poi effettuate comparazioni e sono analizzate le tendenze storiche. Le gerarchie del sistema educativo sono trasformabili precisamente perché sono basate su risultati che possono cambiare continuamente, e questo fatto alimenta la competizione tra le istituzioni educative: l'espressione «battaglia per l'eccellenza» con cui si descrive il testa a testa per la migliore posizione ci rivela un sistema gerarchizzato ma flessibile, costituito da posizioni instabili e mutabili.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

è attraversata da regimi di accreditamento, titoli legali, infrastrutture materiali e simboliche e, soprattutto, dispositivi migratori che ne impediscono una piena autoregolazione concorrenziale. Ne consegue che il RHE si configura primariamente come strategia governativa: lo Stato definisce le condizioni di ingresso e di operatività dei provider, costruisce meccanismi di fiducia e qualità, e orienta in modo selettivo la distribuzione di risorse attraverso incentivi, investimenti mirati e politiche di reputazione. In parallelo, la regolazione dei flussi di studenti e accademici mediante visti, permessi e criteri di permanenza costituisce una leva strutturale dell'attrattività, rendendo la mobilità un oggetto di governo e non un semplice effetto collaterale dell'internazionalizzazione. Da qui l'interesse sociologico: il RHE funziona come laboratorio di ibridazione tra statalità e mercato, in cui lo Stato non arretra, ma si ristruttura come regista di concorrenza regolata, selettività e accumulazione reputazionale, producendo al contempo differenziazione istituzionale e nuove gerarchie di accesso e di valore.

b) L'università viene integrata nelle strategie di sviluppo economico (Knight 2006; Mok 2007); tale possibilità è resa credibile dal fatto che la produzione e la circolazione dei saperi non è fissata in una gerarchia immobile e che i luoghi di potere nella congiuntura economica attuale si stanno moltiplicando, distribuendosi su più scale, in forme reticolari e policentriche.

c) Infine l'inglese si afferma come lingua dominante dell'insegnamento (Pennycook 2000; Lin 2006, 2009; Martin 2005). L'utilizzo della lingua inglese funziona meno come strumento neutro di internazionalizzazione e più come meccanismo di stratificazione, capace di produrre differenziazioni durature nella popolazione tra una élite cosmopolita e multilingue, capace di muoversi tra contesti accademici e mercati del lavoro transnazionali, e segmenti di popolazione monolingui e localizzati che restano progressivamente vincolati a traiettorie di scarsa mobilità, sia geografica sia socioeconomica. Ne consegue che il RHE opera come dispositivo di inclusione selettiva: abilita mobilità e opportunità per chi possiede i requisiti linguistici e formativi, e produce non-mobilità relativa per chi ne è privo, intensificando linee di frattura interne ai singoli paesi e alla regione (Martin 2005).

Il RHE è impiegato soprattutto per analizzare le trasformazioni in atto nel Sud-Est asiatico, e Singapore è spesso considerata l'archetipo di questo modello: a partire dagli anni duemila, ha promosso una strategia intenzionale di attrazione di università straniere, studenti internazionali e centri di ricerca, trasformando la città-Stato in un polo educativo regionale (Olds, 2007; Tan 2004). Hong Kong rappresenta un caso in parte analogo, in cui le università operano come nodi che collegano il sistema educativo cinese con i circuiti accademici globali (Chan, Ng Pak 2008; Tung 1999). La Malesia, seppur con caratteristiche differenti, ha sviluppato una strategia di hub educativo fondata sull'attrazione di branch campuses di università straniere, in particolare britanniche e australiane, con l'obiettivo di intercettare studenti regionali (Knight, Morshidi 2011). La Corea del Sud è infine spesso indicata come caso emergente di RHE, grazie a politiche di internazionalizzazione dell'istruzione superiore, all'espansione di programmi in lingua inglese e a investimenti mirati ad attrarre studenti asiatici e a rafforzare la competitività globale del sistema universitario (Dou, Knight 2014). Nel loro insieme, questi casi mostrano come il RHE non costituisca un modello uniforme, ma piuttosto una famiglia di configurazioni

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

istituzionali dove lo Stato assume un ruolo di regia strategica volto a trasformare città e paesi in piattaforme educative regionali, collocate all'intersezione tra politiche pubbliche, mercati globali e mobilità transnazionale.

4. *Materiali di ricerca empirica*

4.1. Caso studio I: Singapore e l'università sussidiaria

Un'isola che è un arcipelago: a Singapore università pubbliche e private, college di diversa nazionalità hanno fatto del centro finanziario dell'Asia meridionale l'epicentro dell'attuale espansione dell'istruzione universitaria. Ma essere ammessi alle sue università pubbliche è altamente competitivo, soprattutto per i suoi cittadini. Dalle interviste condotte con alcuni studenti, è emerso come l'ostacolo principale sia la competenza linguistica sia inglese che cinese, requisito che costituisce per molti una barriera significativa. I candidati singaporiani di lingua malese, o tamil, sono tenuti a dimostrare una buona competenza in entrambe queste lingue per essere ammessi. Tuttavia, un numero considerevole di loro incontra difficoltà con la lingua cinese. Al contrario, il processo di ammissione per gli studenti internazionali è relativamente meno impegnativo, poiché questi vengono valutati solo in base alla loro competenza in inglese.

La lingua costituisce un fattore chiave di distinzione tra gli istituti di istruzione universitaria privati e pubblici, nonché tra nazionali e internazionali. Questa distinzione rivela un paradosso: è più facile essere ammessi alle università nazionali di Singapore per uno studente internazionale che per un cittadino singaporiano. Gli studenti singaporiani tendono a trovare più facile l'accesso agli istituti accademici gestiti da università straniere a Singapore.

È questo il caso della Newcastle University di Singapore, un'università australiana che ha aperto una filiale straniera in questa città-stato. Gli studenti che vogliono iscriversi "devono solo avere un buon livello di inglese; non c'è la valutazione di una seconda lingua, perché la nostra università è diversa dalle altre università pubbliche singaporiane" (Peter K.). la Newcastle è un'università pubblica australiana che ha aperto una filiale internazionale a Singapore dal 2001, quando il governo ha iniziato a tagliare i fondi nazionali per l'istruzione pubblica. Una storia simile è quella della James Cook University che ha subito un calo dei finanziamenti in seguito alla cessazione del pieno sostegno da parte del governo federale australiano nel 2007. Di conseguenza, l'università ha cercato di generare entrate proprie oltre al budget stanziato dal governo.

"Inizialmente, abbiamo aumentato le tasse universitarie per gli studenti internazionali in Australia, che ora pagano più degli studenti nazionali", ha spiegato Tim R. il direttore della ricerca. "Successivamente, abbiamo istituito una nostra università a Singapore per generare entrate aggiuntive per il campus principale dell'università in Australia". Tim R. ha ulteriormente precisato: "Abbiamo deciso di istituire un campus distaccato all'estero come mezzo alternativo per raccogliere fondi attraverso le tasse studentesche. In collaborazione con la PBS Academy, un'organizzazione privata singaporiana, abbiamo creato un campus e abbiamo iniziato a offrire i nostri

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

programmi di studio. Questa iniziativa si è rivelata una fonte significativa di entrate per la James Cook University in Australia" (Tim R.).
Lo stesso ha fatto la Newcastle University che, in risposta ai tagli fiscali pubblici "ha deciso di diventare più imprenditoriale cercando fonti di reddito alternative" (Peter K.). Continua: "Di fronte al calo delle entrate in patria, abbiamo preso la decisione strategica di rafforzare la nostra presenza a Singapore. Siamo tenuti a generare profitti, incoraggiati ad adottare una mentalità imprenditoriale e ci si aspetta che espandiamo l'uso del linguaggio commerciale" (Peter K.).
Questi due casi dimostrano come le università pubbliche, creando sedi distaccate internazionali a Singapore, possano assumere caratteristiche private. Pertanto, lo status pubblico e quello privato possono coesistere all'interno della stessa istituzione, non sono più mutuamente esclusive o opposte, ma complementari. Come sostiene Tim R.: "La James Cook University è un'università pubblica in Australia, ma opera come società privata a Singapore. L'entità di Singapore è posseduta al 51% da noi e al 49% dalla PSB Academy. Si tratta essenzialmente di due status diversi all'interno della stessa università" (Tim R.).
Peter K., della Newcastle University afferma: "La NCU è un'azienda come tutte le altre. Operiamo con un bilancio autonomo, ma siamo tenuti a restituire i profitti all'università madre in Australia sotto forma di dividendi, proprio come una normale azienda" (Peter K.). E chiarisce ulteriormente:
"In un certo senso, la filiale della NCU a Singapore funziona come una società dell'università australiana, che ne detiene la proprietà totale. Per comprendere questo nuovo modello istituzionale, bisogna ragionare in termini di azionisti e proprietà. Loro sono i nostri proprietari. Noi siamo come una filiale che rimpatria i profitti" (Peter K.).
Mentre il campus in Australia è basato sulla ricerca di laboratorio e programmi post-laurea, queste "università controllate" sono incentrate sull'insegnamento e si presentano come attrattive, valide alternative alle università pubbliche. Come osserva Ingrid T. R., docente alla NCU: "Le lauree sono equivalenti a quelle delle università pubbliche di Singapore. Tuttavia, noi offriamo quella che è nota come laurea accelerata, con tre trimestri all'anno rispetto ai due offerti dalle università locali, che consente agli studenti di completare i loro studi in soli due anni invece che in tre" (Ingrid T. R.). Peter K. aggiunge: "Il nostro sistema a tre semestri è molto attraente per gli studenti che desiderano ottenere una laurea perchè consente loro di ottenere la laurea più rapidamente rispetto agli istituti locali" (Peter K.).
Ma la qualità percepita e il riconoscimento di queste istituzioni variano. Dalle interviste realizzate emerge come l'offerta formativa dei campus internazionali si discosta spesso in modo significativo da quella delle università pubbliche locali. Shoan H., cittadino singaporiano che non ha potuto proseguire gli studi nelle università pubbliche a causa del mancato superamento del requisito linguistico in cinese, ha scelto di trasferirsi in Australia anziché iscriversi a una delle università internazionali presenti a Singapore: "Ho preferito studiare all'estero piuttosto che frequentare un'università internazionale a Singapore, perché la reputazione e la qualità accademica di queste istituzioni private non rispondono alle esigenze. Nelle scienze umane e in politica internazionale i loro programmi sono rivolti più a chi cerca uno sbocco professionale immediato, piuttosto che a chi desidera un vero approfondimento accademico" (Shoan H.).

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

Queste istituzioni integrano i finanziamenti del governo nazionale con i flussi di entrate provenienti dai loro campus all'estero. Questi fondi vengono utilizzati per sostenere l'istruzione post-laurea, i programmi di ricerca e le infrastrutture di ricerca nazionali in Australia, generando nuovi modelli di produzione di conoscenza e meccanismi di finanziamento.

4.2.Caso studio II: Hong Kong e gli Associated Degree

A partire dagli anni duemila, subito dopo lo storico passaggio dal Regno Unito alla Cina e la crisi finanziaria del 1997 che ha duramente colpito l'economia di Hong Kong, il governo di questa città-Stato ha intrapreso un percorso originale per favorire l'espansione dell'educazione universitaria attraverso la privatizzazione dei servizi educativi riducendo la spesa pubblica. In particolare, ha istituito l'associated degree (AD), una certificazione educativa inizialmente definita "sub-degree" e successivamente associated degree, un percorso formativo intermedio tra il diploma di scuola superiore e la laurea triennale: "è un po' più di un diploma, meno di una laurea triennale. È una laurea 'a metà'" (Cheung S.K.). Questo tipo di laurea è interamente autofinanziata dagli studenti, non richiede alcun esame di ammissione, ed è offerta dalle università pubbliche, utilizzando le strutture e il loro nome come brand per gli studenti che pagano le tasse universitarie.

"Il governo incoraggia a istituire questi programmi autofinanziati all'interno delle università pubbliche" (Cheung S.K.) per motivi di bilancio, perché "i cosiddetti 'associated student' pagano tasse piuttosto elevate" (Lau K.C.).

Il campus della Lingnam University, ex istituto professionale diventato università negli anni Novanta, è frequentato sia da studenti "regolari" che da studenti "associati". Due popolazioni con due diverse aspettative frequentano la stessa università: "Nel campus, nella nostra mensa, si possono vedere studenti diversi allo stesso tempo, nello stesso luogo: studenti iscritti alla triennale, studenti iscritti ai master e associated degree; solo questi ultimi pagano l'intero costo della loro formazione. L'università si sta dividendo in due: una parte è sovvenzionata dal governo, con quote molto rigide, mentre per gli AD non ci sono quote; più sono, meglio è" (Lau K.C.).

L'aspettativa di ottenere una laurea specialistica è ciò che motiva a iscriversi ai corsi di AD: "Gli studenti sono motivati dal fatto che c'è la possibilità di entrare nell'università pubblica se il loro punteggio come 'associated students' sarà alto" (Hui P.K.). Infatti, la maggioranza degli associated students desidera continuare a studiare e ottenere la laurea specialistica a causa dello status poco chiaro di questa "laurea incompleta, non riconosciuta come laurea vera e propria da molti datori di lavoro" (Hui P.K.).

Il governo ha presentato gli associated degree come una sorta di pass per entrare nell'università pubblica e ottenere la laurea triennale. Questa aspettativa è molto alta anche perché molti college che promuovono gli AD "sono situati dentro il campus principale dell'università, coincidono con esso" (Lau K.C.): questa "istigazione alle aspettative" costituisce una vera e propria "pubblicità ingannevole, poiché la realtà dei fatti dice che solo il 3% degli studenti è in grado di proseguire negli studi" (Cheung S.K.).

Così, molti studenti cittadini di Hong Kong trovano un'alternativa studiando all'estero: "La maggior parte degli studenti AD accede a programmi di laurea integrativa

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

autofinanziati in diverse istituzioni internazionali; diverse università australiane collaborano con i community college di Hong Kong organizzando corsi di laurea integrativa per gli studenti AD. Molti studenti conseguono la laurea in questo modo" (Cheung S.K.). Oppure "aggirano il sistema delle quote dell'università nazionale laureandosi in Australia, Regno Unito o Singapore", ha riferito Harold T.
I giovani cittadini di Hong Kong, costretti a studiare all'estero e a pagare per conseguire la laurea magistrale vivendo in quel "centro dell'istruzione internazionale" che è Hong Kong, mostrano come le connessioni transnazionali e le diverse istituzioni straniere rimodellano il legame storico tra Stato-nazione, cultura nazionale e cittadinanza (Cheng 2010).
Il polo educativo internazionale di Hong Kong, che attrae studenti stranieri offrendo loro la possibilità di frequentare le università pubbliche esentasse, è allo stesso tempo una centrifuga che costringe i cittadini hongkonghesi a studiare all'estero, riscrivendo così il rapporto tra istruzione nazionale e cittadinanza nella globalizzazione.

5. *Ricucire i fili: implicazioni e piste di ricerca*

Nelle pagine che seguono, le conclusioni riprendono i risultati principali dell'analisi e ne discutono le implicazioni teoriche aprendo a future ricerche da intraprendere. Più che chiudere il discorso, l'obiettivo è ricomporre i fili che attraversano i casi di Hong Kong e Singapore come osservatori privilegiati di trasformazioni più generali nel contesto asiatico[2]. Non eccezioni, ma configurazioni anticipatrici di un mutamento strutturale che investe l'università contemporanea dentro uno spazio multiscalare, in cui l'educazione si intreccia con mercati, gerarchie e nuovi regimi di appartenenza.

---

[2] Le interviste non hanno esplorato direttamente gli effetti del COVID-19 in questa regione. Tuttavia, la pandemia ha colpito il cuore operativo di questi due RHE, ovvero la mobilità internazionale, rendendo evidente che l'"hub" è un vero e proprio dispositivo della circolazione fatto di confini, permessi, infrastrutture sanitarie e policy migratorie. La pandemia ha interrotto e ricalibrato i flussi: chiusure, quarantene e incertezza hanno sospeso scambi, study abroad e quella micromobilità (exchange, internship, visiting) che alimenta l'ecosistema-hub; allo stesso tempo, numerosi studi registrano una contrazione e/o un riorientamento dei progetti di mobilità, con maggiore enfasi su corridoi regionali, soluzioni di prossimità e opzioni ibride (Mok 2022; Mok *et al.* 2021; Marginson 2020). Parallelamente, la digitalizzazione forzata della didattica ha "smaterializzato" solo in parte l'hub. Infine, la mobilità studentesca è diventata esplicitamente una questione di governance migratoria: visti, entry approval e corridoi sanitari hanno prodotto disallineamenti tra logiche educative e logiche di controllo dei confini, un passaggio particolarmente leggibile nel caso di Singapore. Nei due casi, l'urto pandemico ha assunto configurazioni specifiche. A Hong Kong, dopo uno shock iniziale nel 2020 si è osservato un recupero relativamente rapido, accompagnato però da una ricomposizione dei bacini di reclutamento: è aumentato il peso degli studenti dalla Mainland China e, più in generale, è cresciuta nuovamente la componente non-local nei programmi finanziati (con picchi recenti). A Singapore, invece, la chiusura dei confini e le restrizioni hanno inciso in modo netto sui segmenti più dipendenti dagli arrivi internazionali (con evidenze soprattutto nel settore delle private education institutions), mentre la ripartenza si è data in forma graduale e condizionata. La letteratura recente (Watermeyer *et al.* 2022; Foong *et al.* 2024) sottolinea come la volatilità delle regole di ingresso e soggiorno abbia inciso direttamente sull'esperienza e sulla sostenibilità della presenza internazionale. In questo quadro, l'hub appare chiaramente come una macchina di accesso regolato dallo Stato: quando cambiano le policy di frontiera, cambia anche la morfologia dell'hub.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

Se la letteratura accademica individua tradizionalmente due orientamenti distinti che modellano strategie istituzionali differenti, "client-oriented" e "status-oriented", spesso ricondotti a tipologie di università diverse, i dati empirici presentati in questo articolo mostrano che tale dicotomia non opera necessariamente tra istituzioni separate. Al contrario, essa può configurarsi come una tensione interna alla medesima organizzazione: nella stessa università possono coesistere, in forme differenziate e talvolta contraddittorie, logiche orientate al "cliente" e logiche orientate allo "status". Dalla prospettiva transnazionale adottata in questo articolo emerge un'istituzione che non sceglie un solo modello, ma combina e mette in equilibrio, in modo instabile, due razionalità che informano contemporaneamente politiche, pratiche e identità organizzativa. Da un lato, Stato e mercato risultano sempre più co-implicati: si sovrappongono e si interpenetrano secondo modalità che rendono arduo tracciare, e ancor più ristabilire, confini rigidi tra loro. Dall'altro, proliferano forme ibride dell'istituzione universitaria entro un interregno in cui il management pubblico incorpora e normalizza approcci di mercato riconfigurando finalità, strumenti e criteri di legittimazione dell'istruzione superiore.
In questo quadro, la classica opposizione tra pubblico e privato perde gran parte della propria capacità esplicativa. Il processo di mercificazione non si limita infatti a una "privatizzazione" lineare, ma si manifesta soprattutto come ibridazione tra educazione *inshore* e *offshore* orientata al profitto, generando interdipendenze inedite, nuove stratificazioni e forme di dualismo istituzionale.
Il caso studio di Hong Kong esemplifica la logica di una stratificazione educativa dove l'università pubblica mantiene un ruolo centrale nell'infrastruttura educativa, ma differenziando la sua offerta per rispondere a vincoli finanziari. Ne deriva un sistema in cui la forma giuridica pubblica dell'istituzione si ibrida a logiche privatistiche nella gestione, nella selezione e nel finanziamento. Il fatto che i college privati vengano fondati all'interno delle università pubbliche, sfruttando le strutture e il brand dell'università, crea una stratificazione interna tra una parte che continua a essere finanziata pubblicamente, accessibile tramite esami di ammissione e con tasse universitarie moderate, e un'altra parte senza selezione all'ingresso, ad alte rette, rivolto a chi ha risorse economiche sufficienti. Uno sdoppiamento che produce nuove disuguaglianze, false aspettative, incertezza. L'immagine di Hong Kong come hub educativo internazionale, lungi dall'essere neutra o positiva, nasconde una serie di contraddizioni profonde legate alla trasnazionalizzazione dell'istruzione che, così come descritta, non è inclusiva, ma esclusiva e selettiva, ridefinendo chi ha il diritto di studiare, dove, e a quale prezzo. Nel doppio sistema educativo ma altamente selettivo per gli studenti locali, e quello più accessibile ma a pagamento, l'istruzione intesa come una scelta personale si svuota di significato: la mobilità degli studenti rende evidente una migrazione educativa che scompagina i riferimenti nazionali, ridisegna i confini culturali e l'immaginario collettivo.
Allo stesso tempo, il caso di Singapore problematizza la tradizionale analisi binaria tra pubblico e privato. Nel contesto dell'istruzione superiore transnazionale, questa distinzione diventa sempre più sfumata, forse persino obsoleta. Se la cornice nazionale da sola non è più sufficiente per rendere conto delle complesse trasformazioni istituzionali attualmente in corso, le università "sussidiarie" rappresentano una forma

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

originale di adattamento istituzionale alle pressioni del mercato globale dell'istruzione universitaria. Esse incarnano una nuova governance universitaria che integra logiche aziendali, strategie internazionali e finalità educative, ma al contempo pongono sfide significative in termini di equità, qualità e ruolo pubblico dell'università.

Sia Singapore che Hong Kong sono casi esemplari di come la globalizzazione non democratizzi automaticamente l'accesso all'istruzione, ma crea nuove gerarchie basate su mobilità economica, status e nazionalità. L'istruzione universitaria perde i suoi connotati pubblici e nazionali, diventando merce globale. Costringere gli studenti locali a studiare all'estero non solo rappresenta un costo economico e affettivo, ma porta a un indebolimento del senso di appartenenza e a una frattura tra una élite globalizzata e il resto della popolazione.

Aihwa Ong (1999) ha analizzato come individui e famiglie in Asia (soprattutto élite cinesi) gestiscano strategie di cittadinanza transnazionale, cercando opportunità educative, economiche e politiche in diversi paesi. La sua idea di "cittadinanza flessibile" si applica precisamente alle situazioni descritte in entrambi i casi studio presentati, dove la cittadinanza non garantisce pieno accesso all'istruzione pubblica nazionale. Ciò costringe gli studenti a negoziare il proprio status educativo e sociale a livello transnazionale per ottenere titoli di studio. Questo è un esempio emblematico di come le logiche neoliberiste spingano verso una cittadinanza mobile, competitiva, e non più ancorata al diritto nazionale. La cittadinanza flessibile descritta da Ong appare così non soltanto come una strategia adattiva delle élite, ma come un effetto strutturale delle razionalità neoliberiste che attraversano l'istruzione superiore globale: una cittadinanza sempre meno ancorata a diritti sociali e sempre più configurata come capacità individuale di muoversi, competere e accumulare credenziali in spazi educativi multiscalari differenziati. Nella educazione terziaria, tutto questo si materializza attraverso l'uso della lingua inglese utilizzata nelle università. Come è emerso dai casi studio, gli studenti internazionali, spesso provenienti da sistemi anglofoni, accedono facilmente alle università pubbliche mentre i cittadini locali trovano più facile entrare in istituzioni internazionali rovescia la logica nazionale. L'università pubblica non "parla" più la lingua dei cittadini, ma quella del mercato globale (Sakai 1997). La lingua non agisce come mero mezzo di comunicazione, ma come filtro che seleziona, dividendo tra chi è "traducibile", cioè integrabile nel sistema formativo, e chi resta fuori dai confini della legittimità educativa (Sakai, Solomon 2006). In Asia, e in particolare nel mercato del lavoro cinese, l'inglese associato all'educazione terziaria appare come uno dei più efficaci fattori di segmentazione, richiamando quanto Étienne Balibar e Immanuel Wallerstein hanno definito "razzismo dell'epoca della decolonizzazione" o "razzismo senza razza" il cui tema dominante è l'apparente insormontabilità delle differenze culturali (Balibar, Wallerstein 1991) che esercitano una forza pari, se non superiore, a quella di categorie tradizionalmente centrali come il genere o la razza.

L'università è un campo di tensioni globali dove lingua, cittadinanza e istruzione sono negoziate, gerarchizzate e tradotte secondo logiche di mercato. Emerge un'istituzione che mette costantemente in tensione le forme giuridiche della cittadinanza nazionale, contribuendo ad accentuare disuguaglianze all'interno di uno spazio multiscalare, attraversato da entità macro-spaziali tra Stati-nazione, regioni e continenti. Emerge un'istituzione che si muove *tra* Stati, un'università che somiglia a una sorta di cucitura.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

L'università contemporanea diventa un'infrastruttura di connessione: cuce mobilità e radicamento, Stato e mercato, aspirazioni individuali e strategie pubbliche. E proprio perché cuce, non elimina le asimmetrie: le rende praticabili, le organizza e, in molti casi, le istituzionalizza.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Adams, F. G. (2006). *East Asia, Globalization, and the New Economy*. London: Routledge.

Altbach, P. G., e Umakoshi, T. (a cura di). (2004). *Asian Universities: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Balibar, É., e Wallerstein, I. (1991). *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso.

Ballarino, G. (2009). L'istruzione superiore e la sua espansione. In L. Sciolla (a cura di), *Processi e trasformazioni sociali: la società europea dagli anni Sessanta a oggi* (pp. 165–194). Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Bok, D. (2003). *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cao, Y. (2005). Atarashii Shigaku Sekutā (The New Private Sector – Independent Colleges). *IDE, Gendai no Kōtō Kyōiku*, 467, 48–53.

Chan, D., e Ng, P. T. (2008). Similar agendas, diverse strategies: The quest for a regional hub of higher education in Hong Kong and Singapore. *Higher Education Policy, 21*(4), 471–491.

Cheng, M. (2010). *Future of Self-financed Sub-degrees in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC).

Do, P. (2010). *Il tallone del drago*. Roma: DeriveApprodi.

Do, P. (2019). *L'uso dei saperi*. Verona: Ombre Corte.

Dou, L., e Knight, J. (2014). Emerging hubs: South Korea, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Bahrain. In J. Knight (a cura di), *International Education Hubs* (cap. 10). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7025-6_10

Foong, Y. P., Pidani, R., Sithira Vadivel, V., e Dongyue, Y. (2024). Singapore Smart Nation: Journey into a new digital landscape for higher education. In A. O. J. Kwok e P. L. Teh (a cura di), *Emerging Technologies in Business*. Singapore: Springer.

Foucault, M. (2009). *Security, Territory, Population*. London: Picador.

Francis, C. B. (2001). Quasi-public, quasi-private trends in emerging market economies: The case of China. *Comparative Politics, 33*(3), 275–294.

Fujie, Y. (2005). *The WTO and the Globalization of Higher Education: GATS, Liberalization and Trade in Educational Services*. Sophia University, Institute of Comparative Culture.

Hardt, M., e Negri, A. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Hayhoe, R., e Lin, J. (2008). China's private universities: A successful case study. *International Higher Education*, 51, 12–14.

Hazelkorn, E. (2011). *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Healy, S. (2006). *Hong Kong Sub-Degree Sector Market Research*. Hong Kong: British Council.

Horta, H. (2023). Emerging and near future challenges of higher education in East Asia. *Asian Economic Policy Review, 18*(1), 171–191.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

Ippolita. (2017). *Tecnologie del dominio. Lessico minimo di autodifesa digitale*. Roma: Meltemi.
Knight, J. (2002). *Trade in Higher Education Services: The Implications of GATS*. London: The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education.
Knight, J. (2004). *Internationalization of Higher Education: Practice and Priorities (2003 IAU Survey Report)*. Paris: IAU.
Knight, J. (2006). *Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide to the Implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for Cross-border Education*. Paris: UNESCO/Commonwealth of Learning.
Knight, J., e Morshidi, S. (2011). The complexities and challenges of regional education hubs: Focus on Malaysia. *Higher Education, 62*, 593–606. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9467-2
Lee, M. N. N., e Gopinathan, S. (2008). Converging paths, diverging outcomes: Higher education in Malaysia and Singapore. *Higher Education, 56*(2), 159–179.
Lin, A. M. Y. (2006). Contexts of English-in-education policy and practice in postcolonial Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 16, 25–44.
Lin, A. M. Y. (2009). Local interpretation of global management discourses in higher education in Hong Kong: Potential impact on academic culture. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 10*(2), 260–275.
Marginson, S., e Rhoades, G. (2002). Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: A glonacal agency heuristic. *Higher Education, 43*(3), 281–309.
Marginson, S., e van der Wende, M. (2006). *Globalisation and Higher Education* (OECD Education Working Papers, No. 8). Paris: OECD Publishing.
Marginson, S., e van der Wende, M. (2007). *To Rank or To Be Ranked: The Impact of Global Rankings in Higher Education* (OECD Education Working Papers, No. 15). Paris: OECD Publishing.
Marginson, S. (2020, 29 settembre). *The World Is Changing: Higher Education and the COVID19 Pandemic* (paper presentato al Global Higher Education Webinar Series, Lingnan University).
Martin, P. W. (2005). *Decolonisation, Globalisation and Language-in-Education Policy and Practice*. London: Multilingual Matters.
McBurnie, G., e Ziguras, C. (1997). *Transnational Education: Issues and Trends in Offshore Higher Education*. London: Taylor e Francis.
Mohrman, K., Ma, W., e Baker, D. (2008). The research university in transition: The emerging global model. *Higher Education Policy, 21*(1), 5–27.
Mok, K. H. (2007). Questing for internationalization of universities in Asia: Critical reflections. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(3–4), 433–454.
Mok, K. H. (2022). The Covid-19 pandemic and international higher education in East Asia. In S. Marginson e X. Xu (a cura di), *Changing Higher Education in East Asia* (pp. 225–246). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Mok, K. H., Xiong, W., Ke, G., e Cheung, J. O. W. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility: Student perspectives from mainland China and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Research, 105*, 101718.
Naidoo, V. (2007). Research on the flow of international students to UK universities: Determinants and implications. *Journal of Research in International Education, 6*(3), 287–307.
Olds, K. (2007). Global assemblage: Singapore, Western universities, and the construction of a global education hub. *World Development, 35*(6), 956–975.

Olds, K. (2009). Association, networks, alliances, etc.: Making sense of the emerging global higher education landscape (Keynote paper, 3rd Global Meeting of Associations of Universities, GMAIII).
Olsen, A. (2024). Education as an export for Australia: 2024. *The Koala News*. Disponibile su: https://thekoalanews.com/education-as-an-export-for-australia-2024/ (consultato il 10 gennaio 2026).
Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Pennycook, A. (2000). English, politics, ideology: From colonial celebration to postcolonial performativity. In T. Ricento (a cura di), *Ideology, Politics and Language Policies: Focus on English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Readings, B. (1996). *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Ross, A. (2006). *Fast Boat to China: Corporate Flight and the Consequences of Free Trade—Lessons from Shanghai*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Sakai, N. (1997). *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Sakai, N., e Solomon, J. (a cura di). (2006). *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference (Traces 4)*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
Sassen, S. (2001). *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Shavit, Y., Arum, R., Gamoran, A., Menachem, G. (a cura di). (2007). *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Shin, J. C. (2015). Mass higher education and its challenges for rapidly growing East Asian higher education. In J. C. Shin, G. A. Postiglione, e F. Huang (a cura di), *Mass Higher Education Development in East Asia* (pp. 1–17). Cham: Springer.
Solomon, J. (2019). La finanziarizzazione del sapere. In P. Do, *L'uso dei saperi* (pp. 103–116). Verona: Ombre Corte.
Tan, J. (2004). Singapore: Small nation, big plans. In P. G. Altbach e T. Umakoshi (a cura di), *Asian Universities: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges* (pp. 273–294). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Tung, C. H. (1999). *Quality People, Quality Home: Positioning Hong Kong for the 21st Century*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
Usher, A., e Savino, M. (2006). *A World of Difference: A Global Survey of University League Tables*. Toronto: Educational Policy Institute.
Veblen, T. (1999). *La teoria della classe agiata* (F. Fantini, Trad.). Milano: Edizioni di Comunità. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1899)
Watermeyer, R., Chen, Z., e Ang, B. J. (2022). 'Education without limits': The digital resettlement of post-secondary education and training in Singapore in the COVID-19 era. *Journal of Education Policy, 37*(6), 861–882. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.1933198
World Trade Organization. (2007a). *The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS): Objectives, Coverage and Disciplines*. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/serv_e/gatsqa_e.htm
World Trade Organization. (2007b). *Trade in Services: Education Services*. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/serv_e/education_e/education_e.htm
Zhang, J. (2009). ASEAN higher education on the road from elite to massification. In *Facing Global and Local Challenges: The New Dynamics for Higher Education* (pp. 37–43). Macao: UNESCO.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 39-54
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.03

The Italian university system's transition towards a formally entrepreneurial, substantially neo-centralist governance model

Agnese Desideri, Sandro Landucci

The Italian University system's transition towards a model of entrepreneurial governance is examined in this paper. First, the main historical evolution of the Italian university system is illustrated. Secondly, the paper focuses on the transition to an entrepreneurial governance model, along New Public Management lines, which was formally reached with the implementation of Law 240/2010. Thirdly, we focus on the recent changes affecting the recruitment and evaluation of university lecturers and more generally, of the university's performance, trying to argument how under a formal appearance of an autonomous entrepreneurial system of universities lies a core of neo-centralistic orientations and practices. The paper is based on documentary research and on a number of privileged witness-interviews with members of the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Florence.

Introduction

The Italian university system consists of 68 public universities, 20 private universities and 11 online universities (Anvur, 2023). After having presented its own theoretical framework and methodological approach, this paper traces the main historical evolution of the modern Italian university system, which was originally shaped on a centralized Napoleonic model in the second part of the XIX century. Secondly, it focuses on the transition, which began at the end of the 1980s, towards the adoption of an entrepreneurial governance model. The cornerstone of this phase is the Gelmini Law No. 240 of 2010, which is based on the private enterprise model and, as will be seen below, in a broader perspective, on the principles of New Public Management (NPM). In order to outline the main changes introduced by the Gelmini Law, we examined the governance system it has introduced within Italian Higher education, from the interpretation given to the notion of higher education to the system's funding shaped by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) in the period between 2008 and 2013. The reorganisation of the university's governing bodies and, finally, the change in the performance evaluation system and in the faculty recruitment system known as national scientific qualification (ASN) will also be taken into account. A concluding reflection will focus on the recent changes affecting the recruitment of university lecturers through the ASN.

1. *Theoretical framework*

In this paragraph, we aim to make explicit the theoretical assumptions supporting our interpretation of the transition of Italian University system from a centralized, homogeneous, essentially Napoleonic model to a system of formally autonomous universities, with a governance in which representative collegial organs have been superseded, at the various levels of articulation (university, schools, departments) by

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 55-77
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.04

“managerial” boards and individual executive organs, in competition among each other mainly in a field of “excellence” whose principles and rules are established by a central agency of accreditation-evaluation, and through this on the quasi-markets for students and for mainly public (scarce and uncertain) resources and, to a lesser extent, private resources.
Historical and sociological comparative studies on the European and Western Higher education systems have developed an ideal typology of modern university-system models (French Napoleonic, German Humboldtian, Anglo-American model) (Anderson 2004; Rüegg 2004; 2011; Côté, Furlong 2016). According to its methodological status, the ideal typology poses an articulated list of pure, abstract types each one identified through a conjunction of characters and distinguished from each other by a tendentially exclusive ordered paired-disjunction of characters; these types are never completely realized empirically (empirical cases, even paradigmatic examples, never fully correspond to all and only the characters of any of the pure types, which only serve as conceptual reference points in a logic of approximation to them).
The main characters of the Napoleonic model are the following; firstly, its being a centralized, hierarchical and homogeneous nation-state institutional branch, with almost no statutory and administrative autonomy among the various territorial units of the system which are strictly governed from the head of a centralized State (with the State Capital hoarding the main part of the system resources, both quantitatively and qualitatively); the second is its main goal of providing, through teaching, formal credentials (having legal value) towards specialized professions (often through national thematic institutes, the *Grandes Ècoles*) both within the state apparatus and civil society – and this implies that the innovative scientific research function can be conceived (and implemented) largely independently and separately from the higher education function; the third character is both the selection of student attendance and the allocation of graduated personnel via competitive, formally meritocratic competitive examinations (*concours*) on high professional skills.
The German-Humboldtian model of university system has in common with the Napoleonic its public, statist character; but at the same time, having developed in a linguistically and culturally strongly united nation but nonetheless subdivided among many different regional political regimes and subsequently in an unitary Empire (afterwards Federal Republics) that maintained a strong regional articulation, the system has developed through less centralistic lines, and each local university maintained a characteristic individual institutional and cultural physiognomy and autonomy (vs the homogeneity of napoleonic faculties and universities) within a plurality of regional States; the second character is to exercise a strict connection between original disciplinary research (lying at the frontier between the known and the unknown) in all the fields of interest (the German concept tied to the term *wissenschaft*, i.e. science, embracing together theology, philosophy, law, philology, history and other traditional humanistic, disciplines with mathematical and natural empirical disciplines) and teaching: in the sense that the teacher is a master who have to teach the method and results of his own original personal research activity to students-apprentices whose main task is to learn approaches and methods of autonomous research rather than specific, technically detailed and accomplished knowledge systems (that prevail in the Napoleonic teaching function). In this sense,

the model clearly distinguishes approved, recognized and publicly sanctioned systems of knowledge as pertaining to the "inferior" school system, from the superior higher studies properly scientific enterprise of critically assessing present knowledge and establishing new pieces of knowledge (Von Humboldt 1810/2017). This ideal conception of a constitutive connection among methodically disciplined research and teaching-learning within the community of teachers and students lies at the base of the notions of *Lernfreiheit* e *Lehnfreiheit*, teaching freedom and learning freedom (which together imply research freedom). Freedoms which, deriving from a notion of pure science which is achieved through a collective cooperative-competitive endeavour of achieving new *pure* knowledge through freely questioning and modifying the old one, in no way are politically original power attributes of the university; they are rather conditions that only the State authority can and must guarantee to the university teachers and students: a limited, State *octroyée* freedom shielding the university both from within, from the dictates of the State apparatus to which the university ultimately belongs, and from without, the pressures of the material utilitarian interests of the civil society, in order to guarantee the possibility of achieving new *pure* knowledge. The third main character of the German model is the concept of *Bildung*: the results of higher education are an organic global built-up personality of the new doctor, as free as responsible, capable of a critical scientific attitude towards its tasks throughout the many specialistic fields of professional life more than counting on highly specialized skills. In this sense, the credentials offered by the German model to its graduates are more of an informal reputational, prestige character (tied to the specific renown of the university of origin) than of the formally certified, meritocratic one of the Napoleonic model (a difference which is maintained even though competitive forms of professional selection and appointment are often formally the same in both systems).
The third model is the anglo-american one. Its first character is its not being originated through a legal reform imposed by the Sovereign within a modern State institutional public infrastructure (as both the Napoleonic and the German system do, even though those two stems from clearly different levels of centralization and *tabula rasa* policy strategies over the former traditional assets) but its being gradually and cumulatively developed through time inside and outside of the State control: the angloamerican model of higher education is peculiarly polycentric and heterogeneous in its genesis, spreading from such different origins as surviving *ancien régime* corporate *universitates* (Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin), State public initiatives at a national and local level (The Scottish universities) (Anderson 2004: 192) and various kinds of private initiatives coming from churches (in a denominational, post-Reform sense) as from private philanthropic, trade or interest associations (*Land Grant* US Universities, British *Redbrick* Universities) (OECD 1999; Whyte 2016). Its mission is equally plural and differentiated: it keeps within itself the formation to specialized higher liberal professions/administrative State bureaucratic offices and the scientific vocation to the advancement of knowledge; but this two goals (that respectively characterize the Napoleonic and the Humboldtian models) exist among many other aims, from the formation of a well-rounded gentleman's humanist personality to a functional-utilitarian conception of producing high skilled work-profiles adapted to the changing and developing needs of a society in fast technological, economic and social transformation and development within a growing differentiation and specialization

dynamics. It correspondingly results in a highly differentiated spectrum of higher education institutes, both at the organizational and the credential level (prerequisites for attendance, duration of the studies, registration fee costs, level and value of formal credentials). Its third character on the kind of educated person the system is purported to produce is equally pluralist: but its accent lies more on the endowing the individual with a set of resources and capabilities (in some cases, formally, in others informally sanctioned) which enhances its chances of success in attaining scarce superior positions in a growingly stratified and selective social environment; thus in conceiving higher education more as a private asset than a mainly public good receiving formally public sanction and certification (Napoleonic and German).
This typology is clearly relevant for our interpretation in the next paragraphs under three aspects: a) the prevailing organizational culture of the Italian HE system; b) the strategies and the goals for the construction of a European HE area; c) the diffusion of a university governance configuration inspired by the NPM doctrines.

a) We'll see that the Italian HE system from the national Unity in 1861 to the reform of 1989 mixed the characters of the Napoleonic model – it was a National homogeneous system directly governed by the Central Ministry which led the organization and even the content of the universities' activities through a myriad of extremely detailed regulations and circulars – with those of the Humboldtian one – the mainly organization through Faculties instead of *Grandes Écoles*, the institution of the Chair and of the *Privatdozent*. But the centralistic character was the prevalent one. It presents for a long duration of 120 years a configuration of extreme centralization within which the ministerial bureaucracy and an academic oligarchy of powerful professors could entertain a *de facto* corporative opaque governance of the system (so clearly and acutely described from the outside by Clark 1977). And surely a very resilient one: if it's true that the opening of university access to all the possessors of secondary certificates in 1969 (sanctioning an extremely sudden, abrupt transition from an *élite* university system to a mass one) happened without touching the existent organization (and in general even its sheer quantitative structural dimensions – with huge side-effects of overcrowding, delayed students careers and dropouts) of the system; and if it's true that the autonomous status the Republican Italian Constitution of 1948 granted to universities remained a dead letter for 40 years, until the Ruberti Reform of 1989. On the contrary, all the three major reforms of governmental initiative (in 1989, 1999-2000 and 2010) were formally implemented very quickly (the very short time-frame of implementation being clearly indicative), even though representing radical departures from the principles and the configurations of the previous functioning system. In summary, 1989: transition from a centralized system to a series of autonomous universities; 2000: transition from the long-standing 4-5 year duration of the university single degree course to a 3+2 years double degree system; 2010 (among other things): abolition of the secular faculty configuration and the conservation of the much less entrenched department as the main subunit of the University. All this shows an extremely strong system disposition against bottom-up, external pressures to changes and a corresponding extremely favorable disposition towards top-down, internal ones: what we consider clear evidence of the deep-rooted centralistic nature of the Italian university system.

b) The political statements of principles and the following normative texts defining and orienting the construction of the European HE Area, From the Sorbonne Declaration to the Bologna and then the Lisbon EU processes have been characterized by a main reference to both the Humboldtian and Anglo-american models, at the expense of the Napoleonic one. But if the first has been recalled mainly within the sphere of principles and values, in characterizing the free vocation of the scientific spirit within the European university tradition, the second has served as a much more direct and pragmatic point of reference for the effective measures of re-organization and re-allignment of the various national HE systems to fit within the European area (Amaral *et al*. 2009): here is sufficient to cite the anglo-american genesis both of the 3+2 years standard course duration and of the credit-unit system for measuring the study workload and duration (Wagenaar 2019), which constitute the main operative pillars of this reform process. As such, the construction of EHEA seems to us clearly oriented towards the anglo-american model (Maassen 2008); and we try to trace its influence in the next paragraphs.

c) The diffusion of the New Public Management theoretical, methodological and operational approach to public policies can be considered merely a specific development within the European administrative sphere of a much larger political ideological hegemony which originated through the eighties of XX century and acquired dominance after the fall of Socialist regimes of Eastren Europe at the start of the last decade of the Century (Gerstle 2022). Anti-government and deregulation agendas, assumption of the individuals' initiative, of the private enterprise and of the free market as *a priori*, indisputable positive reference points have acquired a dominant position throughout western Europe (arriving to get a quasi-ontological status of post-ideological undisputable truths/values): a status that has yet to be completely overcome in the public debate, though having lost much of its ideological appeal since the world's economical Great Recession of 2008. Even though we consider this hegemony as a historical fact, in what follows we try to illustrate how within the evolving Italian HE system of the XXI century a much more subtle and sophisticated technocratic tendency is at work: a tendency that, independently from the ideological colors of its political enablers, uses New Public Management tools and strategies (managerial extra-academic top university leadership; lump sum financing and accounting control procedures; audits and assessments of productivity, efficiency and cost for value; competitive procedures for ranking the institutions on Excellence; new Third Mission tasks) (Amaral 2008), firstly enacted within universities of the anglo-american model (many authors depict historically the NPM oriented interventions as the first main strong intervention of a regulatory State within the tendentially more autonomous, self-governed realm of anglo-american universities) (Reed 2002; Fulton 2002), in an extremely detailed and dirigistic fashion, in order to lead the HE Italian system, formally represented by autonomous, entrepreneurial universities in a substantially neo-centralist way (the main strategic objective of the last two decades being the construction of a stratified system of a few top-élite *Research* universities and a base of lower status *Teaching* universities competing with new online-university institutions on the mass tertiary education market).

2. Methodology

Our main research question is: How has the Anglo-Saxon concept of an entrepreneurial governance spread into the Italian HE system in the past quarter of the century? It is particularly interesting because the Italian HE system is historically constituted on a different organisational tradition and culture derived from the Napoleonic centralistic model. In what follows, we aim to illustrate and document this historic transition from a model that is both formally and substantively statist and centralist to a model that is formally privatist and autonomist (the entrepreneurial model) but which, in substance, as much inevitably as paradoxically retains significant elements of, and continuity with, its origins in an apparently logically opposite model. In other words, we will try to submit the notion of *entrepreneurial governance* as it is declined in the Italian HE system to an elementary application of the genealogical approach to discourse analysis (cfr. Foucault 1971; Dunn, Neumann 2016).

Our study is thus a desk-based documentary research, based on three distinct *corpora* of documents and texts that we have collected and analyzed:

1. Laws and regulations governing the Italian higher education system (e.g., ANVUR, 2023).
2. Grey literature on higher education (e.g. OECD reports); Institutional websites (e.g. MUR and ANVUR website); ROARS forum (Returns on Academic Research and School) for discussion concerning research and higher education policies.
3. Academic literature (monographs, edited volumes, and articles in scholarly journals) on higher education, covering a wide range of disciplines and subdisciplines within the social sciences, from the sociology of education to organizational and management theory.

In addition to these text *corpora*, we formed a fourth one with the transcriptions of interviews we conducted with seven university professors from the University of Florence who held before or at the moment of the interview responsibility positions within the university administration, at the national or local level. They were asked to describe the changes they witnessed while holding their administrative roles. The main topics covered during the interviews were: the major historical milestones of Italian universities and the varying ways in which power and information have been managed; criteria for recruitment for academic personnel based on historical period considered; differentiation of recruitment criteria between online and state universities; National scientific qualification and disciplinary sector related scientific committees. We mainly used this last *corpus* in order to acquire some clues on the practical administrative policies – i.e. actions/decisions qualified by constraints, goals and strategies – the changing field of academic governance made possible, favored or prescribed.

3. *Historical milestones in the Italian university system evolution*

The concept of public education and a national university system was introduced in Italy for the first time by the Casati Law of 1859. This law, in line with the Napoleonic approach (Charle 2004), effectively marked the birth of the modern Italian university. The Napoleonic model, to which Italy referred during the national unification phase, established organizational uniformity and homogeneous regulations for every university in the system and considered academic staff to be an integral part of the public administration bureaucracy. Universities were considered organs of the State apparatus, and their functions were all delegated by the State. At the head of each university was the Rector, an organ of the State apparatus appointed directly by the King. Legal university diplomas and formal qualifications were the main educational credentials that granted access to the most prestigious roles within the bureaucracy and liberal professions. This centralized structure remained in place for over sixty years (Balus 2021). The subsequent reforms introduced by the Fascist regime were promoted on the basis of a totalitarian conception of the State. The September 1923 reform, led by the Fascist minister Giovanni Gentile, established freedom of teaching and research in principle, while also recognizing the university's legal status and administrative autonomy. However, this reform was part of a centralist approach: the minister appointed professors, while the king appointed the rector and faculty deans. The minister also supervised the universities and had the power to establish and abolish faculties (Balus 2021). During the twenty years of Fascism, university autonomy was further reduced. The Consolidated text of laws of 1933, while confirming the administrative, educational and disciplinary autonomy of universities, gave the Minister of National Education the power to replace academic leaders and decide on teaching regulations. With detailed provisions, the minister supervised the universities on behalf of the State. In fact, while in theory acknowledging autonomy, national laws and regulations guided in detail the administrative management, teaching, recruitment, career and status of the academic staff. Academic staff were reduced to the role of civil servants in the public administration in the same way as any other public employee. Furthermore, the 1935 law strengthened State power over universities by introducing additional restrictions on freedom of teaching and research. From the formation of the unified State until the fall of the fascist regime, universities educated only a small, privileged minority of the Italian society. With the fall of the Fascist regime and the beginning of the Republican era, the academic body was granted greater autonomy from the central government: in 1944, the position of tenured professor was established, and in 1945, the minister's power to remove academic staff was definitively abolished (Balus 2021). Those principled changes notwithstanding, the strongly centralized institutional structure that emerged during the twenty years of Fascism remained in place in the following decades, despite the 1948 Republican Constitution affirming the autonomy of universities. Among the most significant measures of the subsequent period, we recall Law 910 of 1969, which reformed university admission. This law allowed all holders of a high school diploma obtained after completing a five-year course of study to enroll as university students. The liberalization of admissions was a response to the need to adapt to the higher education system to cope with an increasing number of students. A further measure dates back to the 1980s (Presidential Decree No. 382), which established university departments consisting of teachers with similar disciplinary backgrounds, granting them administrative and accounting autonomy for the purpose of promoting and coordinating research. This happened while paradoxically the traditional faculty structure based on the offer of degrees was maintained. The Presidential Decree of 1980 also contained reforms to the recruitment and status of professors, who were divided into two categories (full and associate), and established the roles of researchers, contract professors and PhD students (Balus 2021). The members of the academic body – the full professors – associated in national groups and consortia on a disciplinary basis, enjoyed a privileged relationship with the ministerial bureaucracy (Capano 2000). It was the university of the Barons, an expression that became common sense (Clark 1977; Palermo 2011). This type of university was focused, much more de facto than de jure, on the reproduction of the academic body according to a logic of co-optation, on the self-referential expansion of disciplinary affiliations, whereby certain dominant sectors within each faculty could decide to recruit new staff entirely from their own discipline, without taking into account the teaching load, i.e. the numerical relationship between teachers and students among the various disciplinary fields. In the 1970s, the transition to mass university education would have required adequate funding and reforms. Despite this, the organizational structure of the 1970s was still that of the early decades of the 20th century, designed for a small number of students. According to Istat, there were 616,898 students enrolled in 1969 and almost 1.3 million in 1989 (data from Romano, 1993). The increase in enrolment, which was positive in itself in a country historically characterized by a low rate of graduates, also increased the number of students who did not get their degree, either being expelled from the system or remaining in it for a long time as students who have exceeded the standard duration of their studies (*studenti fuori corso*). In fact, during the same period, the number of students who did not complete their studies also increased, with a steady growth rate until the 1970s. Since then, dropouts and low graduation rates became a critical and chronic problems of Italian universities. The situation was aggravated by chronic underfunding and overcrowding of teaching-learning spaces. As the organizational and management structures had not changed, universities were unable to meet the needs of students, creating a tension between the university system quantitative dimension and the growing number of students. Law 168 of 1989 (the Ruberti Law) after forty years formally implemented the principles set out in the Constitution, mainly the autonomy of Italian universities. Thus, this law states that:

«Universities are endowed with legal status and, through article 33 of the Constitution, universities have didactical, scientific, organizational, financial and accounting autonomy; the universities create their own autonomous systems with statutes and regulations» (Art. 6 - comma 1).

Moving beyond the previous centralist vision, autonomy is the defining feature of the university system within a new legal framework that considers universities as public bodies and no longer as mere organs of State administration. The reform also provides for each university to follow its own regulations through the enactment of statutes. Statutes are the primary source of law within the system of an institution which, within a framework of planning and guidelines formulated by primary legislation, governs itself in order to achieve specific objectives and guidelines. For each university, the statutes become the basis for the legitimacy of all subsequent internal regulations. Law 341 of 1990 reformed the educational system, establishing the bachelor's degree alongside the university diploma. Universities decided on their educational system, and the minister examined and approved it. Law 127 of 1997 established that educational systems must be adopted by ministerial decree, which set out the general criteria, universities drawing up the specific provisions. The 1997 law established the Observatory for the Evaluation of the University System, the first step towards a

crucial issue for the subsequent evolution of the system. Organizational and financial autonomy was specified by Law 537 of 1993. It established the Ordinary Financing Fund for universities, corresponding to the share of the State budget for the operating expenses of financial autonomy, which also included recruitment, leading to the abolition of the national staffing structure for university personnel. The same law gave universities the power to decide on how to use their budget. With the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the centralist approach that characterized the Italian university management since national unification appeared to be overcome. Nevertheless, paradoxically, autonomy in Italy was introduced through a reform imposed from above, following a typically top-down process. Thus, the literature on the Italian university governance highlights the lack of an institutional culture of autonomy, which attaches great importance to evaluation, within university ranks (both academic and administrative). However, this evaluative dimension was not provided for in universities' institutional processes (Boffo, Moscati 2005; Turri 2007; Regini 2009).
Another most significant reform implemented at the end of the 1990s concerned the internationalization of the Italian university system. Decree 509 of 1999 initiated the process of Italian universities joining the European Higher Education Area. This decree responded to the need to facilitate student mobility within Europe by aligning the Italian higher education system with the standards of other universities in Europe, thus streamlining the procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications. As part of the process of standardizing European qualifications, University Credits (CFU) were introduced, adapted to the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System)[1]. The 3+2 years course system was also introduced, taking as a reference the courses divided into three-year bachelor's degrees and master's degrees (one or two years) in Anglo-American universities. The student's career was therefore divided into a three-year degree equal to 180 CFU and a specialist degree equal to 120 CFU which, added to the previous one, had to reach a total of 300 CFU. The new system came into force in the 2001-2002 academic year, just two years after the 1999 reform, placing Italy among the first countries to adapt to the European system (Capano 2002).

4. *Italian universities and New Public Management*

The approval of Law 240 of 2010 (the Gelmini Law) marks the second significant reform of the university system since the Second World War. It is supported by a movement that has strongly criticised the process of autonomy and its effects, which are considered largely detrimental and counterproductive for the university system. The reform is part of a broader political and cultural trend inspired by New Public Management (NPM) (Barzelay 2001; Lane 2000; Pollitt, Bouckaert 2011). From a political point of view, NPM emerged in the 1990s during the Democratic presidency of Bill Clinton in the United States and the Labour government of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, as an attempt to rethink and reshape the traditional left-wing principles of equality and social justice (Giddens 1999; Ravasio 2023; Guazzaloca 2015). However, although promoted by leading figures in the progressive

[1] For further information on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), a tool used in the European Higher Education Area to make studies and courses more transparent, see: https://education.ec.europa.eu/it/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system (January 2026).

governments of the time, NPM draws on a tradition of thought that has historically been more closely associated with the conservative right than with a democratic-progressive vision of society. In this context, NPM revives the traditional distrust of right-wing political thought towards the public management of goods and services, favours the market over the State, and translates the services provided by public bodies into quantifiable operating procedures (McLean 1990; Middlehurst 2004). The similarities with the business world are clear: those who use public services are less citizens than users-consumers, who are as such entitled to express their level of satisfaction with the services received. Public bodies must undergo a process of rationalisation in order to overcome waste and internal diseconomies and promote greater systemic efficiency through the acquisition of a firm-like approach. Key words such as quality, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and promotion of merit are incorporated into the principles that guide Law 240/2010. The value framework of the Gelmini reform is inspired by the private company model; it provides for the presence of private actors in university decision-making bodies; it considers the market as a spontaneous mechanism of self-regulation and efficiency; it promotes competition between universities; it attributes greater powers to the top management of the organisation – a management that should run the university according to an entrepreneurial logic - rather than to the assembly bodies. This set of principles and guidelines is accompanied by performance evaluation, the tool used to measure the efficiency of the system in all its internal components. The reform is aimed at reducing public spending. The timing of its promotion is not unrelated to the State's need to reduce the public deficit, which had somehow unexpectedly increased also as a result of the economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008, which led many countries to use public resources to bail out credit institutions and insurance companies. It is no coincidence that, reading the text of the law, one notices that any innovation introduced by the reform is accompanied by the recurring corollary, repeated like a mantra, “without additional costs for the State”. Even more clearly, Table 1 shows the total public funding for the Italian university system in absolute terms from 2008 to 2013, when the effects of the economic and financial crisis had already spread to Italy.

Table 1. Funding from the Ministry of Universities and Research to the university system and the right to education (in millions; years: 2008–2013)

Years	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Student subsidies	462	688	428	375	470	427
University system	7723	7756	7457	7081	7214	6876
Total funding	8186	8444	7885	7456	7684	7302

Source: ANVUR, 2013.

Between 2008 and 2013, all voices decreased significantly: aid to low-income students by 7.6%, funding of the university system by 11%, and total funding by 10.8%. But let us look in detail at the most significant organizational changes that have affected the internal bodies of the university and the academic staff.

a) The university's governance underwent a reconfiguration. The rector acquired greater powers. The previous administrative director, who came from the university's internal bureaucracy, was replaced by the general director, a professional manager recruited from the market, appointed by the Board of Directors and hired on a fixed-term private law contract.
b) The academic senate, which includes the department directors, passes from being the main decisional university assembly to an advisory function; it also has the power to make proposals to the rector and the Board of Directors on matters relating to teaching and the functional organisation of the university.
c) The Board of Directors, composed of at least three members from outside the university, assumes decision-making and management powers.
d) Two new bodies are established: the Evaluation Unit and the Board of Auditors: the former composed of a majority of external members, while the latter composed solely of external members.
e) Faculties are abolished and replaced by schools, administrative units dedicated to the organisation of teaching.
f) Departments are maintained but reduced in number and regrouped. Research-focused structures, departments are assigned the task, previously assigned to faculties, of proposing the recruitment of new academic staff. A minimum number of forty members is also established, below which the department is dissolved, forcing its members to join other departments.

In 2013, following the reform, the number of university departments nationwide fell from 1,625 to 829, halving in number (and correspondingly doubling in size) (ANVUR 2013). This reduction served to rationalise resources, i.e. to make more efficient use of staff, especially administrative staff, with a view to reducing the number of employees; this "rationalisation" operation led to the closure of departments below the minimum threshold which however, depending on the context, could boast a certain academic prestige that nevertheless had to take second place to economic and managerial considerations.

g) The role of permanent researcher as the third level of teaching staff is abolished, replacing it with two types of fixed-term researcher: the first is a three-year contract renewable for a further two years and no more (Type A Fixed-Term Researcher); the second is a three-year non-renewable contract, at the end of which the holder of the position is subject to evaluation and, if they have obtained the National Scientific Qualification (ASN) in the meantime, is appointed to the role of associate professor (Fixed-Term Researcher Type B).

h) The recruitment system of academic staff on the basis of local competitions alone is abolished. In its place, a new procedure called ASN (*abilitazione scientifica nazionale*) is established. These are commissions composed of first-level professors divided by disciplinary field at the national level. The members are drawn from among all those who possess, on the basis of a series of criteria related to their scientific productivity and are in charge for a two-years term. Once the term has passed, that

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 55-77
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.04

commissioner is removed from the draw list for a five-year term. This measure, together with selection by drawing lots, provides for the rotation of commissioners in order to avoid, as far as possible, positions of privilege, conflicts of interest and discretionary evaluations towards ASN candidates. The minimum requirements for a candidate to apply for scientific qualification-in addition to participation in international conferences and funding obtained through competitive tenders-are determined based on significantly different criteria.

For disciplinary fields traditionally belonging to the so-called "hard sciences", such as medicine, physics, mathematics, etc., bibliometric indices are taken into account, that is, citations obtained through various databases within a given time frame, usually 15 years for the first group and 10 years for the second. For other branches of knowledge, such as history, philosophy, sociology, etc., the "research products" (as publications are henceforth called, denoting a productivist orientation of economic origin) are taken into account, based on three categories: monographs, articles and/or contributions in scientific books and journals even in this case according to a time frame ranging from 15 to 10 years depending on the type of category within which the publication is placed and whether you are competing for the ASN for the associate or full professorship. The candidates belonging to the non-bibliometric sectors must meet certain differentiated quantitative requirements for each of the three categories (monographs, articles and/or contributions in scientific books and journals and class A journals) measured on the national median value of publications of those belonging to the group for which one is competing.

5. *The twelve-year functioning of ASN as the recruitment system in the "entrepreneurial" university*

As described in the previous paragraph, this system would appear to be an "objective" one by which to measure the candidates' publications. In reality, this criterion is less so than one might think, since a paper, to be considered valid, must be published in scientific journals recognized as such by ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research). The same applies to articles published in class A journals, a smaller set of all journals considered scientific by ANVUR itself. In other words, publishing articles in journals that have not achieved this "official" scientific status, regardless of their merit content, is worthless when it comes to exceeding the thresholds for the category to which one is competing. Indeed, judging panels, when they find that the thresholds, at least two out of the three categories mentioned above, have not been exceeded, are exempt from evaluating the candidate, declaring the evaluation negative.

Not only that: "predatory" journals were mistakenly included within the "scientific" journal lists compiled by ANVUR. These are journals that require a substantial payment to publish and at the same time do not follow a serious double-blind review process (Drago, 2021). In this sense, the drafting of lists of scientific journals has opened, in the Italian context, a thriving market for accredited publishing groups, which provide a cash contribution from the author to publish within their journals. Otherwise, as mentioned, that paper is not counted towards exceeding the thresholds.

In its first application dating back to 2012, obtaining the qualification for the first or second tier was only possible if the candidate received a positive evaluation from 4 out of 5 components. In addition, a member of the selection board had to be a first-tier professor (Italian or not) permanently employed at a foreign university. Later, as a colleague told us at the time, "we asked to eliminate the mandatory presence of the foreign member, otherwise it would have been like saying that we were not capable of judging correctly". Thus, since 2023 the members have all been Italian, while in the meantime the minimum threshold for obtaining the ASN has also changed, going from 4 to 3 positive evaluations out of the 5 members (MUR 2023). The first change made during the work should be judged, in our opinion, negative because the presence of a foreign member, alien to the self-referential logic of the Italian academy, would have represented greater impartiality of judgment towards the candidates. The second, on the other hand, is positive because in the previous threshold it was sufficient for two commissioners to negatively evaluate a candidate to establish a real right of veto against the remaining members of the commission.

A new government draft law (No. 1518) reforming university recruitment has been proposed in January 2026. The most significant change is the abandonment of ASN and the delegation of the entire process of both evaluation and hiring to local universities. This draft was presented to the Senate of the Republic on June 3, 2025 as the result of a working group that analyzed the functionality of the ASN system 15 years after the approval of Law No. 240 of 2010 and 12 years after its first implementation (Roars 2025, 3).

The main goal that has driven the proposed abolition of the ASN system is, first and foremost, to reduce the number of people expecting to be awarded professorships simply for passing the national evaluation, and consequently, to reduce the distortive effects of the pressure produced by these cumulating expectations on the strategic programming of the Universities.

Furthermore, the dual assessment, quantitative at the national level and then qualitative at the local level provided by the ASN, has been judged "redundant" by the working group on the ASN.

This group has also advocated the extension of the evaluation criteria for recruitment, including teaching, third mission, and administrative-management activities, none of which was adequately taken into account by the ASN system. However, the regulatory proposal aims to

> « Radically simplify the current system, ensuring the maintenance of a minimum threshold of scientific productivity and qualification requirements, shared at the national level, as a condition for access to university teaching» (authors' translation of draft law n.1518).

We observe that this proposed reform of university recruitment remains based on the logic of scientific productivity. Therefore, candidates' self-declaration of eligibility could be easily verified through (and thus replaced by) the results of their scientific output recorded in the computerized publication cataloguing system owned by each university.

Finally, according to the reform proposal candidates will be asked to discuss scientific production and teaching preparation through a trial lecture.

> «The new system aims to concretely hold universities accountable for their respective recruitment policies. From this perspective, the evaluation of new hires becomes a fundamental element in the distribution of the FFO award share, and the contribution allocated to non-State universities. The aim is

to introduce a reward system for universities that hire the best, that is, those who in the post-hiring period demonstrate that their productivity indicators, with their publications and their overall activity, have contributed to the improvement of the activities of the university that recruited them» (authors' translation of draft law n.1518).

Indeed, the ASN-based system that has been in place for over ten years has a whole series of shortcomings. First of all, as it is recalled in the draft reform proposal

«The results of the ASN, also due to the different practices adopted by the individual national commissions, have created a strong heterogeneity in the percentage of qualified individuals between the various competitive sectors and between the different qualifying rounds, clearly compromising the very idea of a unitary and generally homogeneous system for all scientific areas» (Roars 2025, 3).

One of the causes of the significant discrepancy in evaluation between disciplinary sectors is linked to the fact that commissioners do not always have the skills to judge candidates. This is particularly true for minor disciplinary sectors which, in the commission, are aggregated into a macro-sector where the commissioner from that specific disciplinary sector may not be present, because he is not drawn by lot. As a colleague from the University of Florence who has not passed the ASN twice told us "I belong to a small sector whose commissioner is not drawn, or even if he were, he is one along with four other disciplinary sectors, which do not have the skills to evaluate objectively and seriously".

Scientific knowledge has become increasingly specialized, so those who find themselves evaluating candidates who do not belong to their disciplinary field can be induced to infer evaluations for or against the candidate without actually having a precise knowledge of the state of the art of a specific field, therefore not being able to evaluate whether the publication being evaluated is based on a reworking, perhaps well done, with existing knowledge or, on the contrary, it presents significant innovative aspects (Capoferro, 2025).

6. *ANVUR as the centralized Dominus of the "autonomous" and "entrepreneurial" university*

The Gelmini reform attributes to ANVUR (*Agenzia nazionale di valutazione del sistema universitario e della ricerca),* whose members from the academic world are appointed by the minister, the key role of evaluating and monitoring universities. A public law body with its own administrative and accounting autonomy, ANVUR is responsible for designing and implementing *ex ante*, ongoing, and *ex post* evaluations of the Italian higher education system. Through guidelines and prescriptions, i.e. secondary and tertiary regulations, it specifies in detail the qualitative level of performance to reward academic units (universities, departments, research centers) that achieve the best results, assuming a central role in strategic decisions affecting Italian universities: from the allocation of public funds to the accreditation of higher education institutions; from curricula to the formulation of productivity standards for recruitment and academic careers; from the criteria for establishing commissions for the ASN to the selection of scientific committees for the allocations of research grants (Cingolani, Fazekas 2020). Protocols and indicators that measure performance according to a ranking order have significantly modified the dynamics of university governance, orienting it towards formalized meritocratic and competitive logics

(Mateos-Gonzalez, Boliver 2019). The Sisyphus's effort of the Italian Government rhetorically evoked by skeptics to assure meritocratic criteria in university governance, seems to have come to fruition (Capano 2010). However, there is no shortage of fundamental contradictions in the management of the system set up by ANVUR. First of all, with a plethora of prescriptions and guidelines, most often stated in detail, ANVUR is increasingly configured as a top authority with the power to direct (or heterodirect) universities, essentially less and less "autonomous". Furthermore, any type of template, including indicators and indices, first establishes the categories based on which to evaluate universities. They must adapt to these, establishing new offices specifically dedicated to optimize their performance in terms of specific scoring systems. For example, as a colleague told us, the University of Florence has equipped itself with software on the basis of which to select bibliometric publications for periodic evaluation of the quality of research. For non-bibliometric sectors, internal commissions within each department decide which publications to select, within a shortlist indicated by the author, in order to optimize the results based on the criteria indicated by ANVUR. Secondly, the requirements and forms prepared by the agency for the accreditation and quality assessment of universities constitute, as Gianfranco Viesti recalls, "an exercise capable of committing substantial university resources for months among both technical and teaching staff", inevitably leading to a weighing down of procedures and a considerable expenditure of resources (Viesti 2018, 101).

The evaluation of universities according to the procedures developed by ANVUR has led to a progressive shift from standard forms of funding (FFO: Ordinary Fund Funding) to reward-based approaches, based on the principle that universities that achieve better performance will have a greater share of resources available.[2]

In detail, the FFO is divided according to three dimensions: a historical basis, that is, with respect to the previous costs incurred by each university; the standard costs per student established on a national scale; and, finally, reward mechanisms tied to universities' ranking on various indices of merit (ANVUR 2016). From the information we can gather from the ANVUR reports, the 2017 FFO for public universities was divided as follows: 24.5% based on the award share (within this, 80% based on the results of the VQR and 20% based on the quality of the research environment, teaching and internationalization summarized in the category: "Enhancement of responsible autonomy"); 20.7% corresponding to standard costs, 2% in the form of a pre-requative share and 52.4% according to the historical breakdown, all this for a total amount of public resources equal to 7.405 billion (ANVUR 2018). It should also be remembered that, based on some simulations carried out by the same agency, if the historical funding share were eliminated, equal to just over 50%, and the Ordinary Funding Fund were allocated according only to the two remaining items, 30% according to the VQR results and 70% based on standard student costs, we would have a significant reconfiguration of funding on a macro-regional basis.

[2] The National Research Evaluation (VQR) is still the main mechanism regulating the reward share of public funding to universities. VQRs directly affect the amount of funds received by universities and departments, incentivizing quality and scientific productivity, through the Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO). Such funding can be obtained from universities and departments that, through evaluation processes that take into account various indicators in addition to publication productivity, receive rewards for the quality and excellence of research.

The 2015 FFO, with the new breakdown, would see an increase in funding to universities in the North-West (+ 1.5%), the North-East (+ 0.3), the South (+ 0.8%), while the Centre and the Islands would have a corresponding loss, equal to -1% and -1.8% respectively. The elimination of the share of "historical expenditure" would lead to a shift in resources to the benefit of the newly established universities for a total value of 1.8%, which would be lacking for the "historical" universities. The percentages just reported are between l'1.8 and 2.6% depending on whether we are referring to the old and new universities or, alternatively, to the new distribution by macro-areas of the country. In absolute value, based on the State funding of universities in 2015 (7250 million), they correspond to a shift in resources from 130.5 to 188.5 million (ANVUR 2016).
Simulations, as one might imagine, are neither casual nor harmless. In fact, since the introduction of the Gelmini law and its implementing decrees, the FFO distribution criteria have changed. With a gradual increase of 2% from year to year, the FFO bonus fee has increased (which cannot exceed 30% of the total); the standard cost per student has been introduced with a gradual increase from 2 to 5% from year to year, which will gradually replace the "historical" fee criterion up to a maximum of 70%. Thus, as we can read in the latest ANVUR report (2023), the 2022 FFO, equal to a total of 8,656 million, was distributed according to the following items: 25.5% in the form of a "historical" share, 23.1% based on the standard cost, 27% according to the reward share (VQR and Valorization of responsible autonomy), 1.7% for equalization purposes and, finally, 22.6% has been tied to specific objectives, such as the recruitment of academic staff from foreign universities and extraordinary recruitment plans. Compared to the distribution ten years earlier, there has been a significant reconfiguration of resources, with a significant reduction in the historical share, the introduction of standard costs and an increase in the reward share. In 2012, the historical distribution criterion corresponded to 75.9 while the reward share corresponded to 12.4% (ANVUR 2023).
FFO was assigned to universities and departments through evaluation processes that took into account various indicators in addition to publication productivity and were rewarded for the quality and excellence of the research.
Regarding international competition, it can be observed that in Italy, if institutional evaluations (VQRs, ANVUR rankings) may have led to some reshaping of the relative prestige of institutions at the national level, it has barely affected the performance of Italian universities in the international rankings.
This is visible in the results of the international rankings, in which Italy is present at 98th place in the QS (The Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking, better known as QS) with the Polytechnic of Milan. Rome La Sapienza is among the top 150 institutions of excellence of ARWU (Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as Shanghai ranking) and QS. The University of Bologna is among the top 150 positions in THE (Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE).
Another dimension of the NPM managerial focus on evaluation relates to the assessment of teaching organization and activities: that is the AVA system (Autovalutazione, Valutazione e Accreditamento, in English self-evaluation, evaluation and accreditation) implemented in 2013 and managed by ANVUR. AVA was introduced according to the document called "European Standards and Guidelines

for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)" (Ghiazza, Salviati 2020).
The evaluation of teaching in Italy has become institutionalized in the last fifteen years and it has progressively codified a set of guidelines and indicators to be applied to study programs. AVA has evolved through three phases: AVA 1 in 2014, AVA 2 in 2017, and AVA 3 in 2022, progressively increasing the number of domains and indicators to be monitored (De Luca 2024). In detail, each course of study conducts periodic self-assessment. New courses, or courses that have undergone changes, are subject to audits by external experts in order to obtain accreditation. Accreditation is given by the ANVUR after the intervention of special evaluation committees (Commissioni di Esperti della Valutazione, CEV) (Stura *et al.* 2019). This assessment covers elements such as curriculum design, learning outcomes, student services and quality assurance processes. Student evaluation questionnaires are also part of the assessment process. The results of the evaluation may require only minor adjustments, or they may even necessitate the closure of the programme (ANVUR 2023).
In the detailed analysis carried out by Stefano De Luca (2024) on the transition from AVA2 to AVA 3, there is a shift from a 4-11-34 scheme, where 4 corresponded to "Requirements", 11 to "Indicators" and 34 to "Points of attention". In the subsequent version, the scheme, with different names, is 5-39-84: 5 "Areas of assessment", 39 "Points of attention" and 84 "Aspects to consider". Not only that, but since in the AVA 3 version the "Points of attention" do not replace the indicators, the latter are present in a number of 37 as a further specification in the "Aspects to consider," accompanied in turn, depending on the case, by "Other indicators" for a maximum of 9. Thus, «we have a sort of accordion movement which starts from the 5 areas of assessment, widens into 39 points of attention and expands into a further 84 aspects to consider, then contracts into 37 indicators and closes in 9 additional indicators» (De Luca 2024, 53). However, there is criticism of the excessive bureaucratisation of the models and the obsession with indicators and circular procedures, which, in fact, takes time and resources away from improving the quality of teaching (Perla 2024, De Luca 2024). Ministerial Decree 386/2007 (Minister Mussi), which marks the genesis of the AVA system, states:

> «The focus of competition must shift to the quality of educational provision, as well as to the scientific productivity of institutions, verifying and measuring both through self-assessment by universities and external evaluation by ANVUR» (De Luca 2024).

Although teaching quality is formally part of national and internal evaluations, evidence suggests that it remains peripheral or is completely ignored when competing for positions such as the National Scientific Qualification or professorship (ANVUR 2023; De Luca 2024). Thus, the objective expressed in the Ministerial Decree has not been achieved.
The Ava system has virtually no influence on the allocation of funds, but it has imposed a heavy burden in terms of the resources required for auditing. The indicators are rather abstracts, ambiguous and for these reasons applicable to everyone (to every disciplinary sector). This aspect has prompted universities to make strategic use of indicators for the allocation of public funds.

Finally, with regard to the Third Mission, which is a typical expression of an autonomous, entrepreneurial, innovative university, the dominant role played in Italy by ANVUR in the system is considered by an OECD (not a radical anti-government organization) analysis on the development of the Third Mission in Italy to be more a centralistic, bureaucratic hindrance than a support.[3]

«Italian HEIs' capacity to engage is negatively affected by the vast regulatory framework they are subjected to as public bodies. Based on evidence collected in case studies, there may be a disconnect between the formal institutional autonomy of universities and the cumbersome regulations and specific (sometimes conflicting) incentives offered by the government. An example of this disconnect is that the evaluation system takes only into account the research performance of HEIs. It provides an adverse incentive for diversifying institutional strategies, de facto limiting the internal steering autonomy of universities. [...] Conversely, in Italy, the funding scheme emphasises research at the expense of other HEI missions. The current emphasis on scientific excellence at the level of individual entities and researchers is widely perceived to have a crowding-out effect on entrepreneurial and Third Mission activities» (OECD 2019, 161).

It is assumed that partly in response to the OECD's observations, the recent ASN draft law aims to enhance the Third Mission as an evaluation element for the evaluation and hiring of university professors.
One final point to consider is how staff numbers have changed since the Gelmini Law was introduced. Since then, Italian universities have systematically replaced permanent staff with fixed-term staff. In 2010, 57,449 full professors, associate professors and permanent researchers (RTI) were employed on a permanent basis, representing 81% of the total teaching and research staff. The remaining 19 per cent were represented by 13,109 research grant holders. As already mentioned, the Gelmini law exhausted RTIs and replaced them with two positions of fixed-term researchers: type A and type B fixed-term researchers (RTDA and RTDB). As of 2010, the gap between permanent and fixed-term staff is gradually widening: in 2020, there were 46,245 full professors/associate/RTDA/B representing 65% of the staff. Post-doc account for 22% of the total (15,849), RTDAs were 7% (5,192) and RTDBs the remaining 6% (4,616). Law 79/2022 abolished RTDA, RTDB, and research grants, introducing the role of RTT (Tenure Track Researcher) and the research contract. Both contracts are much more expensive than the previous ones. However, the law did not make any provision for extra resources to be allocated. Consequently, the previous figures were extended. The funds arriving at universities under the PNRR (a strategic public investment program aimed at providing recovery and resilience to the Italian economic system after the COVID-related crisis) reinclude the massive hiring of precarious staff, mainly post-doc researchers (*assegnisti di ricerca*) and RTDAs. Nowadays, the two roles are, in fact, becoming redundant. In the future is calculated that around 60,000 aspiring researchers (PhD, post-doc, RTDAs) will have the opportunity to apply for 7,000 fixed-term positions (research contracts envisaged by the MUR within the last regulations DD 47/2025) and 2,600 tenure-track positions, with optimistic forecasts (Roars, 2025,2). Thus, it is evident that the number of permanent staff has decreased drastically over time, and this trend is expected to continue in the future. Thus, out of eight researchers, one can aspire to a fixed-term

[3] For a more in-depth analysis of the emergence of the Third Mission, please refer to the text Desideri, Landucci, Pezzoli 2025.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 55-77
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.04

contract, while out of twenty-three, one can aim for a permanent contract. Rationalisation of expenditure has therefore had a significant impact on staff composition since 2010.

Conclusions

The Italian university system, originally modeled on the Napoleonic system, has retained the peculiarity of centralization over time. In any case, we can speak of a transition towards autonomy; numerous attempts have been made. This process began during the 1980s and has continued to the present day. During this period, university governance has been oriented towards meritocratic and competitive logics, identifiable with the entrepreneurial governance model. These logics fall within a historical-cultural framework known as New Public Management. A crucial event in this process is represented by Gelmini Law no. 240 of 2010. Considering, for example, the funding provided by the MUR to the university system and the right to education between 2008 and 2013, we observe that all expenditure items decreased significantly in the years examined. This means that the transition to autonomy, yes, occurred following a top-down model, but at the expense of the students. As highlighted in the paragraph relating to the historical evolution of the Italian university system, the problems that afflicted the university system in the years '70, unfortunately continue to persist and persist. These include chronic underfunding and overcrowding of teaching spaces, as well as the high dropout rate and low percentage of graduates.

Therefore, the buzzwords such as quality, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and promotion of merit incorporated among the principles guiding the Gelmini Law 240/2010 find concrete application only in part. A part that does not concern students and the proportional ratio of the quantity of students enrolled/quality of infrastructure nor quantity of students enrolled/number of teachers. On the other hand, what has found greater implementation has been the rationalization of expenditures, observable in the reconfiguration of the top bodies and staff.

Furthermore, the allocation of public funds based on the productivity of academic staff has found its concrete application in the creation of the national scientific qualification. In addressing the initial research question, it is posited that, in practical terms, the governance of the Italian university system remains strongly conditioned by attitudes and practices the Napoleonic centralist tradition. In consideration of this situation, the system can be characterised as neo-centralist. Thus, the instruments of new public management (ANVUR; VQR; AVA) become essentially part of a self-referential strategic game of competition between universities for the allocation of national resources. The entrepreneurial aspect, linked to the ideology of NPM, has therefore been essentially implemented into this competition based on the strategical use of performance indicators established and governed by ANVUR. Instead of autonomy, we can therefore speak of "heteronomy," i.e., the subordination of each university to an external authority (the ministry and ANVUR systems of evaluations) (Casavecchia, Pitzalis, Poliandri 2025). The balance between academic freedom and external regulation has become increasingly precarious, with a significant impact on teaching, research, and the university's social role (Pitzalis 2001). At this point one might wonder whether the recent proposal of reform aimed at abolishing the ASN responds to the logic that inspired the Gelmini law or not. As it has been highlighted, some elements of this reform appear to grant greater autonomy to universities and also enhance certain activities, such as teaching and third mission activities, for the purposes of evaluating and recruiting teachers. However, many grey areas remain, and only in the future will it be possible to verify the effects of this reform, in case it will be actually implemented.

References

Amaral A. (2008), *Trasforming Higher* Education, 81-94 in Amaral A., Bleiklie, I., Musselin, C. (eds) *From Governance to Identity A Festschrift for Mary Henkel,* Dordrecht: Springer.

Amaral A. Neave G., Musselin C., e Maassen, P. (2009), *European Integration and the Governance of Higher Education and Research*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Anderson R.D. (2004), *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ANVUR. (2013), *Rapporto sullo stato del sistema universitario e della ricerca 2013* https://www.anvur.it/sites/default/files/202502/Rapporto_ANVUR_2013_sintetica pdf (2025-10-10).

ANVUR. (2016), *Rapporto sullo stato del sistema universitario e della ricerca 2016*, https://www.anvur.it/it/dati-e-pubblicazioni/rapporto-biennale/rapporti-precedenti (2025-10-10).

ANVUR. (2018), *Rapporto sullo stato del sistema universitario e della ricerca 2018*, https://www.anvur.it/it/dati-e-pubblicazioni/rapporto-biennale/rapporti-precedenti (2025-10-10).

ANVUR. (2023), *Rapporto sullo stato del sistema universitario e della ricerca 2023*, https://www.anvur.it/it/dati-e-pubblicazioni/rapporto-biennale (2025-10-10).

Balus B. (2021), *La complessità dell'ordinamento universitario nel sistema delle fonti. La problematica attuazione del principio di autonomia per una amministrazione diversamente pubblica*, Tesi di dottorato XXXIII ciclo. Udine-Trieste: Università di Udine – Università di Trieste, https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/temidiscussione/ 2007/2007-0626/en_tema_626.pdf

Barzelay M. (2001), *The New Public Management: Improving Research and Policy Dialogue*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boffo S. e Moscati R. (2005), *Evaluation in Higher Education: The Case of Italy*. Higher Education Policy 18, 3: 251-69.

Capano G. (2000), *L'università in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Capano G. (2010), "A Sisyphean Task: Evaluation and Institutional Accountability in Italian Higher Education." In "Higher Education Policy" 23: 39-62. DOI:10.1057/hep.2009.19

Capano G. (2002), "Implementing the Bologna Declaration in Italian Universities." In "European Political Science" 1, 3: 81-91. DOI. 10.1057/eps.2002.35.

Capoferro R. (2025), *Le parole e le cose*, Roars, 2 marzo https://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=46253 (2025-10-10).

Casavecchia A., Pitzalis M., e Poliandri D. (2025), *The University from autonomy to heteronomy? How to Rebalance a Critical Path,* Sociologia, and Servizio Sociale Roma Tre Press.

Charle C. (2004). *Patterns*, 33-80 in W. Rüegg (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe*, Vol. III. Cambridge, University Press.Clark B. R. (1977), *Academic Power in Italy. Bureaucracy and Oligarchy in a National University System*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cingolani L. e Fazekas M. (2020), "The role of agencification in achieving value-formoney in public spending." In "Governance", 33:545. DOI:10.1111/gove.12452.

Côté J.E. e Furlong, (eds) (2016), *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Desideri A., Landucci S., e Pezzoli S. (2025), "The emergence of the Third Mission in the Italian university: between the affirmation of New Public Management and the eclipse of autonomy" in *The University from autonomy to heteronomy? How to Rebalance a Critical Path,* edited by Casavecchia A., Pitzalis M., Poliandri D., Roma: Roma Tre Press.

De Luca S. (2025), "La gabbia d'acciaio della cosiddetta qualità." In. Belardelli G., Galli della Loggia E. e Perla L. (a cura di). *Università addio. La crisi del sapere umanistico in Italia*, 56-66. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

Drago D. (2021), "Le riviste rilevanti ai fini dell'ASN: when ANVUR meets 'Breaking Bad'." Roars 7 luglio, https://www.roars.it/le-riviste-rilevanti-ai-fini-dellasn-whenanvur-meets-breaking-bad/ (2025-10-10).

Dunn K.C. e Neuman I.B. (2016), *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Foucault M. (1971). *Nietzsche, la génealogie, l'histoire, 145-172* in Hommage à Jean Hyppolite, Paris, P.U.F.

Fulton O. (2002), *Higher Education Governance in the UK: Change and Continuity*, 163-187 in A. Amaral *et al.* (eds) *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Gerstle G. (2022), *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ghiazza E. e Salviati L. (2020), Evaluation and Quality Assurance of teaching: the Evaluation Board in the AVA Process. *Geopolitical, Social Security and Freedom Journal*, 3(1), 14-30. DOI.10.2478/gssfj-2020-0002.

Giddens A. 1999 (1998), *La terza via. Manifesto per la rifondazione della socialdemocrazia*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Guazzaloca G. (2015), *Storia della Gran Bretagna* 1832-2014. Firenze: Le Monnier.

Lane J. (2000), *New Public Management.* London and New York: Routledge.

Maassen P. (2008), *The Modernisation of European Higher Education: National Policy Dynamics,* 95-112 in Amaral A. *et al.* (eds) *From Governance to Identity A Festschrift for Mary Henkel.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Mateos-González J. L. e Boliver V. (2019), "Performance-based university funding and the drive towards 'institutional meritocracy' in Italy." In "British Journal of Sociology of Education", 40, 2: 145-58. DOI:10.1080/01425692.2018.1497947.

McLean M. (1990), “Higher Education in the United Kingdom into the 1990s: Shopping Mall or Reconciliation with Europe?” in “European Journal of Education” 25, 2: 157-70.

Middlehurst R. (2014), “Higher education research agendas for the coming decade: a UK perspective on the policy-research nexus.” In “Studies in Higher Education” 39, 8: 1475-87.DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2014.949538.

MUR Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca. (2023), www.mur.gov.it/it/areetematiche/universita/docenti-universitari-e-carriera-accademica/abilitazionescientifica (2025-10-10).

OECD (1999), *The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Needs,* OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2019), *Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education in Italy, OECD Skills Studies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, DOI:10.1787/43e88f48-en.

Palermo G. (2011), *L’università dei baroni*. Milano: Edizioni Punto Rosso.

Perla L. (2024), “La qualità perduta della formazione dello studente universitaria.” In Belardelli G., Galli della Loggia E. e Perla L. (a cura di), *Università addio. La crisi del sapere umanistico in Italia,* 56-66. Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli.

Pitzalis M. (2001), Le forme della continuità nell’università italiana. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 42(2), 329-354.

Pollit C., e Buckaert G. (2011) *Public Management Reform a Comparative Analysis* third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ravasio A. (2023), T*he Lay Preacher. Il laburismo di Tony Blair.* Firenze: Firenze University Press.

Reed M.I. (2002), *New Managerialism, Professional Power and Organisational Governance in UK Universities: A Review and Assessment*, 141-161 in A. Amaral *et al.* (eds) *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Regini M. (2009), *Malata e denigrata. L’università italiana a confronto con l’Europa*. Roma: Donzelli.

Roars (2025/1), *Perché aboliamo l’ASN. La relazione illustrativa del governo*, 20 maggio. https://www.roars.it/perche-aboliamo-lasn-la-relazione-illustrativa-del-governo/.

Roars. (2025/2), *I precari dell’università italiana.* https://www.roars.it/i-precari-delluniversita-italiana/

Roars. (2025/3), Addio all’ASN. Ecco il testo di riforma del reclutamento approvato dal Senato https://www.roars.it/addio-allasn-ecco-il-testo-di-riforma-del-reclutamento-approvato-dal-senato/.

Romano F. (1993), *Le rilevazioni ufficiali Istat della popolazione universitaria: problemi e definizioni alternative,* working paper n. 67, gennaio https://www.ec.unipi.it/documents/Ricerca/papers/dsm/1993/Report-67.pdf (2025-10-10).

Rüegg W. (ed.) (2004), A *History of the University in Europe*, Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rüegg W. (ed.) (2011), A *History of the University in Europe*, Vol. IV. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stura I., Gentile T., Migliaretti, G. e Vesce E. (2019). *Accreditation in higher education: Does disciplinary matter?* Studies in Educational Evaluation.

Turri M. (2007), *Il sistema di valutazione del sistema universitario italiano: un'analisi critica.,* Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Viesti G. (2018), *La laurea negata. Le politiche contro l'istruzione universitaria.* Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Von Humboldt W. (1810), *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin,* trad. it. *L'organizzazione interna ed esterna degli istituti scientifici superiori a Berlino* in Bollettino telematico di Filosofia politica, 2017. https://commentbfp.sp.unipi.it/wilhelm-von-humboldt-lorganizzazione-interna-ed-esterna-degli-istituti-scientifici-superiori-a-berlino/

Wagenaar R. (2019), *A History of ECTS, 1989-2019*. Deusto-Groningen: Tuning Academy.

Whyte W. (2015), *Redbrick A Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

La valutazione miope:
la dispersione universitaria oltre gli indicatori

Federica Floridi, Federica Micale, Silvia Cataldi[1]

This paper offers a critical reflection on the use of quantitative indicators in university evaluation and governance processes in Italy, highlighting the implicit assumptions that underpin them. Although useful for planning purposes, indicators cannot be taken as the sole reference point, as they can be subject to semantic ambivalence and fail to capture the complexity of subjective experiences.
The contribution is divided into two parts. The first offers a critical analysis of the tacit cultural assumptions and biases underpinning the use of quantitative indicators in Italian university governance, with particular attention to the phenomenon of student dispersion. The second presents a case study of a three-year degree course in Psychological Sciences and Techniques, combining a longitudinal analysis of the indicators with a qualitative survey. The aim is to promote a more articulated reading of the contemporary university experience, capable of including the social and biographical dimensions of the actors involved without denying the usefulness of the assessment tools.

Introduzione

Negli ultimi decenni, i processi di valutazione e governance dell'università italiana hanno conosciuto una crescente razionalizzazione, sostenuta da indicatori quantitativi pensati per migliorare trasparenza, *accountability* e qualità dell'offerta formativa. Tuttavia, questa logica rischia di ridurre la complessità educativa a soli parametri misurabili, trascurando le dimensioni soggettive, relazionali e contestuali che attraversano l'esperienza formativa.
Il contributo proposto si sviluppa a partire da una riflessione critica sull'uso di alcuni indicatori quantitativi adottati nei processi di valutazione e governance universitaria in Italia, mettendo in luce i presupposti impliciti che li sostengono. Tali strumenti riflettono un orientamento tecnocratico e prestazionale, radicato in una *audit culture* (Power 1997; Shore, Wright 2000), che tende a reificare i fenomeni educativi in funzione della loro misurabilità (Espeland, Sauder 2007; Biesta 2010).
Sebbene utili alla programmazione, gli indicatori non possono essere assunti come unico riferimento rischiando di trascurare i significati soggettivi e le traiettorie biografiche degli studenti. Ne è un esempio il fenomeno della dispersione universitaria che può riflettere un più ampio processo di riorientamento consapevole della carriera formativa.
Il contributo si articola in due sezioni complementari. La prima propone un'analisi critica dei presupposti taciti che ne orientano l'applicazione, soffermandosi sugli effetti attesi, controversi e talvolta perversi che essa può produrre nei contesti

[1] Il contributo è frutto del lavoro congiunto di tutte e tre le autrici. Tuttavia, sono da attribuirsi a Silvia Cataldi i paragrafi "Introduzione", 1 e 2; a Federica Floridi i paragrafi 3, 4.1, 4.2 e 4.3; a Federica Micale i paragrafi 4 e "Conclusioni".

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 79-98
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.05

formativi. Nella seconda parte viene presentato uno studio di caso relativo a un Corso di Laurea triennale in Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche, erogato prevalentemente a distanza. L'analisi di questo caso consente di interrogare in modo approfondito gli indicatori valutativi utilizzati, mettendone in luce le criticità e le tensioni interne. In particolare, l'attenzione si concentra sui fenomeni della dispersione universitaria quali, ad esempio, gli abbandoni e i ritardi nello svolgimento del percorso accademico in cui i vissuti, i riorientamenti e le traiettorie biografiche degli studenti risultano spesso invisibili o tradotti in termini di carenze. Attraverso un approccio metodologico integrato – che combina l'analisi longitudinale di alcuni indicatori quantitativi con un'esplorazione qualitativa delle motivazioni e delle esperienze soggettive – si intende mostrare come fenomeni apparentemente problematici possano assumere significati differenti se letti alla luce delle condizioni strutturali e delle biografie individuali che li attraversano.

L'obiettivo è promuovere una lettura più articolata e critica dell'esperienza universitaria contemporanea, capace di restituire centralità alla dimensione sociale e soggettiva degli attori coinvolti. L'intento non è quello di negare la rilevanza della valutazione attraverso l'uso di strumenti standardizzati, bensì di sottolineare l'importanza di affiancarla a una comprensione più densa e contestualizzata del suo impatto.

1. *Gli sviluppi della valutazione in Italia e i suoi presupposti culturali*

Negli ultimi decenni, la governance universitaria in Italia – come in molti altri contesti nazionali e internazionali – si è progressivamente inserita in un paradigma di valutazione basato sull'uso di indicatori, parametri e metriche. Questi strumenti sono diventati centrali per definire politiche, allocare risorse e valutare le performance istituzionali, segnando una trasformazione significativa nella gestione delle università. Fin dagli anni Novanta del secolo scorso, con l'introduzione dei Nuclei di Valutazione di Ateneo attraverso la Legge n. 537/1993, si inaugura un primo tentativo di sistematizzare la valutazione universitaria. Tuttavia, questa fase mantiene ancora un forte ancoraggio all'universalità del sapere e la sua missione pubblica. Con la Riforma Berlinguer del 1999 (Legge n. 509/1999), inserita nel contesto del Processo di Bologna, si assiste a un'accelerazione verso la comparabilità europea dei sistemi universitari: la valutazione inizia a standardizzarsi attraverso strumenti quali l'autovalutazione e la documentazione sistematica dei percorsi formativi, che rendono per la prima volta misurabile la qualità.

Il processo di razionalizzazione si intensifica con la riforma Moratti del 2004 (Legge n. 230/2005; D.M. 270/2004), che introduce requisiti minimi strutturali e organizzativi per l'attivazione dei corsi di laurea. Ciò rappresenta l'avvio di una valutazione ex ante basata su criteri tecnici e quantitativi, in cui la logica della conformità progressivamente sostituisce quella della missione culturale dell'ateneo. Con la Riforma Gelmini (Legge n. 240/2010) e l'istituzione dell'ANVUR – Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca (D.P.R. n. 76/2010), la valutazione assume una funzione strategica e selettiva, strettamente collegata ai meccanismi di finanziamento. Il sapere diventa un oggetto di misurazione esterna e le università vengono valutate e confrontate tramite indicatori sempre più numerici e comparabili.

Dal 2013, con l'introduzione del sistema AVA – Autovalutazione, Valutazione periodica e Accreditamento (D.M. n. 47/2013), si consolida un modello articolato che combina autovalutazione, valutazione esterna e accreditamento, con indicatori quali tassi di abbandono, soddisfazione degli studenti, placement occupazionale e coerenza tra obiettivi formativi e risultati, diventati decisivi per la valutazione complessiva. AVA 2.0 (D.M. n. 987/2016) sviluppa ulteriormente la logica del miglioramento continuo, organizzata attorno al ciclo PDCA – Plan, Do, Check, Act, trasformando il sapere in una prestazione misurabile, funzionale anche al posizionamento competitivo degli atenei nel mercato accademico. Con AVA 3 (D.M. n. 1154/2021), si punta alla semplificazione e integrazione dei processi valutativi, rafforzando l'attenzione agli esiti e all'impatto, ma sempre attraverso l'impiego di indicatori oggettivi quali occupabilità, coerenza formativa e sostenibilità.

Questi sviluppi riflettono una più ampia trasformazione verso una cultura della verifica e della rendicontazione che si fonda su alcuni presupposti, sedimentati nel tempo, che hanno reso naturale il ricorso a indicatori e procedure di controllo come forma primaria di governo del sapere.

Il primo presupposto è rappresentato dal processo di razionalizzazione burocratica (Weber 1922). Nelle società moderne, l'organizzazione delle istituzioni tende a essere sempre più affidata a norme codificate, a regolamenti impersonali e a procedure standardizzate, che mirano a garantire uniformità e prevedibilità. Applicata al contesto universitario, questa logica ha favorito la progressiva traduzione delle attività di ricerca e di didattica in moduli e procedure verificabili. Questa razionalità burocratica, in apparenza neutrale, fornisce la struttura entro la quale la valutazione diventa possibile, trasformandosi in un esercizio organizzativo che rischia di misurare conformità più che significato (Bosk 2007).

Un secondo presupposto risiede nell'eredità positivista, che impregna la cultura della valutazione con l'idea che la qualità possa essere rappresentata da misurazioni quantitative. Si assume che ciò che è numericamente quantificabile sia intrinsecamente più oggettivo, affidabile e scientifico rispetto a ciò che sfugge alla misura. Tale visione assegna agli indicatori il ruolo di strumenti *evidence-based*, capaci di restituire fedelmente la realtà della formazione e della ricerca. In realtà, come sottolineano Espeland e Sauder (2007), gli indicatori non si limitano a descrivere la realtà, ma la performano, indirizzando i comportamenti e ridefinendo le priorità accademiche. Tuttavia, la forza di questo presupposto culturale ha legittimato una fiducia quasi unanime in classifiche, punteggi e parametri standardizzati come criteri supremi di giudizio.

Il terzo pilastro è costituito dal managerialismo neoliberale, che ha introdotto nel mondo accademico logiche di mercato e linguaggi aziendali. A partire dagli anni Novanta, le università vengono sempre più concepite come attori competitivi sul piano internazionale, chiamati a misurarsi in termini di produttività, efficienza e rendimento. La valutazione accademica si trasforma, così, in una forma di *performance accountability* (Colarusso, Giancola 2020), dove ciò che conta è l'output quantificabile: numero di pubblicazioni, fondi acquisiti, posizionamento nei ranking globali. Come osserva Giroux (2002), questa logica riduce la missione culturale e educativa dell'università a un calcolo di convenienza, favorendo l'omologazione dei saperi e la subordinazione della conoscenza a criteri di mercato.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 79-98
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.05

L'intreccio di questi tre elementi ha dato vita a quella che viene definita *audit culture*. Essa non è quindi il semplice prodotto di nuove normative o di specifiche riforme legislative, ma l'esito di una cultura di fondo che ha reso ovvia e persino inevitabile l'idea che la qualità accademica debba essere catturata attraverso la misurazione standardizzata, la rendicontazione e la comparabilità. In questo quadro, la cosiddetta cultura dell'adempimento rappresenta la manifestazione più evidente: procedure, checklist e documentazioni si trasformano in rituali che hanno valore in sé, indipendentemente dal loro impatto effettivo sulla qualità del sapere. L'università diviene così uno spazio in cui l'atto del valutare, anziché mezzo al servizio del miglioramento, tende a trasformarsi in fine autonomo e autoreferenziale.
Queste trasformazioni hanno suscitato un crescente interesse nella ricerca italiana, che negli ultimi anni ha approfondito, sia gli strumenti introdotti dalle riforme, sia gli effetti organizzativi e culturali che tali dispositivi generano negli Atenei, evidenziando criticità legate alla burocratizzazione e alla pressione performativa (Akbaritabar *et al.* 2021; Bonaccorsi 2020; Casavecchia *et al.* 2025; Galli, Greco 2025; Rebora, Turri 2011).

2. *Bias e rischi connessi ad una cultura dell'adempimento burocratico-valutativo*

L'adozione di sistemi valutativi normativi e quantitativi produce effetti che superano la semplice misurazione della qualità formativa. Questi effetti, profondamente intrecciati con le dinamiche di potere e con i meccanismi di controllo sociale, richiedono un'analisi critica che consideri non solo le conseguenze istituzionali, ma anche le implicazioni simboliche, identitarie e soggettive per i ricercatori e gli studenti coinvolti. Nel cuore di questo processo si collocano vari bias cognitivi e strutturali che condizionano pesantemente il modo in cui la valutazione viene vissuta, praticata e interiorizzata.
Un primo bias, che potremmo definire dell'*accountability* performativa, consiste nella tendenza a ridurre la responsabilizzazione degli attori istituzionali alla sola produzione di risultati misurabili. La valutazione tende infatti a trasformarsi da strumento di apprendimento organizzativo a pratica autoreferenziale, in cui il controllo diventa un fine in sé e non un mezzo per migliorare la qualità (Power 1997; Biesta 2010). Tale dinamica incoraggia fenomeni di *gaming* delle metriche (Guta *et al.* 2013), ovvero strategie orientate a massimizzare gli indicatori senza un corrispondente miglioramento sostanziale, con conseguente riduzione della fiducia nei sistemi valutativi.
Un altro il bias di conformità, che si manifesta nella tendenza sistematica degli attori a conformarsi a modelli, protocolli e parametri di valutazione dominanti al fine di superare agevolmente le procedure valutative. Questa conformità, lungi dall'essere una semplice strategia adattativa, si configura come una forma di *soft coercion*, un modo in cui la logica burocratica e neoliberale riesce a normalizzare comportamenti e pratiche scientifiche (Bourdieu 1998), riducendo gli spazi per l'originalità e la sperimentazione. D'altronde, la pressione al conformismo può sfociare in un ritualismo (Merton 1942), per cui il rigore metodologico si riduce a un'adesione acritica a protocolli che, sebbene assicurino una certa legittimità istituzionale, finiscono per ostacolare l'emergere di approcci innovativi e plurali.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 79-98
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.05

Parallelamente, la pratica valutativa è attraversata da un marcato bias di status quo, che si manifesta nella tendenza a privilegiare metodi, teorie e approcci consolidati, percepiti come più sicuri e facilmente standardizzabili. Questo orientamento, pur garantendo stabilità e prevedibilità alle procedure, tende però a irrigidire il sistema, scoraggiando sperimentazioni e riducendo la possibilità di contestualizzare i risultati. Ne deriva una tensione strutturale tra la missione culturale dell'università – tradizionalmente legata ad autonomia, creatività e pluralismo epistemologico – e le logiche della governance manageriale, orientate invece all'imposizione di standard uniformi e a forme di controllo sistematico (Stame 2016). Tale tensione alimenta una resistenza al cambiamento metodologico e teorico, che limita la capacità della valutazione di adattarsi a sfide emergenti e a campi di ricerca in evoluzione. Si genera così una vera e propria inerzia scientifica, che contraddice la natura dinamica e critica delle pratiche educative e di ricerca. In questo quadro, risultano particolarmente penalizzati approcci qualitativi, interdisciplinari e critici, meno facilmente riducibili a indicatori numerici (Haggerty 2004; Dingwall 2008). Inoltre, la diffusione di modelli valutativi angloamericani, spesso assunti come standard internazionali, contribuisce a marginalizzare tradizioni epistemiche e culturali differenti, con un conseguente impoverimento dell'esperienza valutativa.

Nel contesto della relazione di valutazione emerge inoltre un bias gerarchico e paternalistico. La struttura asimmetrica del sistema valutativo si traduce in un rapporto di potere squilibrato, dove i valutati – siano essi corsi di laurea, docenti o studenti – dispongono di un'agenzia limitata nel determinare criteri, modalità e finalità della valutazione stessa (Foucault 1975). Questo squilibrio si manifesta in una soggettivazione che tende a interiorizzare il giudizio esterno come criterio unico di legittimità, con effetti di auto-sorveglianza e auto-censura, fenomeni ben descritti nelle analisi della *governmentality* (Rose 1999). La struttura gerarchica e asimmetrica del sistema di valutazione si traduce in un rapporto di potere marcato tra chi detta le regole della valutazione e chi le subisce, in cui questi ultimi spesso diventano soggetti passivi, incapaci di incidere sui criteri o sugli obiettivi della valutazione (Dingwall 2008; Adler, Adler 2002). Questo meccanismo limita la partecipazione attiva degli accademici e contribuisce a una diffusa demotivazione e perdita del senso di responsabilità riflessiva, trasformando la valutazione da strumento di miglioramento in un adempimento burocratico privo di reale significato.

Nel campo specifico dell'educazione terziaria, la predominanza di forme quantitative di valutazione produce ulteriori effetti significativi. La valutazione basata su indicatori numerici tende a trascurare i significati soggettivi, le narrazioni biografiche e le traiettorie individuali degli studenti, riducendo le loro esperienze a meri dati statistici. Questo approccio conduce a una standardizzazione forzata dei percorsi formativi e a una progressiva diminuzione della agency studentesca (Ball 2003). L'attenzione ai risultati misurabili – numero di crediti, tempi di completamento, tassi di iscrizione e di abbandono – trasforma l'esperienza educativa in un processo che privilegia la conformità ai parametri istituzionali piuttosto che la crescita personale e l'esplorazione critica. Il prevalere di un uso semplicistico e riduttivo degli indicatori quantitativi favorisce però un'ulteriore standardizzazione, in cui le differenze e le specificità individuali vengono neutralizzate in nome di una presunta equità formale (Bourdieu, Passeron 1970). In questo modo, l'educazione superiore si trasforma da spazio di emancipazione e formazione critica a meccanismo di riproduzione sociale, in cui la agency studentesca viene marginalizzata e la dimensione riflessiva della formazione compromessa.

3. *La dispersione universitaria*

Se il quadro normativo e culturale della valutazione universitaria in Italia ha reso naturale il ricorso a procedure e metriche standardizzate, è nell'ambito della dispersione studentesca che questa logica trova una delle applicazioni più significative e, al tempo stesso, più problematiche. La dispersione assume un ruolo centrale perché rappresenta uno degli indicatori più immediati ed evidenti della regolarità dei percorsi formativi e della capacità delle istituzioni di garantire la progressione degli studenti, diventando così uno dei principali strumenti attraverso cui la valutazione misura efficienza e performance dei corsi di studio.

È importante però sottolineare che con il termine dispersione si indicano diverse forme di interruzione o discontinuità nelle carriere universitarie. Come osserva Fasanella (2012), la dispersione può essere definita genericamente come l'incapacità dello studente di completare, entro la durata prevista, gli obiettivi formativi del corso di studio (CdS) scelto al momento dell'immatricolazione. A partire da questa definizione, è possibile distinguere almeno tre categorie principali:

- l'abbandono inteso come fuoriuscita dal sistema universitario (il cosiddetto dropout);
- il ritardo nel conseguimento del titolo di studio rispetto alla durata legale del corso;
- il passaggio ad un corso di studio diverso da quello di immatricolazione.

Queste tre categorie costituiscono la base concettuale degli indicatori quantitativi utilizzati per monitorare regolarità, prosecuzione e completamento dei CFU, i quali sono sempre calcolati rispetto a uno standard definito come il percorso ideale o normale di studio. Tale riferimento consente di disporre di strumenti comparativi per analisi interne ed esterne e per la rendicontazione dei risultati, evidenziando eventuali scostamenti dalla traiettoria attesa (Colarusso, Giancola 2020).

Tuttavia, l'utilizzo della dispersione come misura comporta limiti significativi. Gli strumenti quantitativi presuppongono percorsi lineari e omogenei, trasformando ritardi, cambi di corso o abbandoni temporanei in segnali di inefficienza, senza considerare strategie individuali, vincoli socioeconomici, impegni lavorativi o familiari, e altre variabili contestuali (Dubet 1994b; Stame 2016).

Ritardi nel percorso accademico e abbandoni temporanei non rappresentano necessariamente indicatori di fallimento, ma possono configurarsi come processi di riorientamento consapevole e creativo, strategie di esplorazione identitaria o, in alcuni casi, come forme implicite di resistenza nei confronti di un modello universitario percepito come rigido, escludente o distante dalle reali esigenze degli studenti. In questa prospettiva, ciò che a prima vista appare come un semplice dato numerico assume un significato più profondo, rivelando dinamiche di adattamento, ricerca di senso e negoziazione critica dei percorsi educativi. Tali interpretazioni sollecitano un ripensamento dell'istituzione formativa, chiamata a interrogarsi e a trasformarsi in direzione non coercitiva né standardizzante, ma capace di accogliere la pluralità dei vissuti e delle traiettorie. Diventa dunque urgente considerare i percorsi universitari non come mere sequenze di esiti quantificabili, ma come itinerari biografici situati, intrecciati a contesti sociali, culturali ed esistenziali.

4. *Il caso di studio*

Il CdS STP – Corso di Laurea triennale interateneo in Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche, attivato congiuntamente dall'Università degli Studi di Roma Sapienza e dall'Università telematica Unitelma Sapienza a partire dal 2017 – rappresenta un contesto particolarmente adatto a questo tipo di analisi. La specificità del CdS STP risiede nella sua modalità di erogazione prevalentemente a distanza, nell'eterogeneità dei profili degli studenti coinvolti (lavoratori, fuori sede, adulti che riprendono gli studi) e nella flessibilità organizzativa, che permette di osservare percorsi non lineari e strategie di partecipazione differenziate. Questa configurazione rende evidente quanto sia difficile adattare indicatori quantitativi standardizzati a un contesto in cui la regolarità formale delle carriere non coincide necessariamente con l'effettiva qualità o l'intensità dell'apprendimento.

Il corso è progettato per coniugare l'e-learning con un approccio didattico partecipativo e collaborativo, valorizzando i punti di forza di entrambi i modelli. La struttura formativa adottata si fonda su tre pilastri fondamentali: una progettazione teoricamente ancorata ai principi del socio-costruttivismo (Vygotskij 1978; Bruner 1996), un team di docenti e tutor altamente qualificati, e l'impiego di un ambiente digitale flessibile e ricco di funzionalità come la piattaforma Moodle. Quest'ultima, unitamente alle modalità con cui viene utilizzata, ha svolto un ruolo centrale nell'armonizzazione tra didattica erogativa e partecipativa, offrendo strumenti capaci di stimolare l'interazione, la riflessione condivisa e la costruzione attiva del sapere (Laurillard 2002; Salmon 2000). Attraverso attività asincrone come videolezioni, forum, attività interattive e di gruppo, è possibile promuovere dinamiche di apprendimento dialogico e cooperativo, coerenti con l'impostazione pedagogica del corso. La natura prevalentemente a distanza del corso di laurea STP permette una fruizione autonoma della maggior parte del materiale messo a disposizione dai vari corsi da seguire. Gli studenti possono organizzarsi autonomamente rispetto alla fruizione dei contenuti erogati secondo il modello classico dell'auto-formazione, ovvero attraverso videolezioni, nonché rispetto alle attività interattive atte a promuovere una partecipazione attiva. La partecipazione alle attività proposte è da intendersi come facoltativa: ogni studente ha la piena libertà di decidere se prendervi parte e a quali attività aderire all'interno dell'offerta prevista dai singoli insegnamenti.

L'analisi si è sviluppata attraverso un approccio metodologico combinato. Da una parte sono stati presi in esame, in un'ottica longitudinale, gli indicatori riportati e provenienti dalla Scheda di Monitoraggio Annuale (SMA) al fine di osservare alcuni aspetti della dispersione universitaria. I dati provenienti dalla SMA si riferiscono all'arco temporale che va dal 2017 al 2023 (con alcune differenze a seconda dello specifico indicatore considerato). Dall'altra, la lettura di tali dati è stata affiancata dall'analisi delle interviste realizzate con gli studenti del corso caratterizzati da una bassa produttività in termini di numero degli esami sostenuti.

Riguardo agli indicatori, l'analisi si è concentrata sulla valutazione della didattica e in particolare sulla regolarità delle carriere. Tra quelli disponibili nel cruscotto ANVUR[2], gli indicatori di regolarità delle carriere presi in considerazione sono i seguenti:

- iC02 – Percentuale di laureati entro la durata normale del corso;
- iC02BIS – Percentuale di laureati entro un anno oltre la durata normale del corso;
- iC13 – Percentuale di CFU conseguiti al I anno su CFU da conseguire;
- iC14 – Percentuale di studenti che proseguono nel II anno nello stesso corso di studio;
- iC15BIS – Percentuale di studenti che proseguono al II anno nello stesso corso di studio avendo acquisito almeno 1/3 dei CFU previsti al I anno;
- iC16BIS – Percentuale di studenti che proseguono al II anno nello stesso corso di studio avendo acquisito almeno 2/3 dei CFU previsti al I anno;
- iC17 – Percentuale di immatricolati che si laureano entro un anno oltre la durata normale del corso nello stesso corso di studio;
- iC21 – Percentuale di studenti che proseguono la carriera nel sistema universitario al II anno;
- iC23 – Percentuale di immatricolati che proseguono la carriera al secondo anno in un differente CdS dell'Ateneo;
- iC24 – Percentuale di abbandoni del CdS dopo N+1 anni.

Per consentire un confronto del CdS preso in esame con la più ampia realtà del panorama universitario, tali indicatori sono stati analizzati in una prospettiva comparativa rispetto alle medie nazionali dei CdS della stessa classe di laurea (L-24) degli Atenei statali e telematici. Tale scelta rende possibile una lettura maggiormente ancorata al contesto di riferimento generale, tenendo conto della natura interateneo del CdS, che vede la partecipazione congiunta di un Ateneo statale e di un Ateneo telematico. Il confronto è stato operato sulla base dei dati pubblicamente accessibili che, tuttavia, riguardano cinque dei dieci indicatori presi in esame[3].

L'indagine qualitativa è stata condotta, invece, attraverso interviste telefoniche semi-strutturate somministrate attraverso il metodo CATI e il supporto di una traccia di intervista flessibile composta da sette domande. Gli intervistati sono stati selezionati sulla base di un monitoraggio che viene regolarmente effettuato dal CdS. Tale monitoraggio individua gli studenti che non superano le soglie stabilite di quantità di esami conseguiti e sono differenziate per ogni coorte in base al numero di esami che effettivamente è possibile sostenere. A partire da questo monitoraggio si è deciso di selezionare solamente gli studenti iscritti dal secondo anno di corso in poi escludendo, dunque, gli studenti iscritti al primo anno poiché al momento della realizzazione delle interviste vi erano ancora due sessioni per poter sostenere gli esami. Le interviste, infatti, sono state realizzate durante il mese di giugno 2025 e sono state anticipate da un primo contatto tramite posta elettronica che ha annunciato l'imminente indagine. Complessivamente gli iscritti a partire dal secondo anno risultati sottosoglia[4], sono stati 67, dei quali ne sono stati contattati 61, tramite una e-mail che annunciava gli

[2] Per un approfondimento di questo strumento messo a disposizione dall'Agenzia vedi Di Benedetto *et al.* 2019.

[3] Dati accessibili al seguente indirizzo https://www.anvur.it/it/cruscotto.

[4] Le soglie individuate sono 5 esami per il II anno, 11 esami per il III anno e 16 esami per i fuori corso.

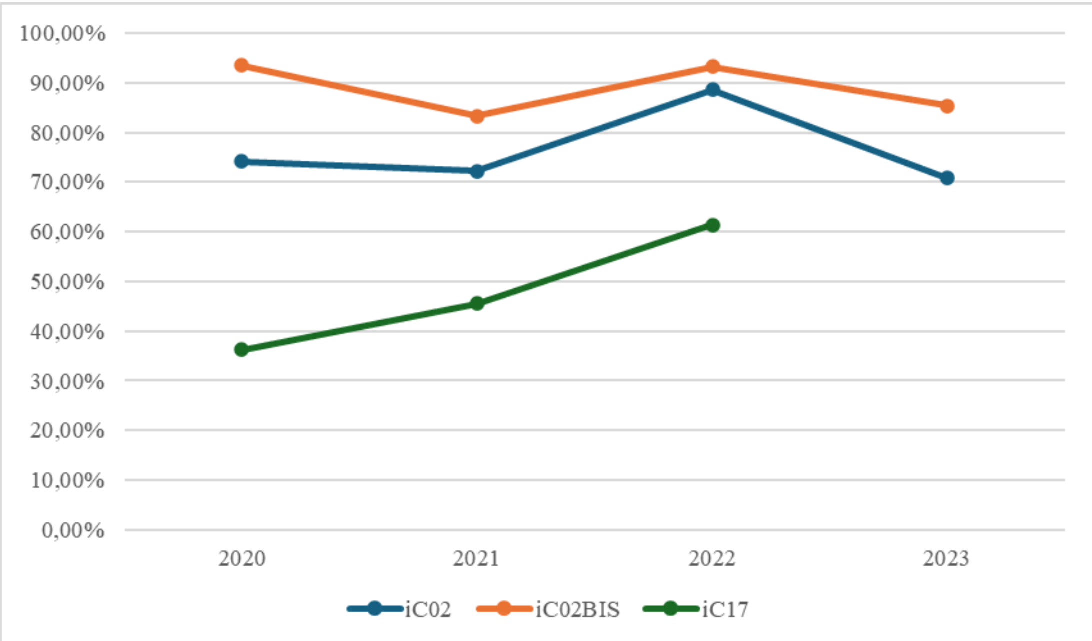
scopi e le modalità dell'intervista e, in un secondo momento, tramite un contatto telefonico. Di questi 61 studenti e studentesse 36 hanno risposto al contatto telefonico e hanno scelto volontariamente di partecipare all'indagine, con un tasso di risposta del 59%.
Le interviste sono state trascritte e analizzate attraverso un approccio narrativo. Successivamente è stata condotta l'analisi attraverso una procedura induttiva, con l'obiettivo di individuare le percezioni e le esperienze più ricorrenti (Maguire e Delahunt, 2017). Tale procedura consente l'individuazione di temi rilevanti e la costruzione di categorie concettuali attraverso la formulazione e la progressiva revisione di ipotesi basate sul confronto tra i casi (Johnson, 1998). I codici iniziali, ricavati suddividendo i testi in unità di significato, sono stati infine sintetizzati e affinati in temi descrittivi.

4.1 *Il conseguimento del titolo di studio*

Una prima parte dell'indagine si è concentrata sul conseguimento del titolo di studio. Questo evento, che costituisce l'obiettivo principale di chi si iscrive a un corso di laurea, può essere raggiunto con diverse tempistiche (ad esempio, con uno o più anni di ritardo) e diverse modalità (ad esempio, seguendo un percorso non lineare caratterizzato dal passaggio a un altro CdS, sia della stessa classe di laurea che di una differente).
Gli indicatori considerati sono iC02 e iC02BIS: il primo rileva gli iscritti al CdS che si laureano nei tempi previsti secondo la durata legale del corso, mentre il secondo include anche coloro che si laureano entro un anno oltre la durata legale, considerando quindi sia i laureati in corso, sia quelli fuori corso di un anno. L'indicatore iC17, invece, prende in considerazione gli immatricolati puri che si laureano con al massimo un anno di ritardo. Per immatricolati puri si intendono quegli studenti che si immatricolano per la prima volta al CdS e nel computo dell'indicatore vengono sottratti quegli studenti che hanno interrotto per un periodo di tempo la carriera. Nel grafico 1 è possibile osservare come la percentuale di coloro che conseguono la laurea in tempi regolari subisca un'inflessione nel tempo. Seppure si verifichi un picco raggiunto nel 2022, probabilmente dovuto anche alle conseguenze della pandemia da COVID-19, in cui la percentuale supera l'88%, nel 2023 (70,8%) si conferma la tendenza osservata per il 2020 (74,2%) e il 2021 (72,2%) che vede una progressiva diminuzione dei laureati in tempi regolari che si attesta, comunque, su livelli superiori al 70%. Per quanto riguarda la media nazionale degli Atenei statali e telematici, i dati mostrano una tendenza crescente. Va tuttavia evidenziato che i valori di partenza del 2020 si attestano su percentuali sensibilmente più basse (65,7% per gli Atenei statali e 60,05% per i telematici), che aumentano progressivamente nel tempo: nel 2021 gli atenei statali registrano il 68,24% e i telematici il 64,68%; nel 2022 si registrano rispettivamente il 69,01% e il 71,93%; nel 2023 il 68,34% e il 74,44%. Sebbene nel 2023 questi ultimi registrino un valore percentuale leggermente più alto rispetto al CdS in interateneo, il valore degli Atenei statali si attesta comunque su percentuali leggermente inferiori rispetto al CdS in esame. Per l'indicatore iC02BIS si rileva la stessa tendenza generale alla diminuzione, seppure mostri un andamento altalenante. Questo indicatore, che nel 2020 si attesta su livelli del 93,5%, raggiunge il suo picco negativo nel 2021 (83,3%) per poi tornare a salire nel 2022 (93,2%) e a diminuire

nuovamente nel 2023, attestandosi all’85,4%. Rispetto alla comparazione con la media dei CdS L-24 appartenenti ad Atenei statali e telematici, si registrano valori tendenzialmente in aumento: nel 2020 le percentuali si attestano su valori rispettivamente dell’83,98% e dell’83,91%, nel 2021 tali percentuali salgono all’84,89% e all’85,96%, nel 2022 i valori continuano a crescere fino ad attestarsi all’87,18% per gli Atenei statali e all’89,22% per i telematici e nel 2023 tali percentuali sono rispettivamente dell’86,51% e del 91,93%. Nonostante le tendenze tra il CdS interateneo e i CdS della stessa classe degli Atenei statali e telematici presentino alcune differenze, è possibile osservare come i valori dell’indicatore iC02BIS del CdS in esame risultino comunque complessivamente in linea con i valori registrati a livello nazionale. L’indicatore iC17, invece, mostra come la percentuale di immatricolati puri che si laureano entro un anno oltre la durata normale del corso aumenti nel tempo, con un valore iniziale del 36,2% che raggiunge il 61,4% nel 2022.
Questi tre indicatori si concentrano sul conseguimento della laurea entro tempi considerati regolari o con un lieve ritardo. Sebbene un aumento della quota di laureati fuori dai tempi canonici possa essere interpretato come un dato negativo secondo criteri puramente quantitativi, due considerazioni rendono necessaria una lettura più articolata. In primo luogo, il completamento del percorso di studi con un ritardo di un anno può essere considerato fisiologico; in secondo luogo, il conseguimento della laurea nei tempi legali non rappresenta sempre l’unico obiettivo degli studenti. Tra gli scopi principali vi è infatti l’acquisizione di conoscenze e competenze, che può richiedere tempi più lunghi rispetto alla durata legale del corso.

Grafico 1 – *Percentuale di laureati entro la durata normale del corso (iC02), Percentuale di laureati entro un anno oltre la durata normale del corso (iC02BIS) e Percentuale di immatricolati che si laureano entro un anno oltre la durata normale del corso nello stesso corso di studio (iC17)*



Inoltre, il prolungamento dei tempi di laurea può riflettere strategie individuali di gestione del tempo in relazione a vincoli lavorativi, responsabilità familiari o altri impegni personali. In questo senso, le logiche di *audit culture* e i principi burocratici e neoliberisti che permeano il sistema universitario influenzano non solo le percezioni di successo e fallimento, ma possono anche amplificare bias impliciti, interpretando ritardi fisiologici come segnali di inefficienza e trascurando le forme di agency consapevole che caratterizzano i percorsi degli studenti.
Tali dinamiche risultano particolarmente evidenti nel CdS STP, dove l'abbattimento dei vincoli temporali e spaziali tipici dei corsi in presenza favorisce la partecipazione di studenti lavoratori, fuori sede o di coloro che intendono riprendere un percorso di studi interrotto, conciliandolo con impegni professionali e familiari. Un sondaggio condotto nel 2019 all'interno del CdS ha rilevato che le motivazioni principali degli studenti includevano la passione per la psicologia, esigenze organizzative o opportunità accademiche. Ciò contribuisce a spiegare perché i percorsi degli studenti non sempre si conformino ai tempi legali di completamento del corso.
Un ulteriore elemento di contestualizzazione riguarda il bacino di utenza del CdS, che include studenti con caratteristiche particolari, come coloro che lavorano o hanno rilevanti impegni familiari. Queste condizioni sono emerse chiaramente dall'analisi delle interviste. Ad esempio, un'intervistata sottolinea come la sua condizione di studentessa lavoratrice, insieme alle motivazioni personali, influenzi il ritmo e l'organizzazione del percorso di studio, evidenziando come la partecipazione al corso sia guidata dalla passione pur in presenza di tempi limitati da dedicare allo studio:

«Ho già la mia laurea, lavoro fulltime ed è una cosa che faccio per passione nel tempo libero. Ci tengo molto, è una cosa che voglio assolutamente concludere, però è una cosa che purtroppo devo fare nei ritagli di tempo, quindi purtroppo rimane a volte più indietro e nei periodi più liberi andare più avanti» (I_15_F_3anno[5]).

Anche le parole di un'altra intervistata restituiscono una chiara immagine dei motivi che possono essere alla base del conseguimento della laurea oltre la durata legale del corso. Seppur si tratti sempre di una studentessa lavoratrice, in questo caso i motivi alla base dell'iscrizione al CdS sembrano essere di natura più strumentale:

«Io faccio due/tre lavori e questa è un'università che va a tempo perso per convalidare un master in counseling, quindi la sto facendo, ma non ho così tanta pressione nel farla rapidamente nei tempi. Per cui la sto prendendo con molta, molta calma» (I_36_F_fuori_corso).

Un punto di vista differente è desumibile dalle parole di un altro intervistato che specifica come per lui l'acquisizione delle conoscenze sia un aspetto che prevale sul conseguimento del titolo nei tempi previsti:

«Lavoro full time ed ho iniziato il percorso per passione, per qualcosa di personale e non ho esigenze di andare veloce. Ho una mentalità molto meno improntata sul finire velocemente per trovare un lavoro, ma molto più improntata sull'acquisire conoscenze che mi piace avere» (I_18_M_3anno).

Questi stralci suggeriscono come il conseguimento del titolo di studio debba essere interpretato alla luce di percorsi individuali e strategie di apprendimento differenziate.

[5] Per garantire l'anonimato degli intervistati, le interviste sono state codificate con un numero sequenziale (ad esempio, I_1), il sesso (M/F) e l'anno di corso (ad esempio, 2anno).

4.2 *Produttività e proseguimento nel percorso di studio*

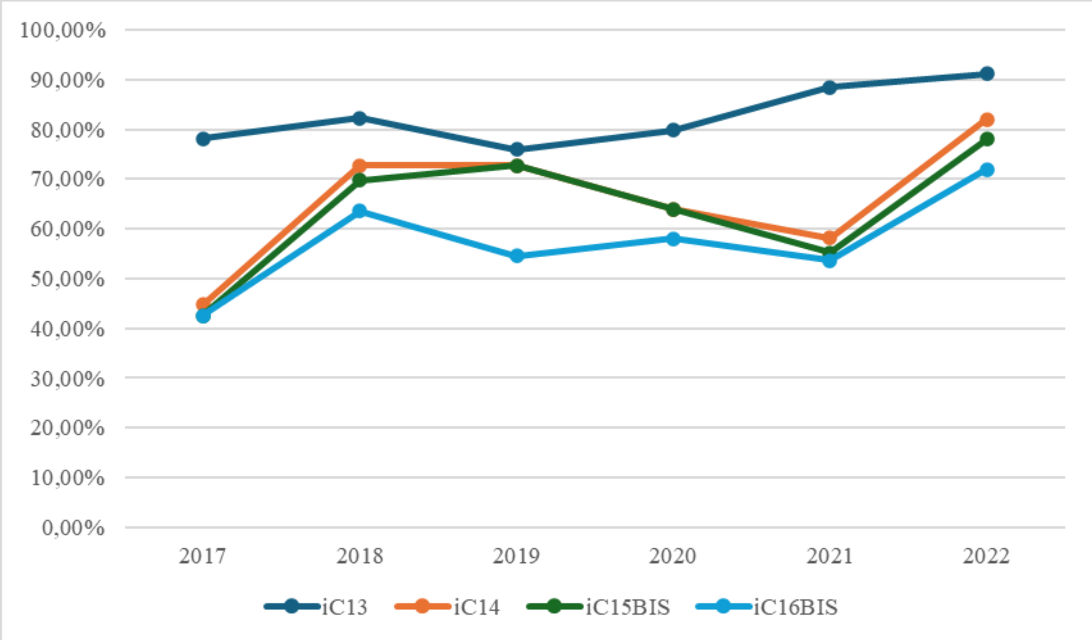
Il secondo focus dell'analisi riguarda la produttività degli studenti e il proseguimento della carriera nello stesso corso di studio (grafico 2).

L'indicatore iC13, che si concentra sulla produttività e rileva la percentuale di CFU conseguiti al I anno rispetto ai CFU da conseguire, ha un andamento crescente che, seppure subisca un'inflessione nel 2019 (76%), da un valore del 78,1% nel 2017 arriva a superare il 91% nel 2022. Confrontando i dati con le medie nazionali dei CdS della stessa classe di laurea degli Atenei statali e degli Atenei telematici è possibile osservare la stessa tendenza crescente, seppure i telematici si attestino su valori decisamente inferiori rispetto al CdS interateneo e alla media degli Atenei statali. Per questo confronto i dati sono disponibili solamente a partire dal 2019, anno in cui le percentuali registrate sono del 72,23% per i CdS L-24 di Atenei statali e 41,17% per quelli telematici. Nel 2020 i valori percentuali si attestano rispettivamente al 71,91% e al 43,64%, nel 2021 al 71,94% e al 42,71% e, infine nel 2022 tali valori si innalzano fino a raggiungere il 76,51% per gli Atenei statali e il 52,33% per i telematici. L'iC14, che registra la percentuale di studenti che nel passaggio dal primo al secondo anno proseguono nello stesso corso di studio, è incentrato sulla linearità del percorso. Gli altri due indicatori riportati nel grafico 2 (iC15BIS e iC16BIS) combinano le due informazioni, rilevando la porzione di studenti che nel passaggio al secondo anno proseguono nello stesso CdS avendo acquisito rispettivamente un terzo e due terzi dei CFU previsti al primo anno. L'iC14 e l'iC15BIS presentano un andamento molto simile che tende a un incremento generale poiché da valori iniziali del 44,7% (per l'iC14) e del 42,6% (per l'iC15BIS) aumentano rispettivamente fino all'82% e il 78% nel 2022. Ciò indica che tendenzialmente quasi tutti gli studenti che proseguono al secondo anno hanno acquisito almeno un terzo dei crediti formativi previsti nel primo anno di corso. Il confronto dell'iC14 con i valori dei CdS di L-24 degli Atenei statali e telematici (disponibile a partire dal 2019) pone in evidenza come il corso interateneo si posizioni per alcuni anni su valori maggiormente assimilabili agli Atenei telematici mentre per altri, in particolare per il 2022, i valori siano più simili agli Atenei statali: nel 2019 il CdS interateneo registra il 72,7%, gli Atenei statali l'85,23% e i telematici il 68,98%; nel 2020 si registrano rispettivamente valori del 64% (CdS in esame), 83,74% (Atenei statali) e 67,48%(telematici); nel 2021 valori corrispondenti al 58,2%, all'84,26% e al 66,98%; infine, nel 2022 le percentuali registrate si attestano 84,90% per gli Atenei statali e al 62,53% per i telematici.

Anche l'andamento dell'iC16BIS presenta un tendenziale aumento confrontando i valori del 2017 e del 2022 (42,6% e 72%). Tuttavia, tale aumento non è lineare e presenta un brusco calo passando dal 63,6% del 2018 al 54,5% del 2019. Tale valore aumenta leggermente nel 2020 (58%) per diminuire nuovamente nel 2021 (53,7%). L'iC16BIS presenta fisiologicamente valori più bassi dell'iC15BIS poiché è compreso in quest'ultimo.

Anche per l'iC16BIS il confronto con Atenei statali e telematici è possibile solamente a partire dal 2019, anno in cui le percentuali si attestano su valori del 65,2% per gli Atenei statali e del 23,85% per i telematici, nel 2020 i valori registrati sono rispettivamente del 64,27% e del 22,17%, nel 2021 sono del 65,01% e 22,5%, mentre per il 2022 i valori sono del 67,98% e del 39,66%. L'andamento generale dell'iC16BIS del CdS interateneo registra valori più vicini ai livelli degli Atenei statali piuttosto che ai livelli dei telematici, e nel 2022 registra i valori più elevati in assoluto rispetto ai confronti operati.

Grafico 2 – *Percentuale di CFU conseguiti al I anno su CFU da conseguire (iC13), Percentuale di studenti che proseguono nel II anno nello stesso corso di studio (iC14), Percentuale di studenti che proseguono al II anno nello stesso corso di studio avendo acquisito almeno 1/3 dei CFU previsti al I anno (iC15BIS) e Percentuale di studenti che proseguono al II anno nello stesso corso di studio avendo acquisito almeno 2/3 dei CFU previsti al I anno (iC16BIS)*



Rispetto a questo gruppo di indicatori è possibile riflettere su due questioni: da una parte, seppure la scarsa produttività degli studenti possa essere un segnale che precede l'abbandono, è possibile riproporre la considerazione relativa all'acquisizione di conoscenze e competenze che per gli studenti rappresenta una priorità rispetto alla velocità nell'acquisizione dei CFU. Dall'altra parte, il mancato proseguimento al secondo anno nello stesso corso potrebbe indicare un riorientamento consapevole dello studente.

Rispetto alla questione della scarsa produttività c'è da sottolineare che può essere dovuta a diversi fattori. Il principale motivo che viene riportato dagli intervistati è la condizione lavorativa che ostacola il sostenimento degli esami. Tuttavia, non sono rari i casi in cui vengono riferite cause legate al carico familiare o a problemi di salute. A tali fattori si aggiunge il desiderio di acquisire le conoscenze in modo approfondito o mantenere una media dei voti alta in vista dell'iscrizione alla laura magistrale. Alcuni stralci particolarmente eloquenti sono riportati di seguito:

«Io sono studente lavoratrice e purtroppo il mio lavoro è molto preponderante (…), quindi sto riuscendo a seguire le lezioni, ma mi è difficile preparare gli esami. Non mi piace dare gli esami così tanto per provarci, mi sono iscritta all'università proprio per imparare e quindi per andare a fondo negli argomenti» (I_5_F_2anno).

«Non mi piace fare esami troppo velocemente perché mi piace avere una media alta e non ho corso, diciamo così. E poi il fatto del lavoro, che cerco di conciliare con lo studio» (I_30_F_fuori_corso).

Alcuni studenti e studentesse possono incontrare anche difficoltà nel superare gli esami:

«Ho provato a fare altri esami, che non superavo o di cui non accettavo il voto, anche per col fatto che per la magistrale ora c'è una valutazione per l'accesso, voglio accettare voti più alti» (I_32_F_fuori_corso).

Come anticipato, un ulteriore fattore di ostacolo alla produttività degli studenti può essere legato a condizioni di salute particolari come patologie o disabilità, come riportato nei due stralci di intervista che seguono:

«Il motivo (per cui ho fatto solo quattro esami) è che devo destreggiarmi tra il lavoro e i ricoveri in ospedale. Purtroppo, sono nata con questa patologia ed è dalla prima elementare che combatto con le assenze, perché la mia salute devo tenerla sotto controllo. Diciamo che raggiungo i miei obiettivi, ma ho i miei tempi, ecco» (I_1_F_2anno).

«Sono stati tre anni in cui ho vissuto tante cose diverse, poi con una disabilità conciliare studio e lavoro non è facile» (I_19_F_3anno).

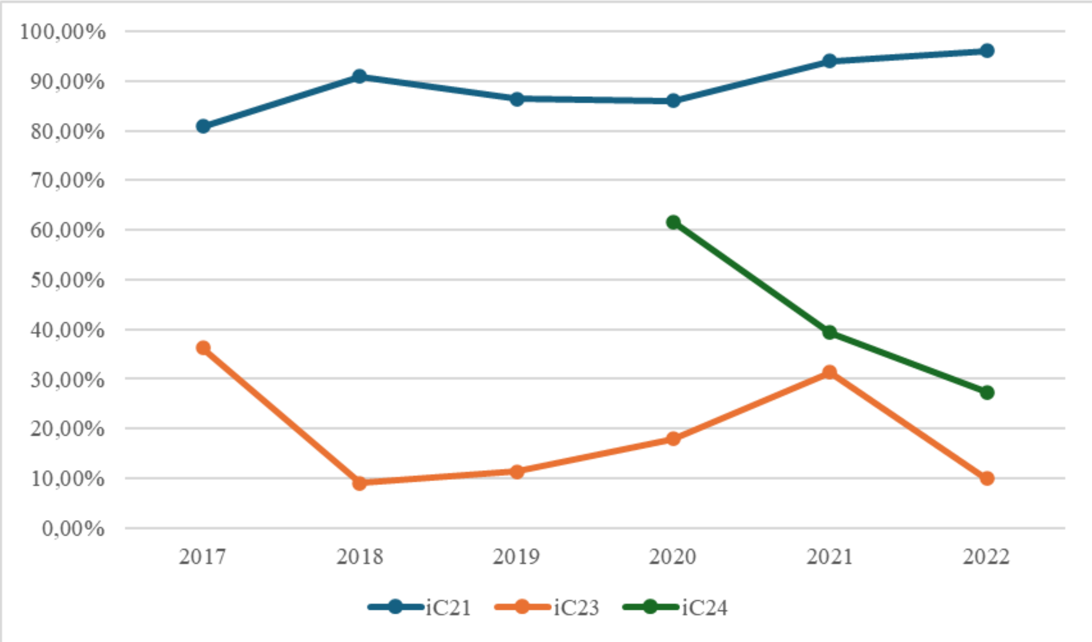
Ciò suggerisce che la produttività e il proseguimento nel percorso di studio non possono essere letti esclusivamente in relazione alla velocità o all'efficienza che andrebbero a produrre bias paternalistici e gerarchici, interpretando ritardi fisiologici o scelte strategiche come segnali di inefficienza o scarsa motivazione.

4.3 *Abbandono e riorientamento*

Con l'ultimo gruppo di indicatori (presentato nel grafico 3) è stata approfondita la questione dell'abbandono. Osservando l'iC21 è possibile rilevare come nella maggior parte dei casi, nel passaggio al secondo anno, gli studenti proseguono la loro carriera nel sistema universitario, raggiungendo un valore del 96% nel 2022. L'iC23 mostra, invece, la percentuale di immatricolati puri che al secondo anno proseguono in un differente CdS dello stesso Ateneo. Per tale indicatore possiamo osservare come i valori siano variabili seppure tendano ad una diminuzione nel tempo: se nel 2017 il valore era del 36,2%, dopo l'iniziale brusco decremento – che arriva al 9,1% nel 2018 – si nota un crescente aumento, fino ad arrivare al 31,3% nel 2021 per poi tornare ad attestarsi al 10% nel 2022. Infine, l'indicatore iC24 mostra la percentuale di abbandoni dopo un anno oltre la durata legale del corso. Questo indicatore, disponibile solo a partire dal 2020, mostra un iniziale valore del 61,7% che diminuisce fino al 27,3% per il 2022.

Questi indicatori consentono di osservare un aspetto dell'abbandono che non può comunque essere considerato un fallimento ma un legittimo riorientamento consapevole degli studenti.

Grafico 3 – *Percentuale di studenti che proseguono la carriera nel sistema universitario al II anno (iC21), Percentuale di immatricolati che proseguono la carriera al secondo anno in un differente CdS dell'Ateneo (iC23) e Percentuale di abbandoni del CdS*



In effetti, se l'iC21 fornisce contezza di quanti studenti nel passaggio al secondo anno decidono di fuoriuscire dal sistema universitario, gli altri due indicatori non possono essere considerati come un abbandono tout court ma, piuttosto, come un processo di ridefinizione del percorso universitario che prosegue in una direzione differente rispetto a quella inizialmente intrapresa. Nel caso specifico del CdS in Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche, il passaggio a un altro corso dell'Ateneo che potrebbe, ad esempio, essere in presenza, non dovrebbe essere considerato con un'accezione negativa se osservato dal punto di vista dell'agency studentesca.
Un'intervistata, ad esempio, riferisce di seguire due corsi universitari contemporaneamente e, per tale motivo, ha trascurato il CdS in STP:

«Sono iscritta in contemporanea a un'altra facoltà e al momento questa CdL l'ho messo un po' da parte» (I_20_F_3anno).

Le interviste hanno affrontato temi relativi al riorientamento. È interessante notare come spesso tali deviazioni non siano legate a caratteristiche del CdS, quanto piuttosto a questioni soggettive e personali:

«Il primo anno io ho cambiato università (facevo infermieristica nella sede di Viterbo), però ho avuto un'esperienza personale non negativa per colpa dell'università, ma l'ho vissuta un po' male, quindi quando ho lasciato ero un po' provata. Poi mi sono riscritta a psicologia e inizialmente l'ho presa un po' con calma, dando un esame a sessione per riuscire a sostenere, perché prima non riuscivo nemmeno a sostenere quelli, mi facevo prendere dal panico» (I_21_F_3anno).

Il riferimento a problemi personali che l'università non può risolvere emerge ricorrentemente durante le interviste:

«Le mie esigenze non me le risolve l'università, devo risolvermele da sola» (I_17_F_3anno).

In tal senso, questi processi non sono completamente governabili attraverso misure o iniziative da parte dei CdS e dovrebbero essere letti come possibili variazioni legittime dei percorsi. Letti attraverso le parole degli studenti, abbandono e riorientamento non indicano necessariamente fallimento, ma strategie deliberate di ridefinizione del percorso universitario, coerenti con l'agency individuale.

Conclusioni

L'analisi del caso del CdS in STP ha rappresentato un osservatorio privilegiato per interrogare criticamente le logiche sottese alla valutazione accademica contemporanea. Attraverso l'analisi di indicatori quantitativi e dei vissuti studenteschi, emerge come la dispersione o i ritardi nel percorso di studi possano essere reinterpretati alla luce delle traiettorie soggettive e delle condizioni strutturali.
Lungi dal configurarsi come semplice sintomo di inefficienza organizzativa o di carenza individuale, la cosiddetta dispersione si rivela spesso esito di strategie adattive, di pratiche di riorientamento consapevole o di forme di resistenza silenziosa rispetto a modelli universitari percepiti come rigidi, performativi e scarsamente inclusivi (Dubet 1994a). Tale riconcettualizzazione invita a uno spostamento di prospettiva verso una visione capace di accogliere la pluralità delle esperienze, riconoscendo nelle discontinuità, nei rallentamenti e nelle deviazioni elementi non marginali ma costitutivi dei processi formativi contemporanei.
I risultati della ricerca evidenziano proprio tali aspetti. Molti studenti, confrontandosi con impegni lavorativi, responsabilità familiari o condizioni personali particolari, hanno costruito percorsi individualizzati, modulando tempi e modalità di studio. In diversi casi, scelte come il rallentamento degli studi o l'abbandono dei corsi rappresentano strategie deliberate per conciliare obiettivi accademici e vincoli personali, oppure per approfondire conoscenze specifiche.
Il caso in esame offre così lo spunto per una riflessione più ampia sul significato e sulle funzioni della valutazione accademica, la quale si configura sempre meno come uno strumento di misurazione oggettiva e sempre più come un dispositivo performativo (Strathern 2000). Essa non si limita infatti a registrare la realtà, ma contribuisce attivamente a plasmarla. Le metriche valutative, i protocolli di qualità e gli standard di performance costituiscono una griglia epistemica e normativa che orienta i comportamenti, seleziona ciò che è visibile, legittima determinati saperi e ne marginalizza altri. Il rischio è quello di un *goal displacement*, ovvero uno spostamento in cui i mezzi – moduli, indicatori, procedure – diventano fini, generando una cultura dell'adempimento in cui la conformità burocratica prevale sul valore formativo e trasformativo dell'educazione.
In questa fase storica, la valutazione rischia di trasformarsi in un meccanismo di disciplinamento che, invece di promuovere la qualità, può inibire l'innovazione metodologica, la riflessività critica e la sperimentazione epistemica. Tale meccanismo tende a produrre soggettività governabili, adattate a un regime tecnocratico,

alimentando processi di esclusione simbolica e materiale a danno di chi non si conforma ai modelli dominanti di efficienza, linearità e prestazione.
Per uscire da questa doppia logica, che riduce la valutazione a mero dispositivo di controllo, è necessario un ripensamento profondo che la riconduca al suo ruolo originario di strumento di riflessività e trasformazione. In primo luogo, la valutazione deve essere concepita come un processo intrinsecamente plurale, e non come dominio esclusivo di una logica quantitativa e standardizzata (Stame 2016). Se da un lato gli indicatori numerici rappresentano strumenti imprescindibili per monitorare aspetti organizzativi e di performance, essi non possono da soli esaurire la complessità dei fenomeni educativi. Devono essere affiancati da una pluralità metodologica ed epistemologica che integri dati qualitativi, narrazioni e approcci interpretativi, capaci di restituire la specificità e la complessità dei percorsi di apprendimento (Guba, Lincoln 1994; Rustin 2000; Denzin, Lincoln 2018).
In secondo luogo, è imprescindibile promuovere un'analisi situata dei contesti e un coinvolgimento attivo degli attori coinvolti, valorizzandone l'agency e la capacità di interpretazione e trasformazione. Ciò richiede di superare la logica di marketing che riduce gli studenti a clienti e la formazione a un prodotto da consumare, riconoscendo invece le persone come soggetti agenti, portatori di vissuti, aspettative e strategie in dialogo continuo con le strutture istituzionali (Emirbayer, Mische 1998). Un approccio valutativo che tenga conto delle condizioni materiali e simboliche in cui si dispiegano tali traiettorie permette di trasformare la valutazione in uno spazio di dialogo e co-costruzione di significato, restituendo centralità alle dimensioni formative, critiche ed emancipative dell'esperienza educativa.
Le evidenze raccolte mostrano come i diversi livelli analitici, quali le logiche delle riforme valutative, gli indicatori quantitativi relativi alle carriere universitarie analizzati in un'ottica longitudinale e le narrazioni degli studenti, si intreccino in modo significativo. Mentre la ricostruzione della normativa e delle riforme che regolano l'attività di valutazione nel contesto del sistema universitario definisce il quadro di riferimento entro cui si muovono le istituzioni e gli studenti, delineando le regole, le aspettative e le logiche organizzative che orientano le pratiche accademiche e le scelte individuali, gli indicatori quantitativi evidenziano tendenze generali, ma anche variazioni che, se lette insieme alle interviste, rivelano strategie consapevoli degli studenti per modulare tempi e modalità di studio in funzione di impegni lavorativi, responsabilità familiari o esigenze personali. In questo senso, le pratiche di apprendimento degli studenti rappresentano concretamente, su scala micro, l'effetto dei sistemi valutativi: essi orientano comportamenti e decisioni, influenzano le traiettorie individuali e, al contempo, mettono in luce i limiti di una lettura esclusivamente quantitativa dei percorsi formativi.
L'analisi proposta, dunque, non mira a delegittimare la cultura della valutazione, bensì a riappropriarsene in modo critico, sottraendola alla sua riduzione a mero strumento di controllo burocratico e restituendole la funzione originaria di dispositivo riflessivo. Una valutazione che voglia sostenere processi formativi autentici dovrebbe infatti promuovere il pensiero critico, rendere visibili le condizioni strutturali che orientano le scelte educative e contribuire alla costruzione di un sapere capace di interrogare il reale anziché limitarsi a conformarsi ad esso. Se l'università aspira a configurarsi come spazio di emancipazione e produzione di conoscenza situata, è necessario ripensare

con coraggio criteri e logiche attraverso cui valuta, seleziona e legittima. In questa prospettiva, le pratiche valutative devono essere concepite come momenti dialogici e generativi, capaci di valorizzare la diversità dei percorsi biografici, di riconoscere la complessità dei contesti e di restituire centralità al senso trasformativo dell'esperienza educativa. Quando la valutazione si allontana da tali principi, rischia di perdere di vista proprio i soggetti a cui dovrebbe rivolgersi: gli studenti e le loro possibilità di crescita, ricerca e costruzione di significato.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Akbaritabar A., Bravo G., Squazzoni F. (2021), *The impact of a national research assessment on the publications of sociologists in Italy*, in "Science and Public Policy", *48*(5): 662-678. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scab013

Adler P. A., Adler P. (2002), *Paradigms and prejudice: Theoretical constructions of deviance*, in Piquero A., Mazerolle P. (eds.), *Contemporary developments in criminological theory: Vol. 11. Control theories of crime and delinquency,* Routledge, New York, NY: 73-90.

Ball S. J. (2003), *The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity*, in "Journal of Education Policy", *18*(2): 215-228. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065

Biesta G. (2010), *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*, Routledge, New York.

Bonaccorsi A. (2020), *Two Decades of Experience in Research Assessment in Italy*, in "Scholarly Assessment Reports", *2*(1): 16. DOI: 10.29024/sar.28

Bosk CL (2007), *The new bureaucracies of virtue or when form fails to follow function*, in "Journal of Political and Legal Anthropology Review", 30(2): 192-209.

Bourdieu P. (1998), *Contre-feux. Propos pour servir à la résistance contre l'invasion néo-libérale*, Raisons d'Agir, Paris.

Bourdieu P., Passeron J.-C. (1970), *La reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*. Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

Bruner J. S. (1996), *The culture of education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Casavecchia A., Pitzalis M., Poliandri D. (2025), *Tra autonomia ed eteronomia: alla ricerca di un equilibrio. Un'introduzione*, in Casavecchia A., Pitzalis M., Poliandri D. (eds.), *L'università dall'autonomia all'eteronomia? Come riequilibrare un percorso critico,* RomaTrE-Press, Roma: 7-15.

Colarusso S., Giancola O. (2020), *Università e nuove forme di valutazione: Strategie individuali, produzione scientifica, effetti istituzionali,* Collana Materiali e documenti, 59*,* Sapienza Università Editrice, Roma. https://doi.org/10.13133/9788893771542

Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (2018), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.), SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Di Benedetto A., Ciolfi A., D'Alessandro G. (2019), *Uno strumento per l'autovalutazione e il monitoraggio dei Corsi di Studio: il cruscotto indicatori ANVUR*, in "Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione", 74: 97-110. DOI: 10.3280/RIV2019-074006.

Dingwall R. (2008), *The ethical case against ethical regulation in humanities and social science research*, in "Twenty-First Century Society", *3*(1): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450140801913061
Dubet F. (1994a), *Les lycéens*, Le Seuil, Paris.
Dubet F. (1994b), *Sociologie de l'expérience*. Seuil, Paris.
Emirbayer M., Mische A. (1998), *What is agency?*, in "American Journal of Sociology", 103(4): 962-1023. https://doi.org/10.1086/231294
Espeland W. N., Sauder M. (2007), *Rankings and reactivity: How public measures recreate social worlds*, "American Journal of Sociology", 113(1): 1-40. https://doi.org/10.1086/517897
Fasanella A. (2012), *Prospettive metodologiche per l'analisi del cambiamento istituzionale*, in Benvenuto G., Decataldo A., Fasanella A. (a cura di), *C'era una volta l'università? Analisi longitudinale delle carriere degli studenti prima e dopo la 'grande riforma'*, Bonanno, Acireale-Roma: 15-36.
Foucault M. (1975), *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris.
Galli F., Greco F. (2025), *Ranking Departments based on research quality: a statistical evaluation of the ISPD indicator*, in "Scientometrics", 130(2): 705-725. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-025-05240-2
Giroux H. A. (2002), *Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of higher education: The university as a democratic public sphere*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT.
Guba E. G., Lincoln Y. S. (1994), *Competing paradigms in qualitative research*, in Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research,* SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA: 105-117.
Guta A., Nixon S. A., Wilson M. G. (2013), *Resisting the seduction of 'evidence-based imperialism': Critical reflections on knowledge translation using a science and technology studies approach*, in "Health", *17*(5): 529-545. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459313497617
Haggerty K. D. (2004), *Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics*, "Qualitative Sociology", *27*(4): 391-414. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000049239.15922.a3
Johnson P. (1998), *Analytic Induction*, in Symon G. & Cassell C. (eds), *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in Organizational Research*, Sage, London: 29-30.
Laurillard D. (2002), *Rethinking university teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*. Routledge, London.
Merton R. K. (1942), *Science and technology in a democratic order*, in "Journal of Legal and Political Sociology", *1*: 115-126.
Maguire M., Delahunt D. (2017), *Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-step. Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars*, in "All Ireland Journal of Higher Education", 9(3): 3351-33514.
Power M. (1997), *The audit society: Rituals of verification*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Rebora G., Turri M. (2011), *Critical factors in the use of evaluation in Italian universities*, in "Higher Education", 61: 531-44. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9347-1

Rose N. (1999), *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Rustin M. (2000), *Reflections on the biographical turn in social science*, in Chamberlayne P., Bornat J., Wengraf T. (eds.), *The turn to biographical methods in social science: Comparative issues and examples*, Routledge, London: 2-22.

Salmon G. (2000), *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*, Kogan Page, London.

Shore C., Wright S. (2000), *Coercive accountability: The rise of audit culture in higher education*, in Strathern M. (ed.), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy* Routledge, London: 57-89).

Stame N. (2016), *Valutazione pluralista*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Strathern M. (2000), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*, Routledge, London.

Vygotskij L. S. (1978), *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA).

Weber M. (1922), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen.

Managing the enrollment of new students in French open-door universities and institutional change

Christelle Manifet

In France, a movement has long set itself the task of documenting the policies from the second half of the twentieth century devoted to the egalitarian expansion of access to secondary and higher education and their mitigated implications considering democratization. This same movement is now engaged in a bifurcation for documenting the post-welfare state policies, promoting new values and objectives for educational policies with compressive effects on the conditions and modalities of access to higher education. While French universities may have been considered to have taken the principle of social democratization the furthest, with their free access, they are fully in line with this trend.

This article documents the changes through a functional-institutional lens in relation with the academic, political, and economic structures of French universities. This exploration opens the way to a discussion about the crisis of mass and open-door university and the sociology of higher education institutions.

Introduction

French universities are internationally known for their *"non-selection"* rules for entering students (Deer 2005, 230). University registration fees are low and annually set by State decree. Up until recently, the only official condition for admission was to have passed the baccalauréat exam. This exam marks the end of secondary education for high school students and allows them to enroll at university. However, this feature, which has been key among French universities for almost thirty years, is now compromised. Following a range of reforms since 2007, in March 2018, a new law on student orientation and success was passed.

The extent to which these reforms actually constitute a change is a matter of debate. the legislators claimed they had not touched the *"principle of equal access to higher education"* (educational code fixed by the 1984 Savary Law) and *"selection for admission to the first year of university"* is still considered contrary to the values and missions of the university (Igaenr 2016). But the new law does make *pre-registration* procedures compulsory thanks to an online platform, *ParcourSup.* Thus, *"all candidates are free to enroll in the institution of their choice,"* but only if they pre-register, and admission is only mandatory in the candidate's home region, and even then, only if capacity is not already exceeded. In addition, the section of the law dedicated to the course of undergraduate studies has increased tenfold in volume, the first three paragraphs becoming ten numbered paragraphs addressing a variety of elements that make up new *admissions policies*. The Ministry, the national representatives of the disciplines, and the universities formulate their conditions according to available seats, prerequisites, and "expectation" which are supposed to serve as warnings for candidates. In turn, capacity limits have been generalized leading, when demand exceeds supply, to ranking and selection. The reform also

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 99-125
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.06

introduced the possibility of a so-called "zero" year before the first year of the *licence* degree, an equivalent to a preparatory or remedial year. The *Conseil d'Etat* has ruled that pre-enrollment procedures, even those that are explicitly pre-selective, do not derogate from the *"constitutional requirement of equal access to education"* (*Conseil d'Etat* 2017) whereas the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights considers the assignment system implemented through the *ParcourSup* platform to call into question the "effectiveness" of the principle of equality (…) [and] *"lead to the abandonment of the principle of non-selection for admission to licence degrees (...)"* (Translated, CNCDH 2021, 3-6).

In universities and among students, the main argument put forward by its opponents is that the reform introduces selection at university, while its promoters could argue that it was to break away from failure-based selection. The legal and political qualification of the reform, as well as the social controversy, challenge the status of French universities as open-door institutions or mass universities, both in the past and present. A look back at history shows that the issue of university admissions selection is not so new on the French political agenda and that the principle of non-selection at entry had long been considered established and *"almost non-negotiable"* (Deer 2005, 230) precisely because of the strength of the social and political struggles in its favor since the 1968 student demonstrations and then the tragic end of the 1986 *"Selection and Reform Project"* (Richter 1988, 53)[1].

Given this panorama, a research question is raised about the extent of the changes affecting French universities, their forms, the stakeholders involved, and their driving forces. Considering the issue of university admissions and the open-door status, as well as the sociological debate on the institutional mechanisms producing student admissions, exclusions, and exits, this article combines an institutional analysis with a functional one, focusing less on the relationship between traditional or meritocratic academic habits and students' educational capital underpinned by class society, and more on the relationship between universities as productive organizations and their environment of demands and resources (1). Relying on combined contributions regarding methods and types of data from educational sociology, organizational and public policy analysis, and historical institutionalism, the results are divided into two parts. First, the long-term timeframe, from the 1960s to the 2010s, helps to identify the functional and institutional structures that fuel the regulation of entrants (allocation, control, and sanction) and what is changing (2). The analysis of the design of reforms and their implementation in universities aims to understand the systemic conditions, demands, constraints, and resources in which universities and their academics and other staff are acting (market-making State and marketized higher education system) and which ultimately have repercussions on their relationship with their students (3).

Method and data

To describe, understand, and explain university policies and practices for regulating admissions and new entrants, my method combines insights from the sociology of education, organizations, public policy, and historical institutionalism.

[1] During the student demonstrations against the reform in Paris, one student died as a result of altercations with police. The minister stepped down and the prime minister halted the reform.

Data are threefold. First, an analysis of the policy design behind the recent reforms (political discourses and reports, political construction of the public problem, causes and means, education legal code modifications, public policy tools). The starting point is the "Plan for Success in *Licence* Degree" implemented from 2007 to 2012. This program accompanied a new law relating to the freedoms and responsibilities of universities (known as the "2007 LRU Law," August 10, no. 2007-1199) and was formally drawn up to fight against undergraduate student failure at university. It marks a key step in the implementation of pre-registration procedures and the national admissions policy unfolded from 2009 to 2021. The "2018 ORE Law" (March 8, no. 2018-166) on "Student Guidance and Success" introduced a pre-registration rule based on an online platform[2].

The second material corpus is related to the implementation of these policies in French universities. Secondary data has been used to grasp how the reforms have been integrated into universities nationally and to document trends and differences in university strategies (research publications and national evaluative reports). Primary data were collected on a case study: a University of Letters, Languages and Human and Social Sciences. Universities of Letters and Humanities have been particularly shaken by the changes. They have embraced the concept of open institutions the most, and consequently, they are also the most affected by admissions reforms and most vulnerable to present students' study program choices. The case studied is located in a French regional metropolis, Toulouse, which annually hosts 24 000 students. The vice-president in charge of enrollment at this University, two managers at the central level, and five other student managers were interviewed in 2016. The policy-making in relation with the management of the undergraduates in the context of the reforms has been analyzed: minutes from meetings, informal discussions, notes, strategic documents, and statistical data. Observations of registration processes and participant observation of the academic work relating to new undergraduate students and academics' arguments in promoting/opposing the reforms completed the case study.

The third material is historical, based on the same university's archives since 1967 (reports and minutes of university councils) filtered for information about admission, classification, and management of undergraduate students. These archives document the history of a university but also provide information about the State agenda and other contextual details related to universities.

Analysis of policy design and implementation serves to understand the sociological rationale behind the changes underway, the controversies, the conflicts between interdependent logics, and the power struggles. The long-term timeframe helps to identify the institutional structures that fuel the regulation of entrants and better understand what exactly is changing. It reveals the academic and bureaucratic motivations while placing them in their context of constraints and opportunities.

2 The online platform, which opened in 2009 under the name *Admission post-Bac*, was modified in 2017 and then renamed *ParcourSup*.

1. *Theoretical framework: Open-door institution, entrance regulation and sociology of the institution*

The main aim is to qualify the changes in admissions management in French universities and its parameters. A review of literature on university admissions and the specifics of open-door or mass university demonstrates that the binary classification used between non-selective/selective or open/closed national higher education (HE) systems or HE institutions (HEI) is more complex than it initially appears. It sheds light on the interpenetration and blending of forces of openness and closeness in open-door institutions with regard to their incoming clientele. In so doing, it elaborates an analytical framework of the institutional regulation that facilitates the understanding of the current changes.

1.1. Entrance regulation in open-door higher education institutions

Firstly, "open-door institution" refers to a formal aspect that should not be underestimated in the analysis of university staff practices, but rather articulated in relation to other values and opposing forces. The conditions for admission are mainly based on social justice and equity. The "open" aspect emphasizes accessibility in terms of entry requirements, subject choice, and learning methods. The concept is closely connected with the idea of a social and democratized institution, in a context of social-democracy and welfare state, offering broader access to HE, regardless of the students' financial, cultural, social, and educational backgrounds. In France, entrance is open to anyone once they have obtained the *baccalauréat* degree: free-entry (quasi-free of charges), no entrance exams, no tests, and an enrollment process that can be administratively and pedagogically fastidious, but which nonetheless guarantees access. The term "open-door" has been used less frequently than that of "mass university," then in a positive, democratic and liberal sense: *"the university is both a mass world and an atomized world (...). The former aspect refers to the high number of students and the organization's limited control over their behavior whereas the latter is related to the heterogeneity of individuals, the diversity of their origins, backgrounds, and plans"* (translated, Dubet 1994, 511).

Secondly, there is a systemic feature in that the open-door status and scales of openness/closeness must be measured in relation to the characteristics of the national HE system, its diversification and stratification. The openness function is variably shared internally in a national system, depending on the level (secondary education/higher education), the type of HEI (State/private or elite/mass status), and the diversification/stratification scale of the secondary and higher education system. For instance, Wolter et al. (2014) state that access to Swiss universities is open due to the fact that selection is made before entry, Switzerland being among the countries with the lowest *baccalauréat* rate. In the United States, community colleges (which offer two-year higher education (HE) degrees) are widely known to serve as open-door institutions in a hierarchical HE system. In France, the hierarchy of the HE system is even more complex considering that French universities are both open-door institutions and the main venue for advanced studies and research. Nevertheless, the French HE system, as well as French universities, are not immune from social stratification and elitism, distributing social demand first among the three types of *baccalauréat* degree and then among the non-selective (university general undergraduate degree programs), short-selective vocational (in technological institutions and in high schools), and more or less elite-selective HE programs (two-year preparatory programs for prestigious HE institutions – *grandes écoles* –, engineering, business, and other specialized schools, ranked in order of prestige) (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer 2008). It is therefore quantitative, rather than qualitative, democratization of the HE system and/or segregation, rather than uniformity, that show how the expansion and massification of education have been accompanied by social stratification in relation to gender, social class, and cultural background (Merle 2009). Moreover, French universities tend to experience a "*downgrading*" (Vatin, Vernet 2009), considering that the social profiles of their first and second-year students are less diverse and the weakest, academically speaking.

Thirdly, there is the institutional level of admissions process, its governance and professional practices. Previous analysis demonstrates that it is less a question of absence of selection than one of methods of selection that specifies open-door institutions. The landmark theory about admissions to open-door institutions dates back to the 1960s and is based on the case of community colleges. Within the American HE system, "open-door institution" means three things (Marginson 2018). *"The multitude are encouraged by 'open-door' admission to public-supported colleges*" (Clark 1960, 569). Colleges are "*unselective in admissions and by law, custom, and self-conception, accept all who wish to enter"* (Clark 1960, 572). These same colleges regulate the demand in that they *"cool"* the desire to pursue HE for those deemed too weak academically (Clark 1960; Beach 2012). In France too, it is possible to understand the past and present of the practices dedicated to accepting clientele in line with these forms of regulation: since the end of the 1980s, the dominant paradigm among French universities has been that of the *"floating"* (Jellab 2013) or *"indeterminate and anomic"* university (Felouzis 2001a) (students are on their own, receive no guidance, and their motivations and goals are vague or even unknown). Yet these organizational shortcomings when it comes to considering the needs of undergraduate students can also be interpreted as serving the need to regulate admissions for institutional drivers and professionals who cannot, either because of a lack of resources or due to academic preoccupations, meet sharply rising student demand. Some studies are even highly critical of the French open-door university system, considering selective and open-door institutions to not be so different fundamentally, given the meritocratic or academic function (or professional *habitus* and practice), coupling equal and fair access with the process of selection and assessment of academic ability (Patterson 1976):

«In selective systems (USA), entry is limited by pre-enrollment selection…but the socioeconomic status of the students is supposed to be eliminated as a barrier by free HE, scholarships and subsidies." On the contrary, in the open-door system (France), entry "is guaranteed to all who want it with, at most, nominal enrollment selection, such as the baccalaureat." In this latter, "sorting becomes a major internal consideration and selection of students is made after entry, often covertly» (Patterson 1976, 174-175).

Fourthly, reviews of more recent international comparison studies show an increase in explicit practices to regulate admissions thanks to formal *admissions policies*, a term originating in North American universities. In the United States, public open-door institutions, as well as selective and private ones, have admissions policies and they are even more complex and decentralized, and also more multi-layered, in order to control a range of pluralist indicators. Typologies of national admissions systems (Helms 2008; Freeman 2020) include secondary leaving exams, entrance exams, standardized aptitude tests, multiple exams, as well as no exams at all. These indicate a dominance of secondary leaving examinations, particularly in Western Europe, France included (the French *baccalauréat)*. In French universities, admissions policies were not a thing, or the task was outsourced in support of the final secondary exam. However, this literature shows a process of rationalization underway at the supranational, national, and institutional levels, aimed at controlling inflows and outflows. It also highlights the difficulties in producing rational admissions policies (government versus institutional control, objectivity versus subjectivity, financial sustainability, equity issues, quality assurance, career guidance, internationalization). The aim of this literature is to find the best admission, selection, or recruitment methods to achieve the best match between students' potential and higher education programs

1.2. Sociology of the university as an institution

First of all, the sociology of the internal selection of students at open-door institutions aligns with broader statements about educational institutions. Meritocracy «equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations» (Adnett *et al.* 2011, 28) is an academic value, albeit ambivalent in itself. Admissions policies and practices imply a subtle balance between equity and selection, equality and excellence, or elitism and universalism (Timmons 1982; Belanger 1986; Tuijnman 1990). They aim to establish the dominance of an academic conception of quality, excellence, success, and/or accomplishment, on the basis of which hierarchy and classification are justified. If this domination succeeds, diplomas are recognised as the best way to access satisfactory professional and social positions in society. And while university staff and experts on the HE system are not fooled by the limits of meritocracy when the conciliation between equity and selection is at stake, they fully endorse the academic model of excellence and tend to consider it the only model of quality. The result of all this is a vicious circle: how the imperative to provide equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of background, can be reconciled with the fact that *"prior attainment data remains the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level, and continues to be central to the admissions process"* (Schwartz 2004, 5). Zanten suggests that it can be a contest between conflicting action values: in elite programs, the meritocratic value of academic sanctions for candidates and students enrolled is combined with a *sponsorship* value (Zanten 2019). Meritocracy would therefore ultimately act as an illusion, considering the non-neutrality of the educational institution as well as the system of relations that unite the education system and the class structure of society (Bourdieu and Passeron 2005). This creates selection and reproduces social injustices in students' paths, for example, among those who drop out (Beaupere et al. 2009) and those who, lacking the required skills, demonstrate a capacity to *"hold steady"* (Nielsen 2015).

However, at least three other sociological causalities must be considered when analyzing the institutional regulation of university newcomers in the context of

contemporary university institutions and the growing influence of institutional governance and bureaucracy in competition with academics.
Therefore, the second factor is organizational: university is no longer *"an organized body of professional teachers providing for its own perpetuation"* (translated, from Durkheim, Bourdieu, Passeron 2005, 173). The French sociology of *"the school"* (Secondary Education Institutions) (Felouzis *et al.* 2013) examines the cumulative effect of secondary schools' institutional strategies of distinction and family choices in producing social and territorial segregation. In a similar way, the sociology of universities (Musselin 2017) relies on the concept of *"configuration"* and the triptych of institutional governance, academic disciplines, and state government. In this way, the university corresponds to a model of national polycentric coordination that combines the professional autonomy of actors according to a disciplinary logic (academics and their representative bodies) with the presence of a hierarchy made official by bureaucracy. This hierarchy is increasingly internalized through the governance of institutions, although it was traditionally externalized through supervision by the national political-bureaucratic system.
In this regard, selection responsibilities must also be attributed to the challenges facing the institution as an organization and public administration. The selection process not only links class society and academic habitus, but also involves organized action by an institution within a political, economic, and social context of resources and demands. Clark emphasizes that the *"cooling out"* regulation is not just a matter of filtering social demand to make it competent and productive externally, in line with what is expected of these intermediary HEI, but also of ensuring, for the colleges and their staff, their place and their reputation in the American HE system, not to mention to upgrade their standing. The new preoccupation of selection at entry cannot be explained solely by the relationship between academics and students, it must rather be understood in the context of the relationship between universities, the State, and the higher education (HE) supply-and-demand market.
Furthermore, while self-perpetuation is indeed an infrastructural determinant of the institution in the generic sense, the third factor is actually the relationship between the institution and its environment. The *"openness"* and *"responsiveness"* of the HE institution (Rhoades 1983; Fulton 1984) are *"institutionalized,"* which means that while responding to external demands and needs, universities expand and preserve themselves: *"the ways groups within institutions reacting or responding to these demands are selectively attentive to them and even distort them"* (Rhoades 1983, 288). In any case, we can't escape from the concept of "institutional" or "field" effects (Bourdieu 1997). However, in this phenomenon, the environment is the driving force behind the institutionalization, or the *autopoiesis* and *perdifferentiation* (Luhmann 1999). In short, the opposite choice from that taken by Bourdieu and Passeron (2005, 174) is made, giving back space to external and functional determinants within the fabric of the university institution in a context of significant exogenous and endogenous changes.
The fourth and final factor concerns taking change into account considering that, in the institutional self-perpetuation process, it is less a conservative logic and more a logic of change that is at work, connected with the capacity for receptiveness to the concrete environment of resources and demands. The functional-institutional approach

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 99-125
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.06

better addresses the institution's potential for change, documenting not so much the effects of closure and reproduction as the mechanisms of layering, displacement, drift, and conversion (Maggetti 2014). There are dynamics of change in the French HE system that need to be documented. Universities have changed in various ways, albeit only in morphological terms. This is particularly true in France, where the number of members who consider themselves part of the university corporation has quietly decreased. For now, it consists of 68 institutions distributed throughout mainland France and overseas territories. This community shares an open-door status for most of its degree programs, programs based on academic and scientific rules, even when the professional destinations are more varied. The recent implementation of university clusters and mergers has also had an impact, shifting the emphasis from disciplinary criteria to those of critical mass, and redefining the rules of governance and university democracy[3]. In addition, French HE studies now document the transition from policies of the second half of the 20th century, devoted to the egalitarian expansion of 'access' to secondary and higher education, to post-welfare state policies of the first half of the 21st century, promoting new and marketized values for educational policies, institutions, and individuals, with compressive effects on the conditions and modalities of access to higher education (Tomlinson 2005). The post-welfare era hypothesis reflects these, discussing the hypermodern characteristics of contemporary societies: the accentuation of processes typical of modern societies (functional differentiation, rationalization, industrialization, individualization), accompanied by inflexions in the forms in which these typical features of modernity have manifested themselves until now (denationalization, destruction of integrative systems of capitalist production and public services, marketization, hybridization, and decline of social institutions (Crouch 2013; Touraine 2013). In line with these post-welfare and hypermodern hypotheses, recent HE studies have documented how, in open-door institutions, cooling-out practices declined while contrasting warming-up practices rose, aimed at supporting undergraduate students (in order to combat dropouts, grade repetition, and failure) within rational organizations dedicated to their users (Convert 2010; Borras 2011; Sarfati 2013). These studies echo others from other countries, which deem the openness of universities to be defined as their organizational capacity to respond to *"student diversity,"* in particular their ability to focus *"on the needs of students at risk of failing or early departure"* (McInnis 2003, 389). It is in this atmosphere of modernization and rationalization that new admissions policies are promoted today and on the basis of the 'selection by failure' counterexample (Adnett et al. 2011; West and Gibbs 2004)[4].

2. *Regulating incoming students: Permanence and change*

This section explores the historical structures of entry regulation in French universities, as well as the characteristics relating to their evolution.

[3] April 2006 'Research Pact' (agency-based management and university grouping and mergers).

[4] This failure rate specificity of open-door institutions is a persistent idea, but exaggerated, considering, first, that these failure rates include dropouts before exams, reorientations, breaks in study, part-time work, student perseverance, etc. Moreover, more closed university systems are not immune to these phenomena (Kapur 1972; Wimshurst, Allard 2008; Quinn 2013; Troelsen, Laursen 2014; Wolter et al. 2014).

2.1. Historical conditions of the open-door status of French universities

In accordance with non-selection rules for entering students, university registration fees are annually set by State decree[5]. The only official condition for admission is to have passed the *baccalauréat* exam. This exam marks the end of secondary education for high school students and allows them to enroll at university. The other well-known characteristic of the French higher education system is its *"duality"*: there is an *"open university sector"* where access is open to all holders of the *baccalauréat*, and a *"closed sector,"* the *"grandes écoles,"* where admission is selective (Eicher 1997, 185). This duality acts as a graduated measuring scale of social and functional distinction, between democracy and elitism, and between HEI and types of HEI. Moreover, throughout the second part of the 20th century, French State has continuously supported extended schooling and a HE public sector. The institutional structures of French universities as open-door institutions or mass universities were defined by the 1969 law (known as the Faure law)[6], following the events of 1968: an open university as a societal projection, combating social elitism in universities, opening up education and training opportunities to external needs and beyond the reproduction of the academic corporation. This law also focused on university democracy, with the idea of participation from all its stakeholders, academics, other professionals, and students. The target of the 1984 law (known as the Savary law)[7] was 'social democratization' which aimed to substantially increase the number of students and remove barriers to access to HE. Between 1985 and 1995, the percentage of students with a *baccalauréat* rose from 30% to 63%, and then, between 2009 and 2015, this number rose again, from 65% to 75% (Figure 1). The pursuit of HE has gradually become the norm. Thus, in 2023, 74% of *baccalauréat* holders continued on to HE[8].

[5] As of 2025, university registration fees are set at €178 per year for the licence degree (a three-year undergraduate degree), while education is free for low-income students with need-based scholarships (37% of student population in 2023), to which a student life fee (€105) was recently added.

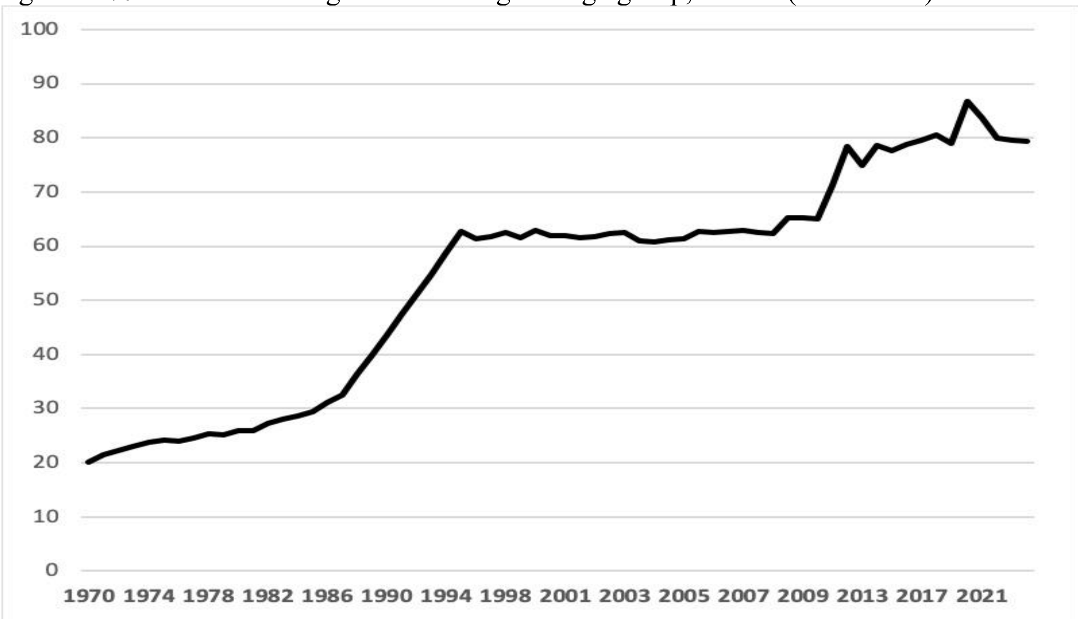
[6] 1968 Faure Law, framing the HE, November 12, 1968, no. 68-978 [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/].

[7] 1984 Savary Law, on HE, January 26, no. 84-52.

[8] This overall increase in graduation rates masks disparate success rates, depending on the type of baccalaureat: general, 94%; technological, 81%; vocational, 47% (unless otherwise specified, the statistical data are taken from publications by the Ministry of Higher Education's statistical and evaluation services, particularly the annual report on higher education [https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/FR/eesr/]).

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.06

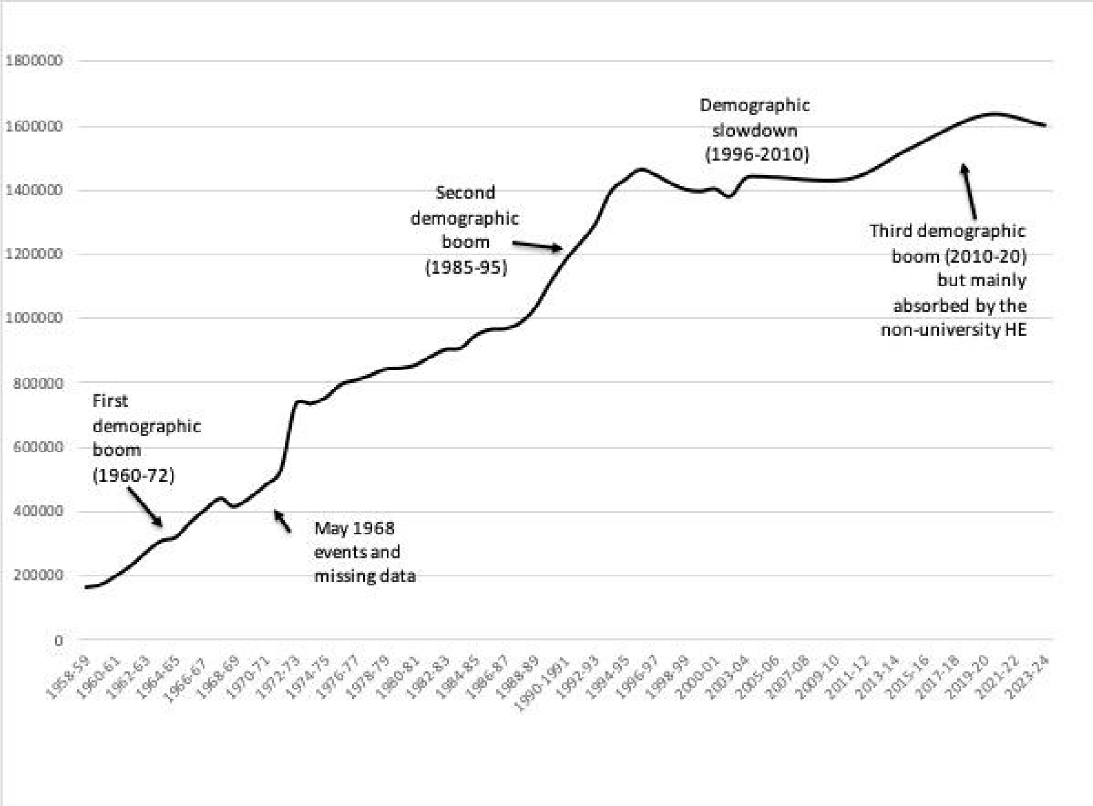
Figure 1: % of baccalauréat graduates in a given age group, France (1970-2024)



Three types of *baccalauréat* exist: general (which has undergone substantial changes recently), technological (of which the first class graduated in 1969), vocational (of which the first class graduated in 1986 and vocational education was reformed between 2011 and 2014).
France excluding overseas departments and regions until 2000, France excluding Mayotte since 2001. Figure and data: MESRI-SIES, State of HE, 2024 and 2025 editions, https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/.

These are the three reasons behind the statement that *"for the last 30 years... universities have been assigned the task of supporting the strong tendency to pursue higher education"* (Beaud, Millet 2018). The first student "explosion" took place in the 1960s when student numbers rose by 10% a year (Figure 2). The second occurred between 1985 and 1995, when student numbers increased by 6% a year. The creation of new universities and the opening of branches in medium-sized cities linked to main campuses in metropolitan areas have made it possible to respond to this growth. In these historical conditions, the principle of an open-door institution has sedimented deeply in the structures of the French university system. After a settling period, and since 2012, positive growth has restarted and continued until 2025 (between 2.6% and 3.2% a year). The latest demographic trends undermine rather than support the French universities' status since the growth is mainly absorbed by non-university HE.

Figure 2: Evolution of the student body in French universities



Data were collected from publications of the French HE ministry statistical services and reprocessed in order to give an internal and temporal consistency despite issues relating to changes in methodology and legislative decisions affecting the scope of university HE.

2.2. Regulating university entrance: allocation, control, and sanction

An analysis of a university's archives filtered for information about admission, classification, and management of undergraduate students shows that the regulation of incoming students is a constant concern for its leaders, academics and staff, as well as for state policies. The classification of the university records resulted in a three-dimensional regulation: Allocation (actions and tools that are expected to serve the needs of students and better support them); Control (controlling the number of entering students); Evaluation (of students' work).

Allocation: implementing organizational modernization

The challenge of managing undergraduate students underwent significant development as universities emerged as modern and rational organizations (at the end of the eighties in France). The archives of the University of Toulouse show that actions were already being taken at the end of the 1960s to improve orientation and support for new students as well as the information given to them about degree programs, services, and the examination process.

At that time, increasing the number of course programs (such as preparatory courses for *grandes écoles*, vocational tracks, and partnerships with companies and non-profit organizations to broaden students' career prospects) was seen as a way to motivate

students and combat failure. These local measures were bolstered by the 1970s reforms which promoted better alignment between university studies and job opportunities and created new, nationally recognized and vocationally oriented undergraduate and postgraduate diplomas for all universities.
The 'University 2000' Plan (1990-1995) addressed the problem of undergraduate students in a territorial way by constructing and renovating university buildings and campuses and creating new, smaller campuses in middle towns that functioned as warm and welcoming communities (Felouzis 2001b).
The 1997 'Bayrou university reform' (named after the Minister of National Education) promoted practices such as tutoring, orientation meetings for new students, and remedial classes.
The 2001-2002 'Bologna Reform', launched to Europeanize the French HE system[9], was also implemented to tackle student failure. At the University of Toulouse, this reform resulted in a subtle orientation strategy described as *"innovative"*: diversified degree programs (with a major and minor specialization); ways for students to change degrees; programs for continuing education, apprenticeship, and vocational postgraduate programs; expanded foreign language courses.
Between 2007 and 2012, the Plan for Success in *Licence* focused public attention on student failure at university, dropouts, and absenteeism. This plan was presented as a symbol of a new client-centered French university (diversified program offering, orientation and career training, increased advice and support for students). Other measures complemented and extended this program by focusing on pre-registration procedures called *"active orientation"* before the 2018 reform made it compulsory.

However, these allocative policies are not equivalent answers, as some are oriented toward openness (University Plan 2000, 2001-2002 LMD reform), while others are mainly aimed at closeness (the relative anomy of the 60s and 70s, the 1997 Bayrou university reform, the post-2000s policies). Moreover, all are fueled by ambivalent motivations and effects. The tools designed to better respond to student diversity and focus on the needs of at-risk students generate "warming up" as well as "cooling out" effects. Active orientation generates support and supervision of students' paths: "[active orientation] *helps them to define their personal and professional goals and enables them to embark on an educational path best suited to their profile; this is an indisputable guarantee of their chance of success"* (Translated, *Cour des comptes* 2012, 669). Diversification and professionalization of degrees are another illustration of the ambiguities surrounding these warming up policies, generating both segmentation and hierarchy within the university.

Control: Limiting the number of students or making it sustainable

Implicit forms of control can be observed through dropouts and early departures, absenteeism, failed exams, repeated years, as well as through a *"laisser-faire"* regulation, considering the liberal/anomic traditional characteristics of universities as *"organizations"*. In turn, temptations to formally and explicitly restrict admissions

[9] The *licence* (*baccalauréat* +3 years), *master* (bac+5), *doctorat* (bac+8) reform.

tend to increase during periods of growth in student demand: the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s.

The archives enable us to go back to the pre-1968 years, when universities were confronted with the first boom in student demand. The failure rates were surprisingly similar to those that served to justify the more recent reforms: of the 835 students enrolled in the preparatory year for literature and humanities, only 54% remained after their first year, while the remaining 46% failed and 27% of them did not even sit their final exams (Kayser and Gaudemar 1967). In the end, only 25% of the students in the initial cohort ended up graduating. For most of them, the degree took a long time: only 12% managed to complete it on time, while the vast majority needed 4 or 5 years, and for some, finishing the degree was a real struggle, lasting up to 6 or 7 years. These results echo those of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) and Antoine and Passeron (1966) who stated that humanities and social sciences faculties serve as a *"refug*e*"* for students who do not hold the most prestigious *baccalauréat*s. These statements persist today in *"segregated democratization"* and the *"downgraded university"*. Eliard, a well-known French education sociologist, placed less emphasis on the entrants' profile than on academic issues in order to explain the high failure rates: *"even though no barriers to access have been built, the faculty of letters selects candidates severely"* (translated, in Kayser and Gaudemar 1967, 4). He also argues that the preparatory studies year in sciences and literature faculties, which is officially supposed to prepare candidates for HE, in fact serves as a second barrier after the *baccalauréat*. In 1966, the Fouchet Reform repealed this "second barrier" that the preparatory year had become. In reaction, one of the suggestions addressed to the Minister of Education was to set up another one: selection at admission. In fact, the dean of the Faculty of Sciences in Paris called for this in an open letter, *"It would be disastrous for thousands of young people to come to university only to go astray on a path that they will abandon without any academic qualification, sometimes after several years"* (translated, regional newspaper, *"Students should be selected based on their ability to enter the faculty,"* 6 October 1967, University archives). The May 1968 student protests were related to this threat of selective admissions in humanities universities (Prost 1989, 63).

In the 1980s, voices in favor of selection at entry could also be heard, although they did not carry the day. In 1981, within the University of Toulouse, the head of the psychology department asked that the number of incoming students be limited: *"We can only accept 500 first-year students; for the rest, it is up to the university to decide what it will do with them"* (Council of the University, 3 June 1981, university archives).

The campaign for the launch of the Plan for Success in *Licence* stated that, out of 100 students enrolled, only half carried on into their second year while the other half 'failed' (48%). Precisely, only 41% of first-year university students went on to their second year, 26% repeated the first year, and 32% left the university system all together (Ministry of Education 2011). At the end of the public program, things were roughly the same.

Statistics for dropouts (students who did not necessarily fail their exams) were included in failure rates (Legendre 2008). These dropout rates reveal the importance of ‘natural’ selection, which is an indirect and complex result of the choices made by students and their families, the labor and HE markets, and the very structure of the mass university. Other implicit practices participate in this control: reducing the involvement of tenured faculty members in teaching first-year courses (as this year is increasingly considered a filter to weed out weaker students), as well as privileging research over teaching in the choices made by HEIs and faculty members.

Evaluation: guaranteeing the value of students, diplomas, universities, academics, and other university professionals

Selection becomes explicitly done through assessments of students’ work.
The importance of exams can be seen in the emphasis given to them in university calendars (at least 25%). What matters is *“the [academic] level,”* said journalist Jean-François Revel, questioning the interest behind the Fouchet reform deleting the preparatory year (Revel 1966). It implies guaranteeing students’ academic level and the value of their diplomas, which of course reflects the value and reputation of the institution awarding the diploma, and more broadly, the value of the university to which these students and their staff are inevitably linked.
Academics and managers took care to *“guarantee the academic level and value of the qualifications and diplomas awarded”* (meeting minutes from the Steering Committee, 21 May 1976, University archives). This concern continues to be central, even when that very same university experienced strikes that severely disrupted classes and examinations. There is a fear that assessment standards would be affected by the “democratization” of access. The preservation of the expected level of academic performance is crucial, as expressed in the following remark: *“The level has dropped, dangerously. I asked the teachers to read copies because I was surprised by the grades which seemed harsh to me and in the end, I thought they were inflating the marks”* (department secretary, woman, social sciences, interview). Staff, academics, as well as bureaucrats, navigate between a liberal and conservative attitude, using different ways to assess students’ productions, from a formative assessment to a sanction-based one, always taking this part of their job seriously.

2.3. What has changed since the 2000s? Allocation by enhanced organizational support and stronger and explicit control

In the 2000s and 2010s, the allocation logic translated into extensive organizational and individualized support and, moreover, new control practices emerged for dealing with incoming students.
Bodin and Orange (2013) elaborate a trilogy for classifying 2000s’ university actions: selection, professionalization, and propeadeutization. The policies confusingly mix the three, the Plan for Success in *Licence* focused on the latter, whereas it is obvious that the latest 2018 reform, focusing on compulsory pre-registration procedures, highlights the former, that is, selection before entry.
On the basis of the tridimensional regulation of entering clientele objectified before, the “allocation” dimension has taken a negative turn that is similar to the concept of propeadeutization, and a positive turn that can be summed up by the idea of individualization of institutional support. The first includes the growing frustration of academics and experts surrounding the low academic level of incoming students,

neglecting the plural parts of their contemporary identity, experiences and competences, and their "external" and non-academic motivations (Nielsen 2015), reducing them to their young and student identity[10]. Then, the years spent working toward an undergraduate diploma, especially the first year, acquire a preparatory function by advocating a return to basics (Orianne, Draelants, Donnay 2008). The second includes the semantic of rational organizations dedicated to their users.
Moreover, the "control" dimension has become stronger at entry and throughout the individual student path, and more importantly, has become explicit. Some universities have been attempting, and some have succeeded, to change their legal status in order to introduce formal selection for entering students. All the universities have developed undergraduate selective programs. More significantly, in Science and Humanities faculties, where the *baccalauréat* as the sole criterion for admission has been, the more strictly, implemented, different forms of selection have become widespread. The random system, which in political theory can be recognized as the most democratic method, has been used for courses in high demand but with limited resources and on the grounds of avoiding ranking candidates. It was first recognized by the State (ministerial circular of April 24, 2017) and then banned following student association complaints and on the classical academic argument that it did not guarantee an "*equal access to higher education for all on the basis of merit*" (Excerpt from a decision of the *Conseil d'état* June 2, 2017[11]). Since then, a category of *licence* degree programs that are in high demand but the capacities of which are limited (sports science, health, law, psychology) has been created with specific authorizations in terms of admissions and pre-selection. Finally, most universities took advantage of the national pre-registration tools introduced after 2009 to apply pre-requisites and capacity thresholds. Faculties that wish to maintain the principle of open access can set the highest threshold, exceeding demand, but the aim is also to integrate classroom capacity, teacher-student ratios, and the equipment needed for learning.
Finally, in a novel move, universities are now developing and internalizing real "admissions policies" on their own since the French *baccalauréat* is no longer considered to be sufficient for entry but knowing that neither tuition fees nor entrance exams can be used by open-door universities. These policies take a new place in the national system, as well as in universities, as organizations with bureaucratic, professional, and individual impacts[12].

---

[10] An undergraduate is understood to be a young person who has just passed the *baccalauréat* exam, a student coming directly from high school and completely focused on studying, whereas the place of studies is often relativized in student actual experience. In a university such as Toulouse, in 2009, only 25% of incoming students had received their *baccalauréat* that year, while more mature students returning to study accounted for 33% and those changing degree programs, 41%.

[11] Following a joint request from the associations '*SOS Education*' and '*Promotion et Défense des Étudiants'*.

[12] Pre-enrollment criteria (tests, competitive examinations, previous academic records, motivation letter, type of *baccalaureate* and subjects studied in high school…); quotas (e.g., minimum percentage of scholarship students, maximum of students from outside the academy…); data about the candidates on their previous academic performances and their contextual information; personalized training and support programs; new professional tasks for managers and teachers for reviewing applications.

3. Selection parameters or the functional ecosystem of French universities

It is now important to understand why relationships with incoming students are more defined by control and, moreover, what conditions have made this legal, explicit, and therefore acceptable in the bureaucratic-professional corporation of universities. Nowadays, the social student profile connected to the class society, as well as the meritocratic-academic habitus, are not sufficient on their own to explain the chronic influence of selective practices vis-à-vis the newcomers and the stage recently reached since these two factors are more of a constant than a novelty and, above all, because academic filtering is not independent but, on the contrary, highly receptive to its functional ecosystem of demands and resources, opportunities and constraints. It is therefore a combination of contextual factors that accentuate or contain selective practices in universities, as demonstrated by the previous historical angle: the increase in student numbers creates organizational and academic stress, exacerbated by the inadequacy of facilities and human resources (overcrowded lecture halls, low staff-student ratios, etc.). The State reforms implemented throughout history have increased difficulties and tensions due to the cost of change, the working hours required for implementation, and also because the referential or belief system of these policies is more or less favorable to openness.

Today, the introduction of admissions policies depends on two main parameters: the dismantling of the public HE sector orchestrated by the French State, and then, the marketized and rationalized political demand; logically, the market, or the French HE system of supply and demand, influences bureaucratic and academic practices more today than it did yesterday. It is more diverse and competitive, and is ruled by a quality market rather than a mass economy.

3.1. The State and universities: dismantling of the public HE sector and the university as a whole

Universities' agenda and decisions are closely connected to the State in a tripartite co-management system between the Ministry, the universities, and academics, organized into fields of knowledge (*Disciplines*). While Musselin (2017) considers this governance structure still analytically relevant, what is being exchanged has changed significantly in line with the post-welfare state, moving from the *"modernizing referential"* backed by *"neo-corporatism"* to that of a *"market"* one (Muller 1990; Hall 2015). It is still a Weberian domination but now based on market rationality, i.e., a "*market-making State*" (King and Le Gales 2017).

Firstly, as Dubet (2010) has shown for secondary schools, strengthening, with the consent of the university corporation, the scale of universities as autonomous (and then, accountable) organizations results in dismantling the university as a whole, in favor of universities, in plural. While universities have traditionally been qualified as loosely coupled systems and organized anarchies, weakly inclined to take decisions (the garbage can model) and with an academic power as strong as, or even stronger than, that of university and bureaucratic governance (Clark, Youn 1976), contemporary French universities are more complex and multi-oriented, but are also rationalized organizations strengthening the power of both governing boards and a new upper class of bureaucrats. This empowerment policy did not sustain the university corporation for long, given that the State supported competition at the same time and reshaped the morphology of universities multiple times by consortia or mergers (from 2006 onwards). Competitiveness and the pursuit of excellence are national priorities which risk splitting up the universities promoting the best universities that attract the best students and researchers as well as those that specialize in pedagogical excellence (projections sustained by reports such as Cohen and Aghion 2004).

Secondly, the State is a major contributor to the liberalization of the secondary and higher education sector. It funds all types of institutions, including private ones. It also contributes largely to the confusion between public and private, university and non-university, operators[13]. It has widened and relaxed its accreditation policy of HE programs as well as that of statutory rules regarding positions and careers in HE, contributing to the reduction in universities' privileges without, until now, having significantly modified their exclusive open-door responsibilities. If the ministry intervenes, it is not to protect a public university sector, but rather to amend an unfair competition, for instance, when selective admissions to short and vocational public two-year HE programs have been corrected by imposing quotas, particularly for vocational baccalaureate graduates. The introduction of pre-registration measures in open-door universities is another example. It seems likely that liberalizing university admission fees could be the next step in that move.

Thirdly, the country's need for HE qualifications can be translated into objectives, programs, and indicators, such as the percentage of undergraduates who complete their degree in three years (the standard timeframe), the percentage who complete their diploma at the same university where they spent their first year, the percentage of university professors who teach first-year classes, the percentage of dropouts in the first year; the percentage of graduating students who find a job. These social impact indicators also have to be *"efficient,"* which officially means: *"to rationalize the use of buildings and classrooms, for the university to find its own funding, to reduce the number of degree programs with few students enrolled, and to reduce the time it takes to complete the degree"* (translated, *Gouvernement français* 2009, 23).

3.2. The HE system of supply and demand: diversification, stratification and competition, or class and status of universities

Economically speaking, universities and other types of HEI produce services for student-clients. Therefore, the recent increase in control over candidates appears paradoxical at first glance but can be explained by the evolutive characteristics of the university economy, which combines features of a planned economy with those of a market driven by quality.

The first paradox is based on the ideal type of industrial or mass economy: greater consumer demand leads to greater capitalist contentment, increased production capacity, yields, and profits. Contrary to logic, control of entry increases when student demand grows. Students are the primary subsistence resource for HEI, not because they pay for the service that they receive, but because they represent a monetary value in a State funding system. Thus, fluctuations in enrollments either increase or decrease

[13] The Ministry's statistical and evaluation services use phrases from *"private university-type institutions"* to *"private institutions delivering university-level programs"* to present the private offer (Ministry of HE, State of the HE 2024, annual report).

universities' funding and undergraduates are manna from heaven: 60% of students throughout France are undergraduates and first-years alone represent 21% of the University of Toulouse's student population. The demand is nonetheless stable and partly maintained artificially thanks to schooling policies and demographic growth. In other words, the quantity of student demand is not an issue but rather more or less guaranteed. Moreover, resources and means of production are characterized by rigidity rather than flexibility. This means that whenever student numbers increase, tension arises among staff over new entrants. In all cases, resources and means are limited, and staffing levels and equipment never quite align with requirements. Ultimately, it is a planned and under-resourced mass economy.

One exception supports this rule of operation as, from 1996 to 2012, the total number of students enrolled throughout France, after having peaked in 1995, was followed by a relative stagnation until 2004, then a drop of about 4% each year. This was an unprecedented national situation and, considering the regional and local variations, it was even more pronounced in Toulouse: the number of students enrolled in 2008-2009 was close to that of 1990-91, *"that is, 18 years ago"* (self-evaluation report, October 2009, University archives). This was a local observation and emphasized the disappointment experienced by staff, accustomed to growth and unprepared for a decline in student demand. The response was then to define an attractive policy for students.

The second paradox is that the current threat of declining demand is not slowing down the logic of controlling entries. This time, the issue is not just about abandoning the industrial or mass economy business model in favor of the under-resourced planned economy model, but rather about turning to the *"quality market"* model (Karpik 1989; Felouzis, Perroton 2007) that introduces competition, service quality, and reputation. Actions to retain the maximum number of students in school for a long time have stimulated the supply market which has in turn expanded, diversified, but also stratified. While all OECD countries have been affected by stratification accompanying the massification of their HE systems (Hallonsten, Holmberg 2013), France has a few particularities given that universities took on the quasi-monopolistic function of providing academic and advanced degrees, and research, as well as ensuring the democratization of HE. Today, however, monopolies are fading, expansionist ambitions and commuting students[14] are destabilizing the nodal place of universities and their undergraduate degree offer is the first victim of these market dynamics. Moreover, as national statistical services gradually improve their understanding of this area of HE, public HE providers, particularly universities, are becoming aware of the growing importance of private providers (Table 1). They have driven growth and forecasts over the last decade, predicting a slowdown in growth by 2030, suggest that non-university HE will continue to grow, whereas university *licence* programs will welcome fewer students, except for science degrees. Humanities universities are anticipated to be the most affected.

'Quality' specifies a market on the basis that price is not a sufficient source of information for customers, then 'reputation' becomes decisive. It presents the risk of

[14] Graduates from the more or less selective two-year post-*baccalaureate* programs move on to the third year of a *licence* degree at university, then, the first two years of this *licence* degree are becoming less attractive for students as well as for academics.

being primarily based on the past rather than the present, like living on one's reputation, benefitting more from a consideration acquired rather than deserved (seniority and size of law firms for lawyers; academic performance for educational institutions, reflecting the socioeconomic profile of their clientele more than their added value). Moreover, it introduces the increasing role of quality indicators or quantification of outputs and outcomes in a competitive comparison context. Then, a quality-market generates a risk management approach: *"if everything may depend on organizational reputation, then reputational risk management demands the risk management of everything,"* in this case, of prospective students (echoing Dole 2014, 66). It is not only a question of guaranteeing access to HE but also guaranteeing graduation and employment, which is a laudable objective but the controlling effects of which on the material to be processed are obvious. Garcia (2006) has shown how HE "quality" policies identify teachers and universities as responsible for student success or failure.

Table 1: *Enrollment by type of undergraduate programs since 1960, France (in thousands)*

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016	2026 (projection)
University	215	661	858	1160	1397	1437	1624	1700
Two-year technological institutes		24	54	74	119	117	117	131
Two-year senior technicians' sections in high schools	8	27	68	199	239	242	257	283
Preparatory classes for *grandes écoles*	21	33	40	64	70	80	86	98
Other HEI and programs	66	130	215	293	454	560	643	854
Total	310	851	1181	1717	2160	2319	2610	2935
University share (%)	69.3	77.7	72.7	67.5	64.1	62.0	62.2	57.9

Data: Ministry of HE, the state of HE, 2018 (July). [http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid132899/l-etat-de-l-enseignement-superieur-et-de-la-recherche-en-france-n-11-juillet-2018.html]

Note: Statistical services have gradually improved their measurement of non-public HE activities, which were still underestimated in 2018.

This political and economic ecosystem has a major impact on the relationship between universities and their student-clientele. Marketization and rationalization of production encourage student flow management and accentuate social selectivity (Frouillou *et al.* 2020).

4. *Discussion*

This paper addressed the traditional process and recent changes in the institutional regulation of entering-undergraduate students in French universities, characterized by a principle of mass or open-door access. Recent events in France have ushered in new “admissions policies,” meaning the means and strategies by which universities admit candidates (“pre-registration,” “admission,” “orientation,” “recruitment,” “selection,” whatever it is named).

The first argument was that the issue of regulating “entries” and “entrants” (at both the level of the large number of applicants and that of each individual applicant) is an ongoing issue in French mass and open-door universities (to welcome and control, to train and evaluate, to consider social backgrounds while meeting academic standards). Indeed, the explicit selection for university admissions has been a recurring but controversial topic in public, political, and academic debate ever since the democratic university was adopted in the 1960s.

However and secondly, current policies represent a step towards the rationalization and formalization of admissions regulation. Gradually, the traditional liberal/anomic structure of the mass university is being replaced by a more rational, national, and local structure of control. While this does not necessarily prevent admission, it does manage access, with implications in terms of human, technical, and organizational resources, as well as the explicit strengthening of checking and testing means for entering students. While these recent reforms relied heavily on the argument of combating student failure at university, they actually only change the instruments used to control access.

The subsequent and third argument was that, rather than being conservative, universities are sensitive to changes in their environment of demands and resources, which have an impact on their relationship with students. Admission practices are becoming more explicit in the French open-door university system due to the intensifying competitive conditions driven by market dynamics and guided by market-based quality values. This is largely due to the reconfiguration of state support in a market-making fashion. These results align with analyses of the transformation of HEIs into productive and commercial organizations focused on the profitability of their actions. (Slaughter, Leslie 1997; Bok 2003).

4.1. Open-door French university, diminutions and shifts

Considering the historical development of the French HE system, the principle of an open-door university has become deeply embedded in the identity and structures of French universities, the HE Ministry, and the French education system more broadly. For nearly a century, the term ‘university’ has been commonly accepted as linked to social democracy. Therefore, current changes are neither harmless nor sudden. Moreover, the open-door university has its conservative advocacy coalitions, primarily ordinary universities, which are seeking to preserve something that is socially distinctive. Furthermore, the pressure to continue studying is more prevalent than ever in political agendas, particularly in the context of an economy based on both knowledge and technology.

Nevertheless, new narratives have now penetrated the French State, HE system, and society. Social criticism of mass university is nothing new, but the hype surrounding student failure at university over the last two decades has borne fruit and converted it from an ideal model into a foil. The liberal/anomic university has been rejected, no longer acceptable, and a reinvention of the open-door university content is underway.

The legislator formally maintained ambiguity about the extent of the change. They claimed not to have modified the principle of equal access to higher education and selection for admission to the first year of university is still considered contrary to the values and missions of the university. At the same time, some of the clauses in the 1984 law were removed and its liberal spirit faded away facing reciprocity and subordination expectations on all scales, from universities to applicants.
The reality of open-door institution still exists but is losing strength because its scope is now reduced and displaced, moving away from openness and more towards closeness: little or nothing has changed for traditional, non-university selective programs; some non-selective programs in universities have become selective; non-selective programs with limited capacity as well as those that are 'truly' non-selective because the capacity is greater than the number of applicants have both introduced pre-registration procedures with the possibility of ranking the candidates. The previous access policies and professional practices, such as *"constitutive"* policies (Lowi 1972), postponed and delayed the constraints and operated on individuals' environment whereas the admissions policies are *"regulatory"* because the constraint is immediate and applies at the individual level.

4.2. Which sociology of institution in condition of hypermodern Society?

The cooling-out hypothesis emphasizes the work of academic institutions, which not only involves welcoming and teaching to students but also positioning the university organization in its environment and ensuring its preservation. This analytical framework, described as "functional-institutional," puts sociological theories of educational institutions to the test of the post-welfare state and marketized and rationalized HE system.
The Durkheimian perspective on social institutions is functionalist and idealistic (Dubet 2010; Touraine 2013), aimed at the "*travail sur autrui,*" socializing and integrating individuals, particularly children, under the guise of collective values —in this case republican values and democratic school and university— fueled by a nation-state and the collectivization of resources and means. While this perspective may be reflected in student monitoring practices, it is flawed due to its idealism and tendency towards obsolescence in current conditions. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to interpret institutional practices using a top-down and value-based rational model. Equally, it is hard to understand institutional practices through the prism of the strict relationship with students whereas universities are multi-purpose organizations. Moreover, this is right in relation to the irresistible process of rationalization of modern organizations, which leads to a "reversal" between means and ends (Weber in Vincent 2009, 111), at least, to a "duality" between living *for* the students and living *off* the students. The current selection processes at entry should be understood less as an institution's means of socializing, qualifying, and classifying individuals, and more as means for rationalized organizations to stake their status and survival in a new environment of cultural, economic, and political demands.
Bourdieu's perspective provides a partial answer to the changing phenomena of entry regulation for contemporary mainstream universities by allowing us to grasp the "field effects," i.e., the fact that each field, including the academic one, is defined by specific issues and interests that cannot be reduced to those of other fields. This approach

avoids an overly functionalist interpretation, but tends to postulate the unity and power of the field and neglect its concrete environment. This perspective, which today would imply considering a certain relativization of the power of the academic professions and therefore the academic field as such, emphasizes the endogenous factors (professional factor) of the educational field that produce social and academic selection of students, but neglects the exogenous determinants of these academic practices, except those related to class society.

The organizational approach, for which the scale of the establishments matters, has increased in France specifically since the 1980s, at the same time as central planning was declining and replaced by HEI *"driving their own self-regulations"* (Salto 2018) and managing their relationships with their student clientele on their own. However, on the one hand, it can stumble over an excessive rational organization theory, neglecting the contributions of organizational sociology. On the other hand, organizational sociology grasps institutional problems through the lens of the institution (history, professional values…), organization (a problem-solving organism), dynamic (Selznick 1996), and of an organizational configuration (Musselin 2017) studying the relational tensions between professions (academics/bureaucrats) and decision-making levels (university governance/faculties or ministries/university governance/faculties) rather than tensions between institutions and their environments. Luhmann's functional approach to hypermodern subsystems appears to represent a step in this direction without compromising the contributions of the institutional approaches outlined above. This approach retains the postulates of field, institution, organization, and system effects when studying functional couplings with the external environment. This allows identity and unity to be preserved through change rather than reproduction (Clam 1997; Luhmann 1999; Lange, Schimank 2001). In a subsystem, self-referential logic is the alpha and omega of functioning. This does not mean that the system is closed and unchanging. In fact, it cannot be, as the very existence of the subsystem depends on its *perdifferentiation* and *self-legitimation* from its environment.

4.3. What is the future for open-door French universities?

Under the assumption that the current political *referential* will not change in the medium-term, it is then up to open-door universities, as a status group, to find and defend a new open-door narrative in a HE system where market, reputation, and results are the new norms. In order to do so, it is worth imagining a shift from the meritocratic paradigm. Academics and management staff must develop their capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism with regard to their power to classify students, as well as their own confidence in their collective ability to take advantage of the uniqueness of the university in the production and transmission of knowledge. In doing so, they must promote a positive image of the open-door university and its students. It is necessary to reflect more accurate, yet positive, images that would bring the corporation of open-door universities, their professionals, and their student users together. For example, they could promote the values of lifelong learning attitudes of adult learners. This could take the form of an emancipatory approach to admitting and managing students, putting less emphasis on their family and academic backgrounds, with the aim of empowering them as creative and responsible individuals, making them aware of the challenges their universities are facing.

References

Adnett N., Mc Caig C., Slack K., and Bowers-Brown T. (2011), *Achieving 'transparency, Consistency and Fairness' in English Higher Education Admissions: progress since Schwartz?*, in "Higher Education Quarterly", 65, 1: 12-33.

Antoine G. and Passeron J.-C. (1966), *La réforme de l'université*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy.

Beach J.-M. (2012), *Gateway to Opportunity?: A History of the Community College in the United States*, Sterling, Stylus Publishing, LLC, Virginia.

Beaud S. and Millet M. (2018), *La réforme Macron de l'université*, «La Vie des idées», February 20, [URL: http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-reforme-Macron-de-l-universite.html].

Beaupere N., Boudesseul G., and Erlich V. (2009), *Sortir sans diplôme de l'Université: comprendre les ParcourSup d'étudiants décrocheurs,* La Documentation française.

Belanger P.W. (1986), *La réponse du Québec aux problèmes d'équité et d'excellence dans l'enseignement postsecondaire*, «Recherches sociographiques», 27, 3: 365-384.

Bodin R. and Orange S. (2013), *L'université n'est pas en crise: les transformations de l'enseignement supérieur enjeux et idées reçues*, Éd. du Croquant, Bellecombe-en-Bauges.

Bok D. (2003), *Universities in the market place*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Borras I. (coord.) (2011), *Évaluation du non-recours au tutorat à l'université*, «Net.Doc»,35, 85.

Bourdieu P. (1997), *Méditations pascaliennes*, Seuil, Paris.

Bourdieu P. and Passeron J.-C. (1964), *Les héritiers: les étudiants et la culture*, les Éd. de Minuit, Paris.

Bourdieu P. and Passeron J.-C. (2005), *La reproduction: éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, les Éd. de Minuit, Paris.

Clam J. (1997), *Droit et société dans la sociologie de Niklas Luhmann*, avant-propos de Niklas Luhmann, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.

Clark B.R. (1960), *The "Cooling-Out" Function in Higher Education*, in "American Journal of Sociology", 65, 6: 569-576.

Clark B.R. and Youn T. I. K (1976), *Academic Power in the United States: Comparative Historic and Structural Perspectives*, American Association for Higher Education, Washington D.C., Report n. 3. [https://eric.ed.gov/].

CNCDH (2021), *Avis pour un enseignement supérieur respectueux des droits fondamentaux: se doter des moyens de cette ambition*, A-2021-7, 27 mai, (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme).

Cohen E. and Aghion P. (2004), *Éducation et croissance*, (report), on behalf of the Economic Analysis Council, auditioned by the national assembly committee responsible for the bill relative to Freedoms and Responsibilities of Universities, July.

Conseil d'Etat (2017), *Opinion on the 2018 Law draft on student guidance and success*, november, 16, n. 393743.
Convert B. (2010), *Espace de l'enseignement supérieur et stratégies étudiantes*, «Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales», 183, 3: 14-31.
Cour des Comptes (2012), *La réussite en licence: le plan du ministère et l'action des universités*, Rapport public annuel: 657-704. [www.ccomptes.fr].
Crouch C. (2013), *Post-démocratie*, Diaphanes, Paris.
Deer C. (2005), *Higher Education Access and Expansion: The French Experience*, "Higher Education Quarterly", 59, 3: 230-41.
Dole R. (2014), *Constructing risk management of Higher Education sector through reputational risk management of institutions, causes, mechanisms and consequences*, in Fallon C. and Leclerc B., "Leurres de la qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur?", L'harmattan, Paris: 65-84.
Dubet F.(1994), *Dimensions et figures de l'expérience étudiante dans l'université de masse*, «Revue Française de Sociologie», 35/4: 511-532. https://doi.org/10.2307/3322182.
Dubet F. (2010), *Decline of institutions or neoliberalism*, "Éducation et société", 25, 1: 17-34.
Duru-Bellat M. and Kieffer A. (2008), *From the Baccalauréat to Higher Education in France: Shifting Inequalities*, "Population", 63, 1: 119-154.
Eicher J.-C. (1997), *The recent evolution of Higher Education in France: growth and dilemmas*, "European Journal of Education", 32, 2: 185-198.
Felouzis G. (2001a), *La condition étudiante. Sociologie des étudiants et de l'université*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.
Felouzis G. (2001b), *Les délocalisations universitaires et la démocratisation de l'enseignement supérieur*, "Revue Française de Pédagogie", 136, 1: 53–63.
Felouzis G., Maroy C. and van Zanten A. (2013), *Les marchés scolaires: sociologie d'une politique publique d'éducation*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.
Felouzis G. and Perroton J. (2007), *Les 'marchés scolaires': une analyse en termes d'économie de la qualité*, "Revue française de sociologie", 48, 4: 693-722.
Freeman B. (2020), «Admissions Processes to Higher Education, International Insights», dans Teixera P.N., Shin J.C. (dirs.), *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, p.94-100. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9_341
Frouillou L., Pin C. and van Zanten A. (2020), *Les plateformes APB et ParcourSup au service de l'égalité des chances?: L'évolution des procédures et des normes d'accès à l'enseignement supérieur en France*, "Année sociologique", 70, 2: 337-363. https://doi.org/10.3917/anso.202.0337.
Fulton O. (1984), *Needs, Expectations and Responses: New pressures on Higher Education*, "Higher Education", 13, 2: 193-223.
Garcia S. (2006), *L'assurance qualité: un outil de régulation du marché de la formation supérieure et de gestion des universitaires*, "Cahiers de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs", 5: 69-93.
Gouvernement Français (2009), Présentation stratégique du projet annuel de performances, Programme n. 150: Formations supérieures et recherche universitaire, Annexe au projet de Loi de finances 2010.

Hall P.A. (2015), *Cognitive Approaches* in Boussaguet L., Jacquot S. and Ravinet P. (dirs.), “Une French touch dans l’analyse des politiques publiques?”, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris: 237-262, https://doi.org/10.3917/scpo.bouss.2015.01.0237.

Hallonsten O. and Holmberg D. (2013), *Analyzing structural stratification in the Swedish higher education system*, “Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology”, 64, 3: 574-586. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22773.

Helms R.M. (2008), “University Admission Worldwide”, *The education Working Paper Series*, 15, World Bank, Washington.

Igaenr (2016), *L'affectation en première année de licence dans les formations à capacité d'accueil limitée - État des lieux et propositions*, report, (Inspection générale de l’administration de l’éducation nationale et de la recherche), n. 2016-004.

Jellab A. (2013), *Cohérences et tensions dans la socialisation universitaire des étudiants: les enseignements d'une recherche qualitative*, “L’Homme et la société”, 1, 187-188: 227-250.

Karpik L. (1989), « L’économie de la qualité », *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 30, 2: 187-210.

Kapur R.L. (1972), *Student wastage at Edinburgh University*, “Higher Education Quarterly”, Summer.

Kayser B., Gaudemar P. (1967), *Dix années d’une génération d’étudiants de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de [H]. Recherche sur les étudiants inscrits en Propédeutique en 1956-57*, Série B, Tome 2, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Toulouse.

King D., Le Gales P. (2017), *The three constituencies of the state: why the state has lost unifying energy*, “The British Journal of Sociology”, 68, S1: 11-33.

Lange S., Schimank U. (2001), *A Political Sociology for Complex Societies: Niklas Luhmann*, in Nash K. and Scott A. (dirs.), “The Blackwell companion to political sociology”, Blackwell, Malden, Mass.: 60-70.

Legendre F. (2008), *Les étudiants fantômes*, “Carrefours de l’éducation”, 16, Janvier: 32-55.

Lowi T.J. (1972), *Four systems of policy, politics, and choices*, “Public administration review”, 32, 4: 298-310.

Luhmann N. (1999), *Politique et complexité : les contributions de la théorie générale des systèmes,* essais choisis, traduits de l’allemand et présentés par Jacob Schmutz, Éd. du Cerf, Paris.

Maggetti M. (2014), *Le changement institutionnel et l’évolution de l’Etat régulateur: l’exemple suisse*, «Revue internationale des sciences administratives», *80*, 2: 281-303.

Marginson S. (2018),*And the sky is grey: The ambivalent outcomes of the California Master Plan for Higher Education*, in “Higher Education Quarterly”, 72, 1: 51-64. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12140

McInnis C. (2003), *From Marginal to Mainstream Strategies: responding to student diversity in Australian universities*, “European Journal of Education”, 38, 4: 387-400.

Merle P. (2009), *La démocratisation de l’enseignement*, La Découverte, Paris.

Ministry of Education (2011), *Les bacheliers 2008. Où en sont-ils à la rentrée 2009 ?*, in "Note d'information", 11-08 [http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr]
Ministry of HE-Statistical and evaluation services, (2024) and (2025), The state of HE [https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/].
Muller P. (1990), *Les politiques publiques*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.
Musselin C. (2017), *La grande course des universités*, Presses de Science Po, Paris.
Nielsen K. (2015), *Fake It 'til You Make It': Why Community College Students' Aspirations Hold Steady*, "Sociology of Education", 88, 4: 265-283.
Orianne J.-F., Draelants H., Donnay J.-Y. (2008), *Les politiques de l'autocontrainte*, "Éducation et sociétés", 2, 22: 127-143.
Patterson M. (1976), *Governmental policy and equality in Higher Education: The junior collegization of the French University*, "Social problems", 24, 2: 173-183.
Prost A. (1989), *1968 : mort et naissance de l'université française*, "Vingtième Siècle", 23, 1: 59-70.
Quinn J. (2013), *Drop-out and Completion in Higher Education in Europe*, An independent report authored for the European Commission, the Network of Experts on Social aspects of Education and Training (NESET), [http://www.nesetweb.eu].
Revel J.-F. (1966), *Contrecensures*, J.-J. Pauvert, Paris.
Rhoades G. (1983), *Conflicting Interests in Higher Education*, "American Journal of Education", 91, 3: 283-327.
Richter I. (1988), *Selection and Reform in Higher Education in Western Europe*, "Comparative Education", 24, 1: 53-60.
Salto D.J. (2018), *Quality assurance through accreditation: When resistance meets over-compliance*, "Higher Education Quarterly", 72: 78–89.
Sarfati F. (2013), *Peut-on décrocher de l'université ? Retour sur la construction d'un problème social*, «Agora débats/jeunesses», 63, 1: 7-21.
Schwartz S. (2004), *Fair Admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, For the Department for Education and Skills Publications, [www.admissions-review.org.uk].
Selznick P. (1996), Institutionalism 'old' and 'new', "Administrative Science Quarterly", 41, 2:270-277.
Slaughter S., Leslie L. (1997), *Academic capitalism: politics, policies and the entrepreneurial university*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
Timmons G. (1982), *The Dilemma of selection in education*, "Higher Education Quarterly", Autumn: 375-387.
Tomlinson S. (2005), *Education in a post-welfare society*, 2nd ed, Open university press, Maidenhead.
Touraine A. (2013), *La fin des sociétés*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.
Troelsen R., Laursen P.F. (2014), *Is Drop-out from University Dependant on National Culture and Policy? The case of Denmark*, "European Journal of Education", 49, 4: 484-496.
Tuijnman A. (1990), *Dilemmas of open admissions policy: quality and efficiency in Swedish higher education*, "Higher Education", 20: 443-457.

Vatin F., Vernet A. (2009), *La crise de l'université française: une perspective historique et socio-démographique*, "Revue du MAUSS", 33, 1: 47-68.

Vincent J.-M. (2009), *Max Weber ou la démocratie inachevée*, Le Félin-Kiron, Paris.

West A., Gibbs R. (2004), *Selecting Undergraduate Students: What can the UK Learn from the American SAT?*, "Higher Education Quarterly", 58, 1: 63-67.

Wimshurst K., Allard T. (2008), *Personal and Institutional Characteristics of Student Failure*, "Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education", 33, 6: 687-98.

Wolter S.C., Diem A., Messer D. (2014), *Drop-outs from Swiss Universities: an empirical analysis of data on all students between 1975 and 2008*, "European Journal of Education", 49, 4: 471-483.

Zanten van, A. (2019), *Institutional sponsorship and educational stratification. Elite education in France*, "Exklusive Bildung und neue Ungleichheit. Ergebnisse der DFG-Forschergruppe*",* Beltz Juvent, Weinheim-Basel. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:24169.

Towards a reticular University: The Creative Europe Programme and the research partnerships

Andrea Lombardinilo, Paolo Brescia

This essay investigates the university partnerships supported by the Creative Europe Programme in the two-year period 2021-2022 within the wider programmatic framework of university reformism and discourse. The aim is to connect the sociological analysis of the financed projects to a European comparative reflection starting from critical interpretations provided by some eminent scholars in the field of Higher Education influencing a "reticular" vision of Universities. Autonomy of research, scientific synergy and communicative reliability are three fundamental tenets, when Universities must turn accountability into an ethic and economic mission. For this reason, the research partnerships boosted by Creative Europe emphasize the necessity to focus on the transformation of the University from Ivory tower into a democratic environment, as Habermas pointed out on the construction of an open and participative community. With reference to the social and cultural dimension of some university projects financed by the Creative Europe Programme, this essay critically examines the metaphorical interpretations of universities perceived as "social", "civic" and "networked" from John Goddard metaphor of university as an engaged environment to the "multiversity" probed by Clark Kerr and Nicolas Dirks, to the more recent Roberta Bassett's "Omniversity".

1. *Towards a reticular University: a methodological perspective*

In an insightful work published in 2023, Julian Dobson and Ed Ferrari highlighted the social relevance of the "civic university" at a time of relevant transformations boosted not only by digitalization, globalization and hyperconnectivity, but also by the functional drawbacks stemming from cultural and communicative shifts. What role can universities play within a society hampered by global conflicts and under the influence of artificial intelligence, along with the communicative shifts of the post-pandemic era? (Casavecchia, Pitzalis, Poliandri 2025; Boccia Artieri, Farci 2021). This is a crucial issue relating to the mission of universities and their social impact as they struggle to deal with their localistic features and the development of effective research networks: «A civic university, by implication, holds itself to account according to its contribution to the collective good (which can include the earning power of graduates, but also much more that cannot be measured simply in market terms» (Dobson, Ferrari 2023, 8).

The challenges highlighted by the Civic University Network in the UK deal with the opportunity to harness the collective power of higher education actors to drive societal, economic, and environmental growth especially in those places requiring more cultural and economic attention. In the meantime, the rise of new forms of censorship within the academic environment (Chemerinsky, Gillman 2017), the diffusion of "infantilization" and "emotional weaponization" (Furedi 2017), the homologation of research activities and the pressure of evaluation (Connell 2019) impose a harsh reflection on academic learning and teaching as they impact on the civic dimension of daily life. This is why the "university of risk" can be considered more than a

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 127-144
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.07

metaphorical insight or a taxonomic intuition, as it may be an interpretative key consistent with the new challenges that universities have to cope with.
The tenet of the “civic university” concerns the third mission activities of academic institutions as they need to empower their social, economic and cultural role. Civic universities face the contradictory effects of hegemonic financial models that seem to be behind the current management of universities in line with the neo-liberal ideology ruling public institutions at large. Therefore, the construction of civic universities ought to consider the meaningful demands for communicative and educational practices, assuming that they should support the introduction of public spheres founded on inclusion, knowledge, information, creative and intellectual skills. This is why Habermas (2008) denounced the role played by lobbies and economic stakeholders within the infrastructure of the public sphere, where knowledge and competences should gain a different informative weight. Thus, civic universities come within this conflictual value framework, in which controversial administrative patterns cohabit and “digital capital in education” is increasing (De Feo, Pitzalis 2017; Colombo, Salmieri 2022).
According to this view, the Europe Creative program appears to comply with such a civic perspective, with particular regard to the three strands financed in the field of media, culture and cross-sectorial products (Scioldo 2025). In the National Civic Impact Accelerator’s report *Civic Capitals as Risk: The Fragile Foundations of The Civic University*, Julian Dobson and Femi Owolade examine the impact and vulnerability of academic engagement, suggesting four “key risks” for contemporary universities, as they emerged during in-depth group discussions with staff from 21 universities involved in civic roles:

> «First is a loss of focus and coordination, generating uncertainty among local stakeholders about the reliability of universities as partners. Second is a loss of institutional memory, leading to the need to repeatedly reconstruct local relationships. Third, stemming from the first two risks, is the loss of trust and reduced credibility of universities as civic partners. In a wider context in which the role of higher education is under scrutiny, there is thus a fourth risk of losing relevance to local communities and strategic partners» (Dobson, Owolade 2025, 3).

The dialectic between the local and the global is one of the main features of academic engagement, despite the loss of public authority, and misconduct and behavioral deviations related to ethical and communicative habits. All drawbacks afflicting universities in current times legitimate both Frank Furedi’s attempt to understand “What’s happened to University?” (2017) and Harold Silver’s question “Does a University Have a Culture?” (2010) as they explicitly denounce the loss of public acknowledgment of academic action in such social and civic turbulence. In this sense, the transition from Habermas’s “University in democracy”, to Connell’s “University of hope” through Paul Virilio’s drawing of “the university of disaster”, exalts the metaphorical fluctuations expressing the way universities have to recover their cultural and civic endeavour by overcoming localistic and individualistic obstacles (Lombardinilo 2019).
Of course, cultural production plays a central role in such a renewal, especially in Europe, as the *Council Resolution on the EU work plan for culture 2023-2026* (2022/C 466/01) underlines:

«Cultural institutions play a vital role in strengthening democracy and social well-being by reaching out to the whole community, providing affordable or free access to knowledge and information, in full respect of intellectual property rights, enhancing media literacy, creating common ground for dialogue and debate, and thereby strengthening social integration and community engagement, and ultimately contributing to combating disinformation, hate speech and fake news. This role of cultural institutions must be further nurtured».

Accessibility, inclusion, sustainability are the pivotal tenets of the European policies on culture and creativity supported by the Creative Europe Programme, for instance, with the aim to improve and harness collaboration among associations, foundations, companies, public institutions, universities and higher education actors.
More specifically, the reticular patterns of the projects financed involving European universities emphasize the way cultural creativity can be supported and enhanced by pursuing a solid epistemological vision inspired by cultural innovation, social impact and audience engagement. The attention paid by European Universities to certain strategic contexts in cultural production emphasizes the successful financing outcomes concerning theatre, arts, literature, anthropology, radio, cinema and TV series, thus confirming that audiovisual sectors are strategic not only in the development of European cultural strategies, but also in the support to university research activities coherent with the tasks of "The networked society" depicted by Jeffrey J. Selingo (2017, 35):

«Many institutions are still approaching these trends by simply hoping they will pass in a short time and they can survive. But the next era in higher education should be about more than survival. Given the growing needs for a post-secondary education around the world, the era in front of us must be defined as one of growth through change and cooperation rather than retrenchment».

The transition from the mass University to the multiversity academy inspired by a specific corporate mindset and managerial strategies concern the dialectic between public and private support, since it can determine the growth of academic competitiveness (Moscati 2012). Cooperation is essential to the construction of a reticular community focused on the exploitation of culture as a social engine and community booster, both at school and at university, as James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987, 214) argued: «is it possible that there are other institutions around which functional communities with intergenerational closure can develop»? The Creative Europe Program has the merit of implementing academic engagement in research strategies inspired by cultural production. The aim is to tether "European citizens and European peoples", as Jürgen Habermas (2013 [2014], 39) points out about the sovereign policies projected towards democratization and solidarity: «What is required is a European-wide political communication. For this we need a European public sphere, which does not mean a new one, however. The existing national public spheres suffice for this purpose; they only have to open themselves up sufficiently *to each other*».
The construction of a real European public sphere implies the development of a shared cultural strategy interiorizing diversity and identities and sharing cosmopolitan communicative inclusion: the three strands into which the Creative Europe Program is divided, Culture, Media and Cross-sectorial, are the main financing channels provided to all those actors who want to build networks in a variety of cultural productions: the

research on audiovisual products and brand journalism confirm the communicative dimension of this polyfunctional symbolic era that universities should investigate further (Ruggiero, Picone 2025). Clark Kerr's (1963) focus on "the uses of universities" can still provide epistemological insights into how to mingle the teaching mission of the mass university to the civic task of the "corporate universities", while considering not only the uses but also the abuses of the University as Nicholas Dirks' *City of Intellect* (2024) recently emphasized. At a time when democracies are undergoing a critical phase, universities can still play a social role for civic awareness and the external environment, both political and ethical. When the "city of intellect" merely turns into an array of private institutions lacking their original target, Universities lose the power to endow lives with a sense of value and the search for truth is hampered. According to Dirks (2024), human lives become poorer and social actors stop imagining a more responsible society.
The construction of strong European academic partnerships founded on reticular collaborations in the field of cultural innovation and content experimentation legitimates the attempt to investigate the functional impact of the financed academic projects in the two-year period 2021-2022, analyzed in research financed by the Ministry of Culture, General Management for Contemporary Creativity focused on the social impact and cultural declination of the projects supported (Lombardinilo 2025). Therefore, this paper is the result of this research, focusing on the role played by Italian Universities within the wider European effort to make culture an inclusive and sustainable social vehicle. To the fore is the sharing of a common cultural convergence, since Europe can be "an unfinished adventure" as Bauman pointed out:

> «It was not culture that happened to be Europe's discovery/invention. Europe also invented the need and the task of *culturing culture.* Culture, let me repeat, is an incessant activity of drawing the world, fragment by fragment, out of the serene yet somnolent inertia of *zuhanden* and transporting it into a uniquely human realm of *vorhanden* – making of the world an object of critical inquiry and creative action» (Bauman 2004, 11).

This is an adventure that universities help encourage through the construction of a new academic mindset generating a different cultural approach to university transformations.

1. *Universities facing global crisis: a theoretical pathway*

Contemporary society is increasingly shaped by a series of multiple and interrelated crises-that threaten the stability of the social order. These crises give rise to new and pressing *social questions*, often directed at institutions which, under the conditions of the *radicalized modernity* introduced by Anthony Giddens (1991), appear to have lost sight of their original missions. To some extent, the forces of overextended globalisation, aiming to create a seamless transnational society, have underestimated the risks of eroding the distinctive functions and identities of institutions.
This loss of specificity that has blurred the traditional roles of institutions within the postmodern context is generating a dual effect of confusion and vulnerability. On the one hand, individuals expect more from institutions than they were originally designed to provide. Conversely, institutions themselves are increasingly compelled to engage

with issues and domains that go beyond their original social functions. Despite these tensions, institutions are still expected to acknowledge emerging social demands and to deliver credible and consistent responses to citizens' increasing insecurities and fears (Furedi 2018), regarding the social exclusions produced by knowledge gaps (Bourdieu, Passeron 1970); and they need dialogical strategies calling for the construction of democratic educational practices (Freire 2000). Such a mandate is made even more challenging in an environment marked by opacity, fragmentation, and complexity (Morin 1999). In this complex landscape, societal risks such as misinformation and disinformation, exacerbated by the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as identified in the latest Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum (2024), are eroding social cohesion, escalating distrust towards institutions, and deepening polarisation and violence.

This landscape of uncertainty sheds light on the need for institutions to rethink the scope of their actions and to adapt their epistemological horizons. Indeed, the enduring relevance of major institutions depends not on their immutability, but on their capacity for renewal. Resilience of institutions, therefore, is not a function of permanence, but of preparedness for change. Those unwilling or unable to transform are more exposed to the risk of obsolescence.

Crucially, these transformations no longer unfold according to the slow and predictable rhythms of the past. As Giddens (1990, 26) observes, modern systems evolve at an increasingly accelerated and nonlinear pace, requiring forms of adaptation that are both rapid and profound. In this fast-changing context, the university stands among the institutions most profoundly affected by these shifts. Indeed, universities are the principal storehouses, sources and disseminators of their societies' knowledge and they should be intimately engaged by these challenges (IUA 2025).

The university has a centuries-old tradition of being a closed collegium also known as a *Hortus Conclusus*. The rhetoric of the Ivory tower appears to emphasize the traditional perception of universities as self-referential institutions, whose autonomy seems to be hampered by a permanent reformism inspired by the need for more accountability and transparency in research activities (Moscati 2010). This is one of the main tasks pursued by our "reticular universities" in which research targets comply with tradition and strategic missions, without neglecting the risks of hetero direction weakening basic research and shifting the tasks of applied research, as Bourdieu (1984) denounced in *Homo academicus.* This is truer in the humanities and creative productions, at a time of increasing investments in culture as a social boost and memorial device (Tota 2025).

Historically, it has resisted adapting its internal logic to align with the changing dynamics of the external social world. Yet, in the current hypermodern context defined by turbulence, inconsistency, and discontinuity, authors agree that the university must confront the imperative of transformation (Connell 2019). It can no longer afford to isolate itself within self-referential academic practices but must instead reimagine its role as a responsive and engaged institution capable of navigating complexity and producing value in an evolving societal landscape (Bauman 2001).

While it is true that, «according to the two meanings of the term *conservation*, the conservative nature of the university can be either vital or sterile» (Morin 1999, 84),

the role and societal purpose of universities are now being questioned more than in the past.
Thus, in this landscape of accelerated neoliberalism, the university is perceived as redundant, or even obsolete. As Bauman remarked, «the world of speed and neoliberal acceleration has no use for the university» (2001, 168).
This has led to a growing awareness of the need to rethink and restructure the university's role within the complex, fragmented landscape of contemporary society. Bauman continues: «Burdened as they are by a sense of history and linear time, universities find themselves profoundly and badly uncomfortable in a world characterised by the sporadic and fragmented nature of social and individual time» (Bauman 2001, 168).
Today's temporality, neither premodern nor properly modern, offers little space or enthusiasm for the traditional model of universities. Our age of fragmentation looms «over the double ruins of eternity and progress» (Bauman 2001, 168), threatening to engulf the institution.
This is probably why a *new model* has effectively been imposed on the university (Matthews 2023). Indeed, the transition is becoming more evident from the traditional image of the elite university, an *ivory tower* detached from society and disconnected from the everyday world, overspecialized and built on academic elitism (Etzkowitz 2000), toward entrepreneurial institutions tasked with contributing to the *common good*. The Humboldtian ideal of the university as a state institution devoted to rigorous scientific formation yet fundamentally insulated from social problems and protected by the state itself, is considered no longer sustainable outside and inside universities.
The foundational principles of that model, freedom of thought and study, radical distinction from compulsory schooling, and the treatment of students as autonomous, responsible adults, have been eroded. In their place, the neoliberal environment has redefined the very meaning of knowledge. Universities and students alike are now positioned as actors within the knowledge market, simultaneously producing and consuming knowledge, and it is no longer clear what role the university plays in society (Readings 1996).
At the same time, this phenomenon has produced the expansion of higher education, to the point of a proliferation of the number of universities, degree programs, and student populations (D'Ambrosi *et al*. 2024; Lombardinilo 2014; Morcellini, Martino 2005), marking the transition from the elite university to the so-called *mass university*. However, this numerical growth raises critical concerns: while student enrolment has dramatically increased, many institutions lack the infrastructural and service support necessary for students' academic and material lives. Moreover, universities have encountered big reductions in the unit of public resources per student (Deem 2004), to the point that the meaning of this expansion remains ambiguous. The numerical explosion alone necessitates profound structural and qualitative transformations, and relying on spontaneous adaptation is not enough.
Universities are complex organisations: they are characterised by ambiguity of goals and objectives, fluid participation of members and high resistance to change (Peretomode 2021). This "multifunctional" model of the university, suspended between an anchoring to tradition and a reformist drive (D'Alessandro 2016), has generated a multitude of pressing functional demands, so that the model of the mass

university has therefore come under increasing scrutiny, as it fails to meet the needs of the current moment. Echoing Bill Readings' famous metaphor, the mass university is *in ruins* (Readings 1996).

Further critical perspectives on the mass university include the view advanced by Clark Kerr, who first introduced the concept of the *multiversity*. According to Kerr, a *multiversity* is not a single, unified institution, but rather a complex and reticular system of communities (Kerr 1963). This model has been more recently elaborated by Nicholas Dirks in his book *City of Intellect* (2024) to describe a network of interdependent university institutions rather than a monolithic entity.

However, it is a fragile but necessary construction, because the university is perhaps most necessary at the very moment it is most threatened (Barnett 2017). As Dirks (2024, 252) affirms: «Without the city of intellect, our individual lives will not just be poorer. We risk losing the capacity to imagine better ways to frame our most fundamental desires as a society with collective responsibility and moral accountability».

However, this evolution is not without risks. Ferrarotti (1981) and later Furedi (2017) warn about the changes this institution is undergoing in the perception of both its students and its professors. In particular, the phenomenon of infantilization makes the university similar to a *buffer* in the generational conflict, with professors seen not as educators of mature individuals, but as caretakers of "eternal adolescents." These are young individuals caught in the structural contradictions of industrial and post-industrial societies, where rapid economic expansion demands increasingly longer educational paths, delaying entry into the workforce and leading to psychological and social disorientation. For these reasons, «universities must re-educate themselves» (Furedi 2017, 186).

While it is true that the elite university has been replaced by the mass university, the latter has inherited many of the previous structural challenges (Ferrarotti 1981). Today's university is facing a profound crisis of legitimacy, having lost much of its cultural and social authority (Viesti 2016).

Other models of university are emerging. It is the case of the civic university (Goddard 2009; Dobson, Ferrari 2023), described by Goddard as the one that «provides opportunities for the society of which it forms part. It engages a whole with its surroundings, it partners with other universities and colleges» (Goddard 2009, 5).

The social university is proposed by Ferrarotti (1981): scientifically rigorous, democratically organized, responsive to its environment, and capable of providing services to its communities. This model aligns with Derrida's (2001) notion of the "University without Condition": an institution that aspires to do more than merely survive in a troubled world. It is a revolution in how universities conceive of themselves and their relationship to the world. They must reimagine their role on a global scale. This would entail not merely reforming the university, but radically reconceptualizing its position in advancing the public sphere. This vision resonates with calls for the development of the ecological university, described by Barnett (2017) as "a feasible utopia".

This expanded vision reaffirms the university's role as a socially relevant actor. It transforms the university from a place of encyclopedic training and scientific excellence into an institution committed to community engagement (Martino *et al.*

2025). Universities, once defined as "places of learning" (Corsi, Magnier 2016), must now adopt the broader mandate of centres of civic consciousness. In this reconfiguration, the university acts to strengthen its ties with local and global communities assuming new responsibilities.
At the supranational level, the pathway of cooperation and civic consciousness, to extend the role and the mission of universities, started with the Bologna process (1999), which has encouraged a long (and still ongoing) process of revitalization of the academic space (Lombardinilo 2018).
A further milestone was the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), which emphasized the critical role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in times of crisis:

> «Europe is experiencing an economic and financial crisis with damaging effects on society. In higher education, the crisis is reducing the availability of adequate funding and making employment prospects for graduates more uncertain. Higher education plays a key role in overcoming these challenges. Efficient higher education systems provide the foundation for prosperous knowledge societies. Now more than ever, higher education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis».

More recently, the European Commission, in its *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation*, reinforced these concerns and urged HEIs to adopt a reticular approach: «For this, we need European higher education institutions to be able to cooperate closer and deeper. Further implementing a European Research Area implies strengthening mobility of researchers and the flow of knowledge, incentivising investment in research and innovation, and enhancing transnational cooperation among higher education institutions» (2022, 1). Taken together, these theoretical pathways anticipate the principles underpinning both the Creative Europe programme and the broader vision of the university as a reticular and networked institution.

2. *University partnerships and cultural production: The Creative Europe Programme*[1]

The construction of the Higher Education Area entails a growing academic ability to support international mobility, scientific cooperation and strategic development in communication and dissemination, in line with the wider European academic framework (Lombardinilo 2025). The production of culture plays a pivotal role in the policies of growth, inspiring the ongoing reformist process regarding both Universities and higher education institutions within the European Union (Mazza, Quattrone, Riccaboni 2008). This is essentially true in considering the deep connection between society and creativity, as Cornelius Castoriadis pointed out in 1991: «The social sphere is locus and process of creation. There could not be any history in the true sense of the term if there were no change, rupture, and creation. The social-historical dimension is primarily the emergence of new social imaginary significations» (Castoriadis 2007, 216). While considering the social sphere as the result of the encounter of symbols, messages, contents, Castoriadis reverses the

[1] This paragraph stems from the research project *The Creative Europe Programme 2021-2022: social impact and cultural declinations*, supported by the Directorate General for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Culture – Creative Europe Italy Desk.

traditional interpretation of culture from an individual immanent process into a collective dynamic producing public acknowledgement of creative processes.
Art, music, literature, theatre, cinema, TV series concern the definition and diffusion of the "new social imaginary significations" requiring a well-planned research engagement and a solid economic backing (Knowles 2010; Kornhaber 2020). Culture as an economic fly-wheel for Europe through the solid financing of audiovisual industry: the *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2022/2047(INI))*

«Invites the Member States to promote existing cultural and artistic activities and provide further opportunities for active participation, to increase the ability to reach new audiences, to integrate and mainstream cultural participation objectives in policymaking beyond cultural policy, and to adopt a cultural rights approach shifting away from a narrow focus on access towards meaningful participation, leaving no one behind».

This is what the Creative Europe Programme intends to carry out thanks to a budget of € 2.44 billion, compared to €1.47 billion of the previous edition of the Programme (2014-2020).
The main endeavor of Creative Europe is to support actions that strengthen cultural diversity and comply with the challenges of the cultural and creative sectors. The main targets of Creative Europe concern, on the one hand, the safeguard, development and promotion of the European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage; on the other hand, its main task deals with the implementation of the competitiveness and economic potential of the cultural and creative sectors, with reference to the audiovisual sector. The three strands into which the Programme is divided sustain these sectors and empower efforts to make cultural production more sustainable, digital and inclusive through the construction of new audience and media consumption. The description of the strands helps focus on the strategic impact of the Programme supporting the convergence of audiences, culture and sustainability:

- the Culture strand deals with the production and trans-border worker circulation of cultural products and the mobility of cultural actors, with the purpose to develop transnational mobility, audiences (accessible and inclusive culture) and innovation, with regard to digitalization, learning and education. In this sector, the promotion of young talents is made possible through horizontal actions (networks, platforms, mobility for artists and professionals, cooperation projects), sectorial actions (music, publishing, cultural heritage) and special actions (European cultural awards, European capitals of culture, support to young artists);
- the Media strand encourages cinema and audiovisual industries in the development and promotion of the products financed, especially movies, TV series, documentaries, video games, cinema, festivals, vod services and markets. The promotion of young talents is supported thanks to programs of education and information addressed to the entertainment of audiences and cinema education;

- the Cross-sectorial strand is dedicated to the mass media sector and promotes media alphabetization, informative pluralism and freedom, with attention to the transnational political cooperation and the development of laboratories for creative media innovation (quality press, freedom and informative pluralism), so as to fuel international exchanges and best practices within cultural and creative sectors.

To the fore is the construction of new research opportunities not only for companies, foundations, private and public institutions, associations, but also for higher education actors and universities, at a time of public fund cuts and the increasing reticular collaborations. The rapid transformation of the academic environment boosted by digitalization, globalization and competition implies the necessity to contemplate both the potential and the effective risks of such knowledge interconnection, to better understand the ongoing and future impact of AI systems and digitalization on the traditional strategies of learning: «Will the university absorb the potentials of this general-purpose technology and use them to develop an open science that exploits this revolution to the benefit of societies and economies? Or will the university's central functions be absorbed by the technology companies that increasingly dominate many sectors of modern life»? (IAU, 2024, 7).

The "risks of the modern university" emphasized by the International Association of Universities in the report *Open Science: The Challenge for Universities* are closely related to this fast transformation of academic spheres soon after the pandemic. The metaphor of "open science" delves into the complexity of such a strategic transition as it deals with the search for new, solid opportunities for innovation for universities, as well as in the field of cultural production (Paltrinieri 2022).

The *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (2022/2047(INI)) underlines the central role played by humanities and more specifically arts in the construction of new ways of social aggregation and creativity: «whereas artistic research should be brought to a peer dialogue with other research disciplines and funded as such, because of both its self-value and its crucial contribution to triggering innovation». In this perspective, the Creative Europe Programme supports this strategy of cultural empowerment in those fields, such as music, theatre, literature, journalism, anthropology, in which temporary employment often hampers long-lasting interests and investments. In other terms, the Creative Europe Programme deals with cultural strategies designed to build a wide European creative sphere in line with the need to involve new audiences dedicated to the so-called world of arts (Becker 1982). Assuming that the Programme intends to enhance reticular connections between public and private subjects, it is important to remark that some co-financed projects involve academic actors and encourage the construction of a shared European sensitivity on the convergence of communicative and symbolic purposes. This is an aspect heralded by Jürgen Habermas (2013 [2014], 12) about European technocracy, social justice and economic solidarity:

> «A technocracy without democratic roots would have neither the power nor the motivation to accord sufficient weight to the demands of the electorate for social justice, status security, public services and collective goods, in the event of a conflict with the systemic demands for competitiveness and economic growth».

What is the relation between creativity, public opinion and social growth? The analysis of the academic projects financed in 2021 and 2022 exalts not only the research opportunities provided by European financing strategies not belonging to the traditional public economic supports (Horizon, ERC, PRIN), but also the incentive for higher education institutions concerning research activities in the audiovisual and cultural productions, thus empowering the academic vocation to dialogue, innovation and mobility. This aspect deals with the economy of culture in handling the sustainability of public policies for social inclusion: «In this advanced phase, public policies are required to increasingly face not only the way to improve the accessibility of cultural products and experiences, but also the enhancement of productive and managerial skills in these sectors, in the light of the more and more important contribution they offer to the macro-economic activity» (Sacco 2025, 56).
The backdrop to this is the transition from the "university in democracy" (Habermas, 1967) to the "new university" (Coe 2021) suggesting the analysis of the functional changes ruling the ongoing process of platformization of universities implying new strategies of private and public support to research activities (Lombardinilo 2025; Rivas 2023; Van Dijck, Poell, De Waal 2018).
The investigation into the projects financed by the Creative Europe Programme during the two-year period 2021-2022 shows that Universities took part in 30 projects also involving Italian Universities: 26 projects belong to the Culture strand, 3 projects are within the Cross-sectorial strand and one in Media strand. The average duration of the projects is 30 months. Six projects were coordinated by university institutions: three of them are Italian (University of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome, University of Turin) and the other three are Spanish (Universidad Catolica Santa Teresa de Jesus de Avila, Fundacion Universidad Catolica de Valencia San Vicente Martir, Universidad de Zaragoza). The remaining 24 projects involve European universities as partners, with an average of 8 partners in each project. As regards the Italian presence, the institutions in the Lazio region are the most active subjects in the promotion and the development of academic collaborations, as they are involved in 9 of the projects analysed.
The interdisciplinary dimension of the projects financed by the Creative Europe Program demonstrates that the «rhetoric of research» described by Raewyn Connell (2019, 36) can be overcome, provided that it is possible to support the social and public responsibility of university research, with particular regard to the Mediterranean area. This is a very strategic aspect, confirmed by the successful proposals of Italian and Spanish universities that show their strategic engagement in certain cultural fields such as social theatre, sustainable fashion methods, the digital storytelling of local traditions, rural intangible heritage, film and media literacy, in line with the promotion of their historical roots. The projects financed concern specific strategic sectors of contemporary creativity focused on shared efforts of inclusive and sustainable cultural productions. To the fore is the development of research networks, also aimed at strengthening the social perception of universities and their social impact, so as to cope properly with Stephan Collini's (2012) pressing stimulus: what are Universities for?.
The financial support provided by the Creative Europe Programme to university projects range from 159.296,00 euros (*Shadow-en-route*, coordinated by Sapienza University of Rome) to 2.440.714,00 euros (*WE produce PODcasts*, coordinated by

Roma Tre University). Spanish higher education institutions are the main partners of Italian universities within projects coordinated by foreign actors, as they take part in 5 research projects. For instance, the collaboration between the Universidad Catolica Santa Teresa and the University of Basilicata is at the basis of the project *Immersive digital storytelling of the European rural intangible heritage*. Furthermore, the partnership between the University of Zaragoza and the Roman archeological group led to the project *ClimAID - Building resilience to climate change through cultural heritage and urban arts*.

Table 1*: Projects supported by the Europe Creative Programme and coordinated by Italian Universities*

Italian University head of the project	**Department**	**Title of the project**	**Extension**	**Financing**	**Strand**
University of Turin	Department of Humanities	*Green E.Th.I.Cs - Green Experience through Theatre Inspiring Communities*	41 months (September 2022-February 2026)	1.973.476,00 euros	Culture
University of Milan	Department of Law	*Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare*	23 months (June 2022-May 2024)	199.998,00 euros	Culture
Sapienza University of Rome	Department of Humanities and Modern Cultures	*Shadow-en-route - Shadow theater EasterN ROots Uniting people Toward Europe*	23 months (June 2023-May 2025)	159.296,00 euros	Culture

Sustainability and digitalization are the cultural research areas mainly focused upon in the two-year period 2021-2022, since they are behind 6 projects. We can mention both the *Zero waste design* project carried out by the Tuscany Region and University of Gabès (Tunisia) and the *T4H - Tech 4 Heritage* coordinated by the French Production Audiovisual Agency "The Factories" and Sapienza University of Rome. Theatre is a strategic research topic within the Creative Europe Programme, as 5 projects are dedicated to the field of theatre innovation. For instance, *Sustainable Theatre Alliance for a green Environmental Shift* is coordinated by the Théatre de Liège in collaboration with the Riga Technical University and the Piccolo Teatro foundation in Milan. The least explored research topic in university projects is cinema, inspiring only one project, *The film corner for all. Digital innovative environments for film and media literacy,* coordinated by Fondazione Cineteca italiana together with the Milano-Bicocca University and the University of Galway (Ireland).

With reference to the three projects coordinated by Italian Universities, this survey highlights a shared focus on theatre innovation and drama education. For instance, *Green E.Th.I.Cs. - Green Experience Through Theatre Inspiring Communities* is coordinated by the University of Turin (Department of Humanities) and involves 18 Partner Actors belonging to 12 different countries. The purpose is to empower civic engagement activities in order to trigger awareness of climate change and strengthen the critical thought and proactivity of citizens in line with the European Green deal through performative arts. All documents and research fundings are available at the website http://greenethics.eu/.
The project *Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare (Typus)* is coordinated by the University of Milan (Department of Law Sciences) and involves four other partner subjects to develop an interactive approach focused on *Romeo and Juliet.* The task is to spark the integration of young marginalized actors in contemporary society to train new professional subjects possessing stage skills also concerning social and legal sciences (www.typus.it).
Finally, the project *Shadow-en-route – Shadow Theater EasterN Roots Uniting people toward Europe* is coordinated by the Sapienza University of Rome (Department of Humanities and Modern Cultures) and is developed with 4 partner subjects. It is inspired by the ancient tradition of the "theatre of shadows" connecting different cultures and identities. It is conceived as a means to promote European cooperation, as it exploits the history of the "theatre of shadows" to make cultural exchange easier and encourage a shared sense of European Mediterranean identity. The project promotes laboratories and public shows in Italy, Greece and Turkey and involves all participants in the creative process to improve their understanding of the European cultural heritage, as recommended in the *European Parliament Resolution of 14 November 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2022/2047(INI))*, which «considers that culture and intercultural dialogue make a key contribution to fostering mutual understanding within a society and between different societies, and to restoring communication beyond linguistic boundaries on the international stage in challenging global contexts».
In this context, the so called "community theatre" investigated by Federico Boni regarding the above projects represents a reliable interpretation of the social impact of dramaturgical strategies (Fişek 2019; Angelaki 2019; Auslander 1999), also considering the collective participation and construction of shared environments: «This tension among ethics, aesthetics and sociality inspires all the theatre and performative projects of Creative Europe as their practices deal with the keywords participation and inclusivity. Therefore, they delve into the agency of people and the groups to which these projects are addressed». (Boni 2025, 154). The way these projects coped with the recovery of handicapped and marginalized subjects confirms the impact of interculturalism (Knowles 2010; Kornhaber 2020), from the perspective of artistic live performances (Gemini, Brilli 2024).
The reticular patterns of these projects seem to exalt the strategic role played by academic networks in research activities on contemporary creativity and cultural production, in line with the construction of European audiences supported by the tenets of inclusion, participation and mobility, thus never forgetting that «Universities

represent, collectively, a tremendous social asset, produced by the effort of many thousands of workers and students over long periods of time». (Connell 2019, 8).

3. *Culture and imagination as a European booster*

«Culture is public because meaning is». As Clifford Geertz (1973, 12) points out in his well-known *Interpretation of cultures*, culture belongs to all social phenomena owning public importance and a shared collective. As William Blake reminds us, «eternity is in love with the productions of time»: the more social meanings are acknowledged and interiorized, the more those meanings may reach cultural dominion according to the new techniques of symbolic consumption of the hyperconnected society.

The cultural production supported by the Creative Europe Programme deals with the attempt to link the public and private dimensions of cultural industries that should comply with the principles of inclusion, sustainability and social engagement. Furthermore, the scientific networks supporting the projects financed exalt the reticular patterns required by the European Programme to enhance university research in audiovisual and cultural innovation processes. In other terms, the definition of such research partnerships in cultural creativity must be framed within the European policies for social and economic development also through the involvement of academic expertise in communication and creative processes, with reference to theatre, art and digital narrations (Altobelli 2025; Paltrinieri, Spampinato 2024). As we go through the contents and the results of the above mentioned projects, we retrieve Richard Sennett's image of "the sociable performer" within our shifting times: «There is an aspect of cooperation which is closer to the concern in this study with the bodily, non-verbal character of performance, cutting across all forms of performance, from rituals to stage plays, from dancing to music» (Sennett 2024, 173).

The dialectic between the ritual and the performance concerns the way we are still capable of producing and consuming culture and, in the meantime, of making culture a public shared process pivoted on the exaltation of local identities and common creative pathways (Sternberg 2023). This is one of the main tasks of postmodern universities in developing civic engagement and collective participation. On the one hand, the construction of postmodern universities depends on their degree of attractiveness and authority; on the other hand, it also requires a different way to foresee the impact of knowledge on everyday life, as Ronald Barnett (2013, 2) underlined: «*how might our understandings of the university be expanded?* One answer lies in the imagination: through the imagination, we may hope to widen our sense of the possibilities before us». Creativity and imagination are two sides of the same coin as they may fuel cultural industries and academic institutions as well, providing that Europe plays a central role in this challenge for intellectual and civil growth: «This feat is accomplished ever anew, daily, everywhere where humans live; the perpetual rebirth and reincarnation of the world is what all and any human mode of being-in-the-world consists in» (Bauman 2004, 11).

Reimagining the university is the pivotal purpose of Dirks' work: only "decentralized and more networked" institutions can unlock new opportunities and position themselves more critically in the ecosystem of knowledge. Therefore, they can be framed within the wider strategies of public relevance and funding improvement, at a time of global uncertainty and multilevel functional risks. This perspective may also shed light on the ongoing complexity of academic governance overturning the positive effects of research partnerships into a rigid administrative procedure contrasting with the need for mobility and worldwide synergies.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Altobelli D. (2025), *Globalizzazione, glocalization e patrimonio culturale. Tradizioni e identità collettive in Europa*, in Lombardinilo A. (ed.), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro*, Carocci, Roma: 162-176.

Angelaki V. (2019), *Theatre and Environment*, Methuen, London.

Auslander P. (1999), *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Routledge, London-New York.

Bauman Z. (2004), *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Bauman Z. (2001), *The Individualized Society*, Polity Press, Press, Cambridge.

Barnett R. (2013), *Imagining the University*, Routledge, London.

Barnett R. (2017), *The Ecological University. A Feasible Utopia*, Routledge, London.

Becker H.S. (1982), *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Boccia Artieri G., Farci M. (2021), *Shockdown. Media, cultura, comunicazione e ricerca nella pandemia*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Boni F. (2025), *L'Europa in scena. Teatro e arti performative*, in Lombardinilo A. (ed.), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro*, Carocci, Roma: 150-161.

Bourdieu P. (1984), *Homo academicus*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit.

Bourdieu P., Passeron J.C. (1970), *La reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris.

Casavecchia A., Pitzalis M., Poliandri D. (eds.) (2025), *L'Università dall'autonomia all'eteronomia? Come riequilibrare un percorso critico*, TrE-Press, Roma.

Castoriadis C. (2007), *Figures of the Thinkable*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City.

Chemerinsky E., Gillman H. (2017), *Free Speech on Campus*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Coe J. (2021), *The New University*, 404 Inklings, London.

Colombo M., Salmieri L. (2022), *Higher Education in Italy. Between New Public Management and Autonomy*, in "Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines", 41: 285-306. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4_59.

Connell R. (2019), *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change*, Zed Books, London.

Coleman J.S., Hoffer T. (1987), *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, Basic Books, New York.

Collini S. (2012), *What are Universities for?*, Penguin Books, London.

Corsi C., Magnier A. (2016), *L'università allo specchio. Questioni e prospettive*, Firenze University Press, Firenze.

D'Ambrosi L., Martino V., Brescia P. (2024), *University Fourth Mission and Social Impact*, in Oliveira E., Gonçalves G. (eds.), *Ethics and Society: Challenges in Organisational & Public Communication*, LabCom Books, Covilhã: 99-134.

D'Alessandro L. (2016), *Università quarta dimensione*, Mimesis, Sesto San Giovanni.

Deem R. (2004), *The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management?* in “Financial Accountability & Management”, 20, 2: 107-128. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0408.2004.00189.x.
De Feo A., Pitzalis M. (2017), *Service or Market Logic? The Restructuring of the Tertiary Education System in Italy*, in “Rassegna italiana di sociologia”, 58, 2: 219-250. DOI: 10.1423/87308.
Derrida J. (2001), *L’université sans condition*, Éditions Galilée, Paris.
Dirks N. (2024), *City of Intellect: The Uses and Abuses of the University*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Dobson J., Owolade F. (2025), *Civic Capitals as Risk: The Fragile Foundations of The Civic University*, National Civic Impact Accelerator, London. DOI: 10.7190/CRESR.2025.7911020742.
Dobson J., Ferrari E. (2023), *Reframing the Civic University: An Agenda for Impact*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Etzkowitz H. (2000), *Technology Transfer and the East European Transition*, in “Science and Public Policy”, 27, 4: 230-234. https://doi.org/10.3152/147154300781781869.
European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (2012), *Communiqué: Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area*. https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf.
European Education Area (EUA) (2022), *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation*. https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-building-bridges-for-effective-european-higher-education-cooperation.
European Union Council (2022), *Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 2022/C 466/01*, Bruxelles. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2022_466_R_0001.
European Parliament (2022), *European Parliament Resolution of 14 December 2022 on the Implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2022/2047(INI))*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0444_EN.html.
Geertz C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York City.
Ferrarotti F. (1981), *I problemi dell'Università di massa: mito o realtà?*, in “Universitas”, 4: 15-19.
Fişek E. (2019), *Theatre and Community*, Methuen, London.
Freire P. (2000), *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc, Lanham (MD).
Furedi F. (2018), *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the 21st Century*, Bloomsbury Continuum, London.
Furedi F. (2017), *What’s Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of its Infantilization*, Routledge, London.
Gemini L., Brilli S. (2024), *Gradienti di liveness. Performance e comunicazione dal vivo nei contesti mediatizzati*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Giddens A. (1991), *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
Goddard J. (2009), *Re-inventing the Civic University*, NESTA, London.
Habermas J. (1967), *Universität in der Demokratie – Demokratisie rung der Universität*, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.
Habermas J. (2008), *Notes on Post-Secular Society*, in "New Perspectives Quarterly", 25: 17-29. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x
Habermas J. (2013), *The Lure of Technocracy* (2014), Polity Press, Cambridge.
International Association of Universities (IAU) (2024), *Open Science: The Challenge for Universities*, Unesco, Paris, https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/open_science_the_challenge_for_universities.pdf.pdf
Lombardinilo A. (2014), *Building university: in una società aperta e competitiva*, Armando Editore, Roma.
Lombardinilo A. (2018), *Università del rischio e mobilità accademica: la drammatizzazione mediale della violenza*, in "Rivista Trimestrale di Scienza dell'Amministrazione", 1:1-29.
Lombardinilo A. (2019), *Università in democrazia. Habermas e la sfera della comunicazione accademica*, Mimesis, Udine.
Lombardinilo A. (ed.) (2025), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro,* Carocci, Roma.
Kerr C. (1963), *The Uses of University*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA).
Knowles R. (2010), *Theatre and Interculturalism*, Methuen, London.
Kornhaber D. (2020), *Theatre and Knowledge*, Red Globe Press, London.
Martino V., D'Ambrosi L., Brescia P., Beniusis V. (2025), *Reframing University. Impact and Relational Value in the Higher-education System*, in "Scuola democratica", *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/for Social Justice*, Vol. 2: *Cultures, Practices, and Change*, Associazione Per Scuola Democratica: 859-867.
Matthews A. (2023), *The Idea and Becoming of a University across Time and Space: Ivory Tower, Factory and Network*, in "Postdigital Science and Education", 5, 3: 665-693.
Mazza C., Quattrone P., Riccaboni A. (2008), *European Universities in Transition: Issues, Models and Cases*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham.
Morcellini M., Martino V. (2005), *Contro il declino dell'università. Appunti e idee per una comunità che cambia*, Il Sole 24 Ore, Milano.
Morin E. (1999), *La tête bien faite*, Seuil, Paris.
Moscati R. (2012), *L'università: modelli e processi*, Carocci, Roma.
Moscati R. (2010), *Torri d'avorio in frantumi? Dove vanno le università europee*, il Mulino, Bologna.
Paltrinieri R. (ed.) (2022), *Il valore sociale della cultura*, il Mulino, Bologna.
Paltrinieri R., Spampinato F. (eds.) (2024), *Arti come agency. Il valore sociale e politico delle arti nella comunità*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.
Peretomode V. F. (2021), *Demystifying the Ivory Tower Syndrome in Universities Through the Use of Transformational Leadership*, in "International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies", 13, 1: 1-9. DOI: 10.5897/IJEAPS2020.0685.

Readings B. (1996), *The University in Ruins*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA).
Rivas A. (2023), *The Platformization of Education: A Framework to Map the New Directions of Hybrid Education Systems*, Routledge, London.
Ruggiero C., Picone A. (2025), *New journalism. La collaborazione transnazionale per l'indipendenza e il pluralismo dell'informazione europea*, in Lombardinilo A. (ed.), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro*, Carocci, Roma: 177-188.
Sacco P.L. (2025), *L'evoluzione delle politiche culturali europee: dal mecenatismo alla Cultura 3.0*, in Lombardinilo A. (ed.), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro*, Carocci, Roma: 55-66.
Scioldo C. (2025), *European Networks and Cultural Governance: How Culture Makes Policy*, Routledge, London.
Selingo J.J. (2017), *The Networked University: Building Alliances for Innovation in Higher Education*, Pearson, London.
Sennett R. (2024), *The Performer: Art, Life, Politics*, Allen Lane, London.
Silver H. (2010), *Does a University Have a Culture?* in "Studies in Higher Education", 28, 2: 157-169. https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507032000058118.
Sternberg R.J. (2023), *Cultural Creativity: A Componential Model*, in Preiss D.D., Singer M., Kaufman J.C. (eds.), *Creativity, Innovation, and Change across Cultures*, Springer, Berlin: 363-387. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28206-5_14.
Tota A.L. (2025), *Geografie della memoria: identità europee e cultural heritage*, in Lombardinilo A. (ed.), *Il programma Europa Creativa. Una sfida per la cultura del futuro,* Carocci, Roma: 67-82.
Van Dijck J., Poell T., De Waal M. (2018), *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Viesti G. (2016), *Università in declino. Un'indagine sugli atenei da Nord a Sud*, Donzelli, Roma.
World Economic Forum (2024), *Global Risks Report 2024*, https://www.weforum.org/publi-cations/global-risks-report-2024/.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 127-144
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.07

Gender-Based Violence in War and (Negative) Peace. A Multifaceted Holistic Approach to Dismantle Patriarchy

William Persichilli

A research carried out by the World Health Organization shows that one in three women experience intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Homogeneous accounts of men's violence prove to be inadequate in reading the gender-based violence phenomenon. In this essay, I propose a theoretical recognition of the main literature available to date, to contend that gender-based violence, both in war and in peace, is a fruit of patriarchy, and that only a holistic approach to peace, which is based on a simultaneous acknowledgment of direct, structural, and cultural violence, can provide a reliable base to counter it. Employing some gender social theory, with a more specific resort to those scholarships of international politics which take into account the global debate about peace and war, I wish to help compose a more critical perspective to investigate this complex subject.

Introduction

A research carried out by the World Health Organization shows that one in three women experience intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organization 2021). Men's violence against women is a spread and deep problem requiring multiple interventions, such as including supporting survivors, holding perpetrators accountable, addressing structural inequalities, and centering women's work and activism against violence. Men tend to be more violent than women and direct violence is regarded as a typically male phenomenon. Galtung reports that 95% of direct violence is committed by men, and that there is massive direct male violence at all levels of society, as criminal violence in the family and society, and as political violence within and between communities and with other communities (Galtung 1996). Even though women are often victims of violence perpetrated by men, with the existence of a structure and pro-violence culture in society, women themselves ultimately feel violence is something that cannot be avoided. Even when women are the umpteenth victims of male violence, where women are forced to participate in preserving the culture of violence and even become perpetrators of violence against other women, they do it for the benefit of men.

The analytical structure of this essay has been envisaged as a theoretical recognition of the main literature available to date with reference to the object I assumed, that is, to show that Gender Based Violence (hereafter, GBV) is a direct/indirect fruit of patriarchy and that only an holistic approach to peace, which is based on a simultaneous acknowledgment of direct, structural, and cultural violence, can provide a reliable base to detect and counter GBV. Overall, the essay employs the lenses typical of gender social theory, even though with a more specific resort to those scholarships of international politics which take the global debate about peace and war into account. Reporting some of the main positions which contribute to the

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 145-163
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.08

debate around the topic at issue, this theoretical reconstruction is far from being exhaustive and does not aim at being universal. However, the main reason of adopting such heterogeneous and multifaceted approach is the hope to help compose a more critical perspective to investigate such a complex subject.

After having provided a brief overview related to how the main feminist theories and studies dealing with violence look at the issue of GBV and after having given a sample of the partially flawed methodologies that main research in the field has so far employed, I attempt to show the controversial relationship between masculinity and violence, especially in time of war, and the linkage between femininity and peacefulness, concluding that they are both mostly rooted in a false myth. To that purpose, I argue that war, and so the direct and institutionalised violence which follows, is gendered, sharing those feminist scholarships that emphasise the role misogynistic training and discourses play in shaping military thinking.

In section 2, I illustrate the main current approaches to tackling GBV, and their limitations. Alongside a glance at the historical roots of patriarchy, with reference both to the classical tradition and to its modern accounts, I report some empirical cases showing how men's violence prevention programs are still too focused on homogeneous account of violence, detrimentally to a full grasp of cultural and structural aspects of GBV.

In section 3, I explain Galtung's theory of conflict and his insight of direct, structural, and cultural violence (the so called violence triangle), to finally show how it can provide a useful basis for addressing GBV, when applied to it. The theories and arguments I employ help locate the topic within the more general question whether GBV is something growing out of patriarchy or rather out of its crisis. After summing up the main positions within this debate, I explain the novelties of the the Galtungian approach to solve GBV, emphasising its framework drawn from peace studies, compared to the other scholarships dealing with violence and patriarchy.

In section 4, I attempt to gender Galtung and to apply its model to GBV. After showing the differences between direct, cultural, and structural violence in relation to GBV, I create a dialogue between Galtung's violence triangle and Burrell's triadic approach to men's violence programs, so highlighting the micro, meso, and macro dimension of GBV. To conclude, I stress the importance of care in our societies and the need of incorporating men into feminist theories and practises of care as essential for achieving gender equality and reducing GBV.

I contend that do exist historical, theoretical, sociological, cultural conditions apt to demonstrate with a certain rate of reliability that GBV is a direct/indirect product of patriarchy and that only an holistic approach to peace can proffer a reliable base to detect and counter GBV.

1. *The relationship between masculinity and violence. The masculinity of war*

The rhetoric that traverses dominant discourses about war and peace is dichotomous and split along gender lines: within militarist thinking as well as militarist cultures, a warrior's death is set against a child's birth; male violence against female reproduction. War certainly seems to be men's business, it is mostly men who make civil and foreign battle plans, who invent weapons and supervise

their construction. Men predominate among the spies, police chiefs, judges and governors who construct a peacetime order guaranteed by the threat of violence. More men than women shoot the gun and start missiles, more men than women command them. Traditionally, in most cultures, it has been men's duty to fight while women watch, suffer, applaud, support and forgive (Ruddick 1995).
Militarists use the myth of war's manliness to shape soldierly behaviour and to reward soldiers, boot camp recruits are "ladies" until, trained in obedient killing, they become men. Misogyny is a useful element in the making of a soldier, as boys are pushed to lower and expel whatever in themselves is deemed to be "womanly". Sexist language for women and their bodies is common in military discipline, and even when misogyny and lust are absent, the warrior embodies a typically masculine ideal of camaraderie and lonely heroism. Rarely does anyone, man or woman, deny the masculinity of war.
Ruddick tries to put light upon the myth of men's war and women's peacefulness, arguing that it is not as universal as one may be inclined to think. Virtually no one denies that military thinking is imbued with masculine values. Yet, a boy is not born, but rather becomes, a soldier. Becoming a soldier means learning how to control fears and domestic longings that are explicitly labelled "feminine". The soldier earns the right to violence and sex and, if he fails, he remains "womanly" while losing the right to women.
If war is masculine and abstract, peace seems feminine: women's peacefulness often begins in negation, alienated women insist that they stand outside men's war and are repelled by otherwise respect worthy men who have been transformed by war's rhetoric. Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* represents a central place within contemporary feminist peace politics, thanks to its detaching women from men's bloody war (Woolf 1966). I highlight how Woolf's women are "outsiders" different from men, and how their "difference" is deeply rooted in a cosmopolitan appeal for peace based on a gendered critique of war (Persichilli 2025). Many women tended to ground their refusal of war in a history of caring labour. A Soviet dissident writing from exile sounds this message:

> «It is natural for women, who give life, to be opposed to war and violence – war of any sort, be it in Vietnam or Afghanistan, and violence against any being. We do not distinguish between guns and nuclear bombs, because all are weapons used for the death and destruction of people» (Mamanova 1984, 13).

Suffragist Anna Shaw asked several years ago:

> «Looking into the face of […] one dead man we see two dead, the man and the life of the woman who gave him birth; the life she wrought into his life! And looking into his dead face someone asks a woman, what does a woman know about war? What, what friends, in the face of a crime like that does a man know about war?».

The same point has been reiterated by so many women from so many nations over so many years that it is hard to hear it afresh.
Men's wars, women's peace; a warrior's murder, a child's birth. The dichotomous rhetoric and theory run up against two facts: men are not so warlike and women are certainly not peaceful. Sara Ruddick provides us with copious arguments about it.

Consider first the "masculinity" of war. There is, undeniably, a disproportionate male presence in defence councils and on battlefields as well as a masculinist ideology to back it. The manliness of war is an outcome of several factors. «Considered as a biological class, men *may* have a greater inclination to aggressiveness than women, and this aggressiveness, which is given licence in war, *may* also motivate some of the men who engage in them» (Ruddick 1995, 151). On the other hand, warfare, especially in its contemporary patterns, seems to require, alongside physical force, a tolerance of boredom or the ability to operate a computer under stress, let alone the peaceful tasks of reconciliation, all characteristics that are neither distinctly "masculine" nor heroic.
Very few of the men who partake in war can be said to "make war": most are foot soldiers and workers in the service of campaigns they did not design, about which they were not consulted, and which they hardly share. Even within the military, the amount of suppliers and bureaucrats to active fighters is high. The soldiers who do engage in combat are usually very young men, many of which are conscripted for battle. Some boys fight eagerly, many of the eager boys are deluded by patriotic fervour and by masculine myths, ending up fighting for national interests and causes from which they derive no benefit and which they barely understand. If men were so willing to go to war, Ruddick says, we would not need drafts, training in misogyny, and macho heroes, nor would we have to entice the morally sensitive with myths of patriotic duty and just cause. Indeed, history reveals that men have an even more ambivalent relationship with fighting expected of them than women do with the maternal work for which they are believed to be naturally suited. Some men thrill to battle and to the sexually predatory violence it allows, some others take part with mixed feelings but minimal questions simply because fighting is expected of them. Some of these men later report that they took pleasure in destruction, cruelty and murder, but there are others, as well as these same men on other days, who are ashamed and disgusted by the killing: in every war there are men who, with clear-sighted courage, refuse to fight, often at great cost to themselves.
Women's peacefulness is at least as mythical as men's violence. Women have never been absent from war: whatever the cause, women on both sides of the battle lines support the military effort of their male relatives and mates, women are proud to fight alongside their brothers, in whatever battles their state enlists them.

> «There is nothing in a woman's genetic makeup or history that prevents her from firing a missile or spraying nerve gas over a sleeping village if she desires this or believes it to be her duty» (Ruddick 1995, 154)

Ruddick concludes. War is exciting and women, like men, can be subject to the excitements of violence and community sacrifice it promises. Moreover, next to a personal adventure and economic profit for men and women, war can offer to women the chance to temporarily leave the domestic space they are traditionally confined in peacetime, an unconscious desire which is rooted in the limitedness of their private existence. Nonetheless, women usually justify their militarism as men do, and even peace-loving women, like most men, support organised violence, at least in "emergencies". As historian Sonya Rose has argued, referring to the history of the Second World War, women are understood to bear other kinds of gendered obligations during wartime, such as maintenance of “moral virtue” in the realm of sexuality and the responsible guardianship of the home and hearth. These were imposed as central responsibilities of citizenship during World War II, and much governmental and popular effort was put on policing the fulfilment of these responsibilities, such as civil defence roles or fire-watching. As their most prominent wartime duties are to family and sexual or familial moral rectitude – the World War II obsession with young women’s morality was thus articulated in terms that constructed moral subjects as responsible citizens – women’s service to the state is indirect, and mediated by their familial roles. Like some men, women can be fierce and enthusiastic militarists or, like some other men, see war as a catastrophe to be avoided but collude with it, relinquishing to leaders political and military appraisals they do not intend to understand. Most women, like most men, believe that violence can be met only by violence and that the virtue of a cause justifies the horrors done in its name. Although women and men support war for reasons that transcend gender, war also excites women in gender-related ways. War offers the adventurous real and imagined freedoms from feminine duty: in wartime a woman may carry secrets behind the lines, blow up the troop train, free prisoners, or torture them. It is possible that many women do not succumb to the romance of war and are rather horrified by the idea of sacrificing lives of male children for the sake of the homeland. Yet war enables even horrified women to engage in deeds that partake of received notions of glory, honour, nobility, civic virtue. When war ends, mothers nurse the survivors just as, at first, they prepared munitions and then put gold stars in their windows. Having applauded their children’s efforts from the first school test, they could not shift their behaviour when the legal force of the state combines with community excitement to draft them for war. According to Ruddick, a pure maternal peacefulness does not exist and cannot be invented.

2. *The main current approaches to tackling GBV, and their limitations*

If Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity is the most influential theory in this field (Connell 2005), diverse streams of radical, socialist, intersectional, and queer feminist scholarship have focused on the many connections between men, masculinities, and violence. It is fundamental to state that there is not a singular feminism, a singular feminist theory of men’s violences, or a sole feminist approach to GBV. Rather, there is an articulated plethora of different feminist views applied in diverse contexts. First, several key feminist theories regard GBV not only as discrete and visible acts, but also as patterns of coercive control (Stark 2007). Such theories cast men’s violence as a continuum from the everyday to the extreme (Kelly 1996). Second, individual accounts of GBV are insufficient by themselves to portrait the phenomenon at issue; a structural analysis of patriarchy is essential as well (Connell 2005). Hooks speaks of “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” while showing how GBV is inseparable from a broader systemic analysis of inequalities, so proffering a wider interlocking structural framework (hooks 2004). For hooks, and many feminist theories in the field, GBV is rooted in unequal structural and relational arrangements of power which confer men dominance over women – and some men dominance over other men (hooks 2003). As Hearn et al. write, «Violence is structure, practice, process and outcome of domination» (Hearn *et al.* 2021, 35). However, as Mclnerne and Archer state, across this complex constellation of different feminist positions, a common thread reveals the multitude of men's violences and notes that it is men's practices, masculine norms, and patriarchal structures which must be examined and transformed to prevent men's violence against women (Mclnerne, Archer 2023).

The history of patriarchy is as long as mankind's, and patriarchy has been one of the founding concepts of gender studies, having led to the development of a plethora of theories that aim to identify the basis of women's subordination to men. Literally, patriarchy means rule by a male leader of a given social unit. The patriarch, typically an elder of the society, has legitimate power over the other members of the social unit, including other men, especially the younger ones, and over all women and children. However, since the early twentieth century, feminist writers have used this concept to refer to a social system of male domination over women.

In classical patriarchal theory, the father is not simply one of the two parents, but the parent, and the one capable of generating political rights. Both Jewish and Christian traditions have for centuries depicted women in a negative light, emphasising their innate moral depravity, their power to seduce men to the point of bringing about their downfall, thus revealing the necessity that women be submissive to the will of men, thus justifying acts of violence and coercion against women as a consequence of their sin (Persichilli 2025). By submitting to men, women are thus saved, redeemed, and protected from their own depravity. In the *Genesis*, God gives man the prerogative of "ruling" over woman, thus curbing her seductive powers and becoming master of her sexuality and desires. This is how chastity, modesty, and submission became the three guard dogs of the female body and desire, and have been powerfully reinforced throughout the ages through constant vigilance and indoctrination, and, ultimately, physical coercion. In the tradition of medieval Christianity, women are generally regarded as men's possession and as creatures to be dominated. In the *First Letter to Corinthians*, Paul of Tarsus states that if a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; a woman should, since she is the glory of man (CEI 2008, 9). Augustine of Hippo believes that if the head of man is Christ, the head of woman is her husband (Agostino di Ippona 1988).

In the modern age, women's condition changed only apparently, for women passed from being fathers' property to being brothers' property. As Pateman argues (Pateman 2018), with the institution of the social contract men ensured that the law of male sexual right remained operative and allowed them to gain material and spiritual benefit from the subjugation of women. Women were in fact deprived of a basis for economic independence, through the separation between the world of work and the domestic world, and through the consolidation of the patriarchal structure of capitalism. Sir William Blackstone, in the eighteenth century, succinctly stated the legal consequences that a woman faced when entering into a marriage contract, according to what in common law was known as the *Doctrine of Coverture*:

«By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything; is said to be […]

under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*» (Blackstone 2005, 182).

Men's violence prevention is often built upon a social constructionist approach which examines the culturally, historically, and politically constructed dimensions of gender and unveils an understanding of masculinities as plural and changing. Such multiple masculinities understanding suggests there is no one singular or inevitable way to be a man. Pascoe and Bridges deny a universalist view of masculinity, stating that masculinities are not "transhistorical or universal'' and that the differences among men can be as essential as the differences between men and people of other genders (Pascoe and Bridges 2016). Therefore, it is essential to study in an intersectional fashion the complex ways that men's experiences with masculinities and violence are impacted by their race, sexuality, and class identities (among others) and so the ways that men can experience both privilege and oppression at the same time.

Since feminist scholarship attempts to spotlight the linkages between men, masculinities, and a plurality of violences, it is no surprise that homogeneous accounts of men's violence are inadequate in reading GBV. Mclnerne and Archer use the expression "homogenous violence" to describe GBV approaches which disproportionately or exclusively focus on individual, often physical, acts of violence. Such work masks the complexity of men's violences. Edstrom et al. also note the preponderance of programming focused on individual men's attitudes and lack of attention to structural violence (Edstrom *et al.* 2015). Burrell's research on activists working with men in the UK presents more evidence of this problem (Burrell 2018). His interviews revealed a frustration that some efforts to prevent men's violence – specifically university programs – limited their focus to certain types of violence (e.g., only sexual violence). Burrell denounces a lack of attention to structural violence: «work with men is too often on changing individual attitudes, leaving patriarchal structures that provide the foundations for men's violence largely untouched» (Burrell 2018, 459).

I will now draw from the Australian context to provide a couple of empirical cases in which a focus on homogeneous account of violence is privileged. In Australia, many programs have been proposed in recent years to work with boys and young men in schools and family support agencies. However, these education programs concerned with violence prevention often emphasise a relationship between witnessing violence as a child and becoming a perpetrator of violence as an adult, supporting the cycle of violence thesis and promoting therapeutic and educational interventions with boys (Indermaur 2001).

Rather than taking into account feminist understandings of masculinity, power and the privileged status of boys in gender relations, many of such programs focus on developing boys' self-esteem and communication skills, (Mills 2001) so rooting the cause of men's violence in the developmental and psychological aspects of the individual perpetrator (Boyd 2007).

A second instance showing that the primary prevention level is seen more often than not as working on the attitudes, values and beliefs of men that underpin violence, rather than on interventions into structurally unequal gender relations, is offered by an application of the public health epidemiological model of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention to intervention strategies dealing with GBV. In fact, if in the original health education context, primary prevention focuses on community education (Mulder 1999) and the introduction of new values and thinking processes in relation to the health issue being addressed, when this conceptual model was applied to violence against women, primary prevention would focus on attitudes and behaviour change.

While some health promotion frameworks do acknowledge structural factors, they are less successful in addressing these in their interventions. Given the gendered power inequality in society and the prevailing social structures which reproduce men's violence, Mulder (1999) has questioned whether these public health concepts, which have their origins in the epidemiological and bio-medical model, will be successful in preventing GBV. In fact, when we frame social problems in terms of immediately feasible intervention strategies, we are engaged in a political act of accepting prevailing assumptions and ideas about the problem.

Shifting our attention to the European continent, we notice that the situation is not much different. A meta-analysis of evaluations of programs for perpetrators in Europe, conducted as part of the Daphne IMPACT project (Lilley-Walker et al., 2018), found that from the initial focus on cultural and social dimensions addressed by the first pro-feminist programs, European interventions have adopted more psychologising approaches. Their objectives are to activate behavioural change through the therapeutic relationship with the perpetrator, the deconstruction of distorted cognitive systems, and the identification of strategies to prevent abuse. In this context, it is interesting to note that the indicators used in the evaluative studies analysed refer to the reduction of recidivism, individual empowerment, behavioural change, awareness of the impact of violence, and, to a lesser extent, the deconstruction of sexist and misogynistic stereotypes.

As a possible solution to GBV, Burrell proposes a 'triadic approach' to working with men that addresses men (individually), masculinities (culturally), and patriarchy (structurally). He argues such an approach can help men «make sense of the micro, meso and macro dynamics through which violence against women is perpetuated, and how they relate to their own lives, personally and politically» (Burrell 2018, 456).

3. *Galtung's Violence Triangle. Novelties and limitations*

In 1964 the already mentioned Johan Galtung, one of the founders and main figures in peace research, expanded the concept of peace and violence to include indirect or structural violence. The expanded nature of violence led to an extended definition of peace, where peace is not only the absence of war and violence (negative peace), but also absence of structural violence (positive peace) realised through the integration of human society.[1] Whereas negative peace seems to be

[1] The terms "negative" and "positive peace" were first introduced by Galtung in Galtung (1964). It must be noted that in 1964 Galtung did not specifically mention the word "structural violence" but "human integration". In 1969 Galtung defines violence as being «present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisation», thus including structural violence. For a more detailed account of Galtung's notion of structural violence, see Galtung (1969).

pessimistic, positive peace is shown to be optimistic and can be realised through communication, human understanding, peace education, international cooperation, dispute resolution, arbitration, conflict management, and so forth. Since personal and direct violence are often built into the social structure, it is more sound, to Galtung, to focus upon the wider picture created by structural violence, as this would reveal the causes and effects of violence and conditions for peace.

Coming to GBV, the Galtungian perspective enables to locate the latter within the more general debate according to which GBV either stems from patriarchy and from its historical contintuation or, conversely, is fuelled by an ongoing crisis of masculinity. Nowadays, masculinist movements often argue that men, particularly in the face of feminist initiatives, have become a disadvantaged group, to the extent that a recent transformation of femininity has never been paralleled by a similar activity on masculinity, in which men should have deconstructed patriarchal categories of manliness. Such distance between women’s and men’s condition is deemed to produce in men insecurity about their identity and social role. Therefore, where patriarchy is struggling to maintain itself amidst social shifts (Fraser 2016), violence remains a crucial mechanism for stabilising its foundation. A key dimension of this violence is the reassertion of a rigid binary gender order that naturalises and upholds normative masculinity and femininity through coercion. Within this order, white masculinity is constructed as the dominant subject, while femininity is positioned as subordinate, reinforcing patriarchal structures of exploitation.

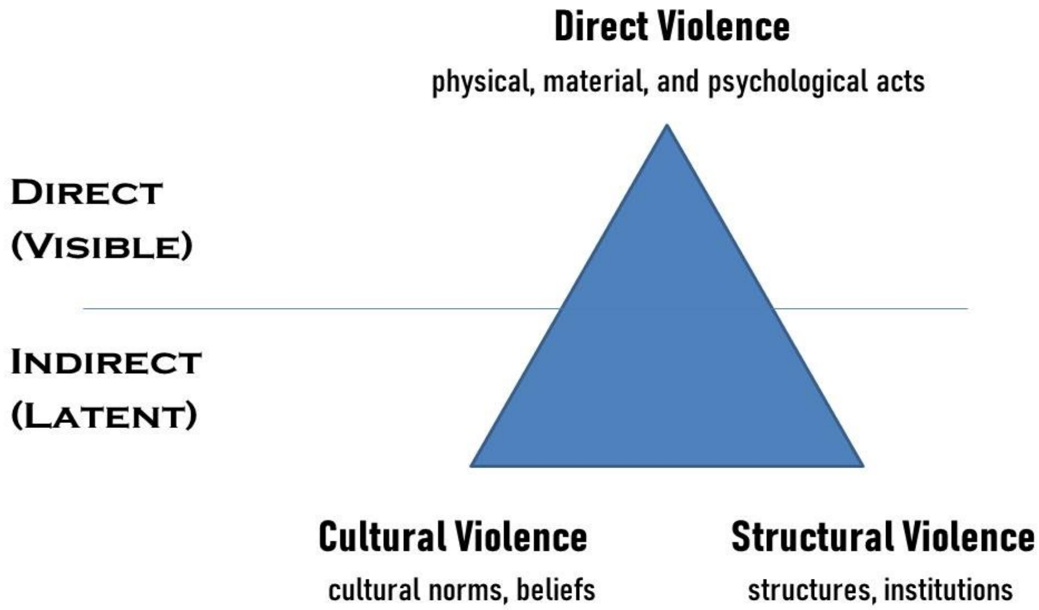
According to these narratives, sexualised violence operates as a regulating and stabilising instrument in the face of women’s liberation, while (re)producing and maintaining the binary gender order and its associated power dynamics. Connell’s already mentioned concept of “hegemonic masculinity” shows how the binary gender system determines who is permitted to exert, and who is expected to submit to power and dominance. Constructing femininity as inherently passive and weak positions feminised bodies as natural and ‘legitimate’ targets for violence, reinforcing their subordinate role within the gender hierarchy. Simultaneously, white, heteronormative bodies, associated with strength and dominance, are perceived as capable of defending themselves.

Galtung’s understanding of direct and indirect violence is not new to those sociological theories that have long emphasised how direct violence is only one face of the broader phenomenon, being it buttressed by more subtle forms of violence. Bourdieu’s account of symbolic violence and Walby’s explanation of the relations between structures of patriarchy, only to mention some of the main contributions to the debate, already highlight that GBV is both a direct and indirect outcome of patriarchy. In fact, to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a form of non-physical domination where the power of a dominant social group is imposed on a subordinate group, often without conscious coercion. It is a "gentle, invisible" form of violence that operates by making the dominant group's norms and values seem like the "natural" or "common sense" way of doing things. This process is reinforced through social structures like education and the media, leading the dominated to internalise their inferior position and accept social hierarchies as legitimate. Coming to gender issues, social conditioning creates “habitus” or dispositions that cause people to willingly and unconsciously comply with gender norms that reinforce male dominance. In the same fashion as Bourdieu, Walby argues that patriarchy should not be seen as just individual men dominating individual women, but as a set of interlocking structures embedded in society. She identifies six structures of patriarchy, which shape women's lives in both the public and private spheres. Household, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, cultural institutions form a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.

What the Galtungian approach adds to the other scholarships dealing with violence and patriarchy, is a framework drawn from peace studies in the attempt to resolve GBV. Peace studies and men's violence prevention are highly connected but often deatched fields. This is particularly clear in the lack of engagement with the concept of peace in men's violence prevention programs (Hearn et al. 2021). As we saw for the case-studies of men's violence prevention programs carried out in the Australian context, a predominant focus on individual responsibilities and behavioural change of the perpetrator prevents from grasping the interdependent relationships amongst violences, peaces, and peace-work strategies in addressing violence against women. In the rest of the article, I show how adapting Galtung's theory of conflict to men's violence work can enrich the latter by incorporating both heterogeneous concepts of men's direct, structural, and cultural violences, and positive and negative peaces. While complex notions of violence are not new to peace studies, Galtung's work can enrich feminist scholarship and offer an accessible tool for practitioners in the ways in which it introduces men's violences to those who may be less familiar with the concept.

To Galtung, direct violence consists of physical, material, or psychological acts of harm. These are discrete acts of violence manifested by discernable actors. In contrast, indirect violence is a hidden form of violence which causes harm to people, although not in the form of a punch thrown or a bullet fired; it is harm deriving from social and cultural arrangements. Galtung delineates indirect violence into two further categories: structural and cultural. Structural violence is the harm caused by social structures and institutions. This is the «non-intended slow, massive suffering caused by economic and political structures in the form of massive exploitation and repression» (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 173). For example, gender inequality, as I will argue later, is a form of structural violence that causes harm to individuals in societies. However, there is not necessarily a single isolatable act of violence that we can call gender inequality. Instead, it is a series of structural arrangements within societies that produce an outcome that causes harm. Galtung notes that this violence is buttressed by the second category of indirect violence: cultural violence. Cultural violence is regarded as a set of cultural norms that cause harm. Such cultural ideas «can be used to justify, legitimize direct or structural violence» (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 41), and once accepted as norms, show how «the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society» (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 42). What is important is that Galtung envisages direct, structural, and cultural violence as three interconnected points of a conflict triangle, that is, these three points compound one another (Galtung 1969).

Figure 1. *Galtung's Violence Triangle*



Galtung notes, «[t]here are linkages and causal flows in all directions» of the triangle and the connections within the triangle show us that «violence breeds violence» (Galtung, Fischer 2013, 47). With Johan Galtung's conception of structural violence and cultural violence, I will argue how patriarchy can be seen as the main cause of violence. In that view, patriarchy places men with their masculinity in a dominant position and women with their femininity in a subordinate position. Patriarchy can be read as institutionalisation of male power in a vertical structure, with a very high correlation between position and gender that is legitimised by culture, and often appears as direct violence with men as subjects and women as objects.

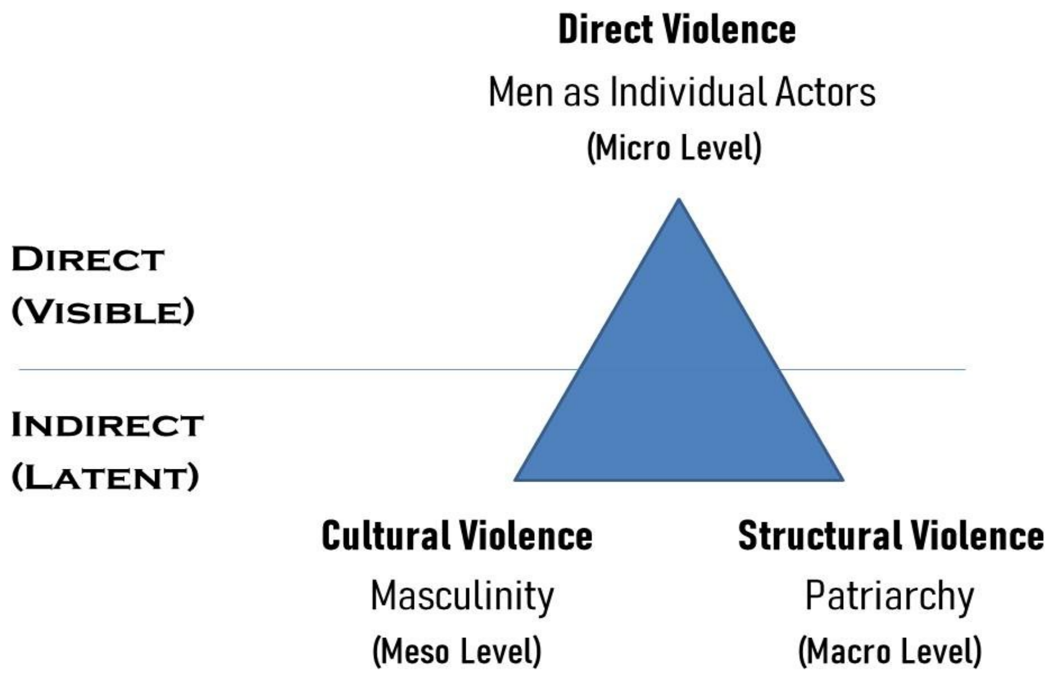
While Galtung is considered one of the most influential scholars in peace studies, his work is not without challenge. Before approaching to the application of Galtung's theories to GBV, I feel first to briefly engage with recent feminist critiques of his work. While Galtung delineates gender as one variable in the complex equation of violence, feminist perspectives from within peace studies argue the relationship between violence, peace, and gender is significantly more consequential. Scholars like Confortini, Alexander, and Hewitt and True note that Galtung studies the relationship between gender and violence by examining the structural, cultural, and direct violence of patriarchy and by looking at gender as a conflict analysis variable (Confortini 2006; Alexander 2019; Hewitt, True 2021). They argue that Galtung's work on conflict needs to engage gender more fully as a socially constructed dynamic practice embodied within power relations. This is not to say that gender is the only or most important lens, but rather to note that all aspects of violence have a gendered dimension to them; thus, violence itself is gendered. As Cockburn makes clear, a comprehensive gender perspective on violence is not just an extra or an aside; it is a necessity as gender links a continuum of forms of violence, temporal states of violence, and of realms of violence in society (Cockburn 2004). All that said, if violence is so fundamentally gendered it follows that our violence detection and reduction efforts must be gendered too. Using Galtung's theories to read GBV thus requires an intentional focus on gender and feminist analysis.

4. *Gendering and potential practical applications of Galtung's model*

Galtung's violence triangle provides a call for more heterogeneous conceptions of violence and adds much to the existing feminist and GBV literature, by offering a framework for men's violences. Adopting a Galtungian approach enables to challenge the false dichotomy between individualised and systemic violence and highlights the interdependencies between men's violent acts, cultural gender norms, and patriarchal structures. I strongly believe that we will never reach a satisfying level of understanding of, and consequently fight against, the GBV phenomenon if we do not engage with a holistic approach which considers *each and together* the three forms of violence. My appeal resonates, for example, with Flood's comments that men's violence must be simultaneously understood as «coercive, structural, and complex» (Flood 2019, 30). Further, despite her valid criticism of his work, Confortini notes that Galtung's theory offers a practical framework «within which violence against women can be seen in the larger context of societal violence» (Confortini 2006, 356). Thus, by highlighting the connections amongst violences, the framework allows for an examination of the linkages between men's violences and the wider inequalities within what hooks calls the «imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy» (hooks 2004).

I will now attempt to give some instances in which Galtung's Violence Triangle can be applied to specifically GBV cases, prior to getting to some more general conclusions about the relationship between patriarchy, GBV, and ways to counter it. I owe much of these classifications and applications to McInerney and Archer's thinking, teaching, and discussions with men involved in men's violence prevention programs. Most of the answers provided come out of question such "What type of men's direct, cultural, or structural violence are present in your community?" and "In what ways do men's various forms of violence intersect and compound?" I will start with the case of direct violence. Men's direct violence against women consists of: acts, threats of violence, and patterns of coercive control, as well as how such acts interact with other forms of direct violence. Specific examples may be individual acts and patterns of physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence, abuse, and coercive behaviour. Specific ways in which women may also be targeted for direct violence based on intersecting forms of marginalisation, for example, homophobic misogynoir directed at Black trans women. Regarding, instead, patriarchal structural GBV, it consists of social, political, and legal inequalities reproduced by patriarchies, as well as the ways in which such gendered structural violences interact with wider social inequalities. Some examples are: gender inequality across society that includes women's limited access to social and material resources, gender pay gaps, second shift domestic labour, and laws limiting women's rights, power, and wellbeing. In addition, specific ways in which women may be targeted by compounding forms of structural violences, for example women living in poverty. Last but not least, cultural violence. Patriarchal cultural GBV is realised through: sexist, homophobic, and transphobic gender norms, as well as the ways in which other harmful cultural norms interact with them. Some specific cases: sexist cultures including depictions of women as helpless and men as dominant, social norms underpinning rape cultures that objectify and hypersexualise women, cultural ideals of masculinities and femininity that reinforce binary roles and exclude trans and non-binary people, essentialism, and male-centric gendered hierarchies. Specific ways in which women may be targeted for compounding forms of cultural violence are, for example, intersecting forms of racism and sexism which target Indigenous women. Galtung's approach highlights the need to simultaneously address all three violences and their linkages. Applied to GBV, this analysis aligns with Burrell's triadic approach and could include explorations of men as individual actors, masculinities as gender norms constructed and embedded in culture, and patriarchy as a structural arrangement (Burrell 2018).

Figure 2. *Applying Burrell's Triadic Approach to Galtung's Violence Triangle*



This analysis also complements an intersectional lens to examine how they are situated within a wider context of violence. McInerney and Archer so optimistically conclude:

«We have found that this framework provides an accessible entry point to discuss how to categorise and think about the many forms of men's violences against women, how to understand the ways different forms of men's violences fuel and sustain one another, and how we can consider addressing them both separately and collectively. While Galtung's framework for violence is not the only perspective needed, we have found it to be an effective entry point, a helpful catalyst for deeper conversation, and a holistic account of the many forms of violence MVP [Men's Violence Prevention] programs seek to address» (McInerney and Archer 2023, 81).

Galtung sees the issue of violence as a universal humanitarian problem. Although he did not deny the fact that many women were victims of violence, both in the form of direct, cultural and structural violence, Galtung did not mean that men were never victims of violence. Galtung sees humans as positioned, both naturally and physiologically and gender as men and women. With many reasons, the differentiation of men and women is the source of the violence that befell women. Thus what is needed is the quality of human beings, both men and women who are conducive to reducing violence at all levels. Herein lies the value of educational conflict resolution that he offers. Therefore, when patriarchy is considered a source of violence, what must be formed is parity, namely equality between women and men rather than matriarchy. And when assuming that the feminine nature is more likely to be prone to creating peace, Galtung offers a solution so that all humans have that feminine character, whether they are male or female. Women have the potential to change the world. There will be no positive peace, without the similarity of views and cooperation for mutual benefit between the sexes.

Patriarchal and masculine community structures, for Galtung must be replaced with equality and cooperation between men and women, by developing a more conducive femininity for the realisation of peace. When men and women both have the potential for violence, even with different levels, they actually have the same potential to eliminate violence. Speaking of the structure of the country, Galtung stated that the existence of men and women with low empathy would have the same effect, namely to bring violence everywhere. For Galtung, men and women can work together to eliminate violence, both direct violence, violence in the structure of society and the state, and cultural violence. Inclusiveness, mutual respect for differences, the ability to understand others, caring, mutual care, loving one another, seeing things holistically, are important. And basically through socialisation, all humans, both men and women can have these positive qualities. Galtung's recipe for a mutual caring work of men and women jointly, in order to eradicate violence, can be further buttressed by those feminist scholarships which emphasise the role of care in societies, and its potential to eliminate a gender inequality which automatically brings to violence.

According to Tronto and Fisher (Fisher, Tronto 1991), care is not only a disposition, but chiefly a practice. To interpret care as a practice gives an alternative to conceiving of care as a principle or as an emotion, for practice involves the use of both thought and action together, and their direction toward some ends. To conceive of care as a practice and not only as a disposition prevents care from being sentimentalised and romanticised, and hinders the traditional divisions between a caring private realm and a not-caring public realm and the enforcement of the ideological construction that women are more emotional than men, and men are more rational than women. In this association of women with caring, what is lost is the reality of the complexity of caring, what is gained is a division of spheres that would serve to relegate women and other caring people. In addition to care being attached to sentiments and opposed to rationality, care is also devalued in its association with the private sphere (Tronto 1994). Since care is relatively disguised in our society, it is somewhat difficult to detect that in our society caring does not work in an egalitarian manner. For Tronto, the distribution of caring work and who is cared for serves to maintain and to reinforce patterns of subordination: those who care are made still less important because their needs are not as important as the needs of those privileged enough to pay others to care for them. This pattern of "privileged irresponsibility", which allows some people not to care about what it is important to them, if reveals on one hand an empirical truth, it shows on the other a hidden process according to which caring needs are being met through a process that distorts reality and makes care invisible. Tronto wishes the beginning of a new political era where to place care and those social groups who provide it at the centre of the public debate:

«To recognise the value of care calls into question the structures of values in our society. Care is not a parochial concern of women, a type of secondary moral question, or the work of the least well off in society. Care is central concern of human life. It is time that we began to change our political and social institutions to reflect this truth» (Tronto 1994, 180).

Engaging men in a feminist theory and practices of care can be pivotal in order to redefine women-men relationship in a less patriarchal way and to construct peace while removing GBV. Engaging men in feminist care involves challenging those traditional constructs which often emphasise dominance, emotional suppression, and the use of power and control, and encouraging men to embrace a more caring and empathetic version of masculinity. This can be achieved through public policies and programmes focusing on gender-inclusive early education, awareness campaigns and positive role modelling, among other initiatives. Engaging men in feminist care should emphasise the importance of consent, communication, and mutual respect in all relationships, whether intimate, familial, or social.

From Moura's research (Moura 2024) and her projects, it is clear how men's involvement in caregiving roles, such as parenting and eldercare, should be encouraged and supported. Policies and workplace practises that promote work-life balance and shared caregiving responsibilities can help break down traditional gender roles and foster more caring and equitable societies. Also, collaboration with male allies and engaging men in supporting and having an active role in care practises can be highly effective. Men who actively support gender equality and care can work alongside women and feminists to challenge harmful norms, advocate for policy changes, and promote cultural shifts towards care and non-violence.

Incorporating men into feminist theories and practises of care is essential for achieving gender equality and reducing GBV. This is why Moura proposes a new paradigm of "caring masculinities" which seeks to address these issues by reconceptualising masculinities and placing care at the forefront. By advocating for a feminist theory of caring masculinities, the objective is to contribute to the disruption of dominant models of masculinity and promote more equitable and compassionate forms of gender identity. This involves not only understanding and analysing the social constructions of masculinities but also actively working to challenge and transform them through legislative and initiative-based interventions.

Conclusions

GBV is a direct/indirect consequence of patriarchy and only a holistic approach to peace, which is based on a simultaneous acknowledgment of direct, structural, and cultural violence, can provide a reliable base to detect and counter GBV. Adopting heterogeneous and multifaceted approaches to the examination of GBV is fundamental to compose a more critical and comprehensive perspective of such a complex subject. Since Galtung envisages direct, structural, and cultural violence as three interconnected points of a conflict triangle, adopting a Galtungian approach enables to challenge the false dichotomy between individualised and systemic violence and highlights the interdependencies between men's violent acts, cultural gender norms, and patriarchal structures. Patriarchal and masculine community structures, for Galtung, must be replaced with equality and cooperation between men and women, by developing a more conducive femininity for the realisation of peace. When men and women both have the potential for violence, they actually have the same potential to eliminate violence and the same duty to eliminate violence together. Inclusiveness, mutual respect for differences, mutual care, mutual love, and socialisation are the qualities and tools to be employed holistically in order to realise peace. I believe that a Galtungian approach can learn from and resonate with a feminist analysis of violence, respond to problems related to homogenous violence in GBV that Flood and Burrell have spotted, and pave the way for novel and innovative possibilities for both challenging violence and promoting more peaceful paths forward.

Bibliographic References

Alexander R. (2019), *Gender, Structural Violence, and Peace*, in Gentry C., Laura, S., Sjoberg L. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK: 27-36. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315525099.

Agostino di Ippona (1988), *La Genesi. Difesa contro i Manichei. Libro incompiuto sulla Genesi*, in *Opera Omnia*, Città Nuova, Rome.

Blackstone Sir W., Cooley T.M. (2007), *Commentaries of the Laws of England in Four Books*, Kessinger, Whitefish US.

Boyd C. (2007), *Perspectives on the Treatment of Men and Boys who Sexually Abuse*, in "Aware: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault Newsletter no. 15", Australian Institute of Family studies, Melbourne.

Bridges T., Pascoe C.J. (2014), *Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities*, in "Sociology Compass", VIII, 3: 246-258. Full text available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134.

Burrell S.R. (2018), *The Contradictory Possibilities of Engaging Men and Boys in the Prevention of Men's Violence Against Women in the UK*, in "Journal of Gender-Based Violence", II, 3: 447–464. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15375304850617.

CEI (2008), *Prima lettera ai Corinzi*, in CEI (ed.), *La Sacra Bibbia*, uncommercial version.

Cockburn C. (2004), *The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace*, in Giles W. (ed.), *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, University of California Press, Los Angeles: 24-44.

Cohn C. (1987), *Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals*, in "Signs", XII, 4: 687-718.

Confortini C. (2006), *Galtung, Violence, and Gender: The Case for a Peace Studies/Feminism Alliance*, in "Peace and Change", XXXI, 3: 333–367.

Connell R.W. (2005), *Masculinities*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Edstrom J., Hassink A., Shakrokh T., Stern E. (eds.) (2015), *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence of Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Equimundo, Washington, DC.

Fisher B., Tronto J.C. (1991), *Toward a Feminist Theory of Care*, in Abel E. and Nelson M. (eds. by), *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY: 35-62.

Flood M. (2015), *Work with Men to End Violence Against Women: A Critical Stocktake*, in "Culture, Health & Sexuality", XVII, 2: 159-76. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1070435.

Fraser N. (2016), *Contradictions of Capital and Care*, in "New Left Review", C, 99-117. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.64590/nt2

Galtung J. (1964), *An Editorial*, in "Journal of Peace Research", I, 1: 1-4.

Galtung J. (1969), *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, in "Journal of Peace Research", VI, 3: 167-191. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301.

Galtung J. (1996), *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, Sage, New York.

Galtung J., Fischer D. (2013), *Johan Galtung Pioneer of Peace Research*, Springer, London.

Hearn J., Ratele K., Shefer T., Khan A.R. (2021), *Men, Masculinities, Peace, and Violence: A Multi-Level Overview on Justice and Conflict*, in Vayrynen T., Parashar S., Feron E., Confortini C.C. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, Routledge, London: 313-323.

Hewitt S., True, J. (2021), *Is Feminist Peace Possible? Constraints and Opportunities in a Global Political Economy*, in Vayrynen T., Parashar S., Féron E., Confortini C.C. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, Routledge, London: 368-378.

hooks b. (2003), *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, Routledge, New York.

hooks b. (2004), *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Washington Square Press, New York.

Indermaur D. (2001), *Young Australians and Domestic Violence*, in "Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice", Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 195.

Kelly L. (1996), *It's Everywhere: Sexual Violence as a Continuum*, in Jackson S., Scott S. (eds. by), *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh: 191–207.

Lilley-Walker S.J., Hester M., Turner W. (2018), *Evaluation of European Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes: Toward a Model for Designing and*

Reporting Evaluations Related to Perpetrator Treatment Interventions, in "International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology", LXII, 4: 868–884. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X16673853.

Mamanova T. (1984), *Women in Russia*, Beacon Press, Boston.

McInerney W.W., Archer D.T. (2023), *Men's Violence Prevention and Peace Education: Drawing on Galtung to Explore the Plurality of Violence(s), Peace(s), and Masculinities*, in "Men and Masculinities", XXVI, 1: 66-90. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X221149989.

Miller D.E., Miller L.T. (1993), *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Mills M. (2001), *Challenging Violence in Schools: An Issue of Masculinities*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Moura T. (2024), *Transforming Harmful Representations, Investigating Violence and Empowering Care Practices in Masculinities, Gender, Sex and Sexualities*, in "Frontiers in Sociology", IX, 1416303. Full text available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1416303.

Mulder L. (1999), *Preventing violence against women*, paper presented at the Interdisciplinary Conference on Women, Norway.

Pascoe C.J., Bridges T. (2016), *Exploring Masculinities*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Pateman C. (2018), *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

Pease B. (2008), *Engaging Men in Men's Violence Prevention: Exploring the Tensions, Dilemmas and Possibilities*, in "Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse", II: 1-12.

Persichilli W. (2025), *'As a Woman, I have no Country'. Pacifism and Cosmo-Feminism in Virginia Woolf*, in Cerra A.G., Mazzone S., Novarese D., Speciale G. (eds.), *Na(rra)zioni*, Historia et Ius, Rome: 319-325.

Persichilli W. (2025), *Il Patriarcato dalla teoria classica al contratto sociale. Una storia di evoluzioni e regressioni*, in Varini M., Pagliuca C., Noia E., Carnaggia C., Acconcia A., Ferrari C., Facchetti A., Truscello G., Visioli (eds.), *Nexus complexus. Sguardi sulla complessità* Vol. II, IPS Edizioni, Siena.

Ruddick S. (1989), *Maternal Thinking. Toward a Politics of Peace*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Sarafian A. (ed.) (2004), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide 1915–1917*, Taderon Press, London.

Schreiner O. (1978), *Woman and Labour*, Virago, London.

Schubert J.D. (2012), *Suffering/Symbolic Violence*, in Grenfell M. (ed), *Pierre Bourdieu. Key Concepts*, Acumen Publishing, Stocksfield: 179-194.

Stark E. (2007), *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Tronto J.C. (1994), *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Routledge, New York.

Walby S. (1990), *Theorizing Patriarchy*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken NJ.

Woolf V. (1938), *Three Guineas*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1966.
World Health Organization (2021), *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018*, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256 (accessed April 30, 2022).

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 145-163
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.08

Disabilità tra diritti umani e abilismo: una lettura multilivello

Andrea Bilotti

Over the past decades, disability has been increasingly reframed through the paradigm of human rights, moving beyond traditional medical-assistance models and affirming the right to full citizenship. Within Disability Studies, this shift has brought critical attention to ableism, a systemic form of oppression that privileges supposedly "normal" bodies and minds while relegating disability to an undesirable deviation. The article develops a multilevel reading of ableism and its implications. At the micro level, it explores everyday experiences of stigma, stereotypes, and internalized prejudice, as well as strategies of resilience and self-advocacy. At the meso level, it examines how schools, welfare services, and workplaces may inadvertently reproduce segregation through paternalistic or exclusionary practices. At the macro level, it highlights how policies, legal frameworks, and cultural representations can embed ableist assumptions, despite the formal advances promoted by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Against this background, social work emerges as a crucial actor in linking micro, meso, and macro dimensions, promoting empowerment, advocacy, and political change, and translating human rights into inclusive practices of social justice.

Introduzione

È ormai noto come negli ultimi anni il tema delle disabilità sia stato progressivamente ridefinito superando i modelli medico-assistenziali centrati sul deficit/minorazione individuale anche grazie all'affermarsi del paradigma dei diritti umani (Bilotti 2025). La Convenzione delle Nazioni Unite sui diritti delle persone con disabilità (CRPD 2006), ratificata dall'Italia nel 2009, ha rappresentato un punto di svolta nel sancire, a livello internazionale, l'uguaglianza e la piena cittadinanza delle persone con disabilità, ponendo al centro i principi di partecipazione, autodeterminazione e non discriminazione (Bilotti 2025; Genova 2023; Marchisio 2023; Scavarda 2024; Valtellina 2024, 2025). Significa, nel concreto, aver assunto la vita ordinaria quale metrica di giustizia: vivere, lavorare, spostarsi, amare come chiunque, riorienta il discorso dai deficit alle trasformazioni dei contesti che possono essere sì, disabilitanti. Si passa così dagli enunciati formali su una uguaglianza necessaria ma al tempo stesso ambigua, alla definizione di una cittadinanza operativa, fondata sui diritti umani, sulla partecipazione e sulla piena appartenenza alla comunità. A livello internazionale tali orizzonti si sono consolidati anche grazie al contributo dei Disability Studies (DS), che hanno supportato le interpretazioni della disabilità non come mera condizione biologica, bensì come costruzione sociale e politica, generata nell'interazione tra minorazioni individuali e barriere ambientali, istituzionali e culturali (Goodley 2011, 2013; Goodley *et al*. 2018; Genova 2023; Valtellina 2025). È in questo quadro che si colloca il concetto di abilismo, inteso come un insieme di atteggiamenti, pratiche e strutture sociali che discriminano, svalutano o escludono le persone con disabilità, normalizzando standard corporei e cognitivi presunti come "dati-da-sempre", in qualche modo "naturali" (Campbell 2008; Bilotti 2025).

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 165-180
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.09

L’abilismo non si esaurisce nel pregiudizio individuale, ma costituisce un meccanismo culturale e politico che naturalizza le differenze e legittima rapporti gerarchici tra cittadini considerati abili e quelli non abili (o disabili) (Holler, Ohayon 2024; Wolbring 2012)[1].
Sebbene negli ultimi anni il concetto di abilismo sia stato ampiamente discusso nei DS, resta ancora limitata la sua adozione quale categoria di analisi e chiave interpretativa nella riflessione sociologica, soprattutto in prospettiva comparativa. Le analisi esistenti tendono a concentrarsi su singoli livelli (biografico, organizzativo o di policy) senza offrire una cornice che metta in relazione micro-dinamiche quotidiane, meso-pratiche istituzionali e macro-strutture delle policies di welfare. L’obiettivo teorico dell’articolo è colmare tale lacuna, proponendo una riflessione multilivello attraverso la lente focale dell’abilismo, considerando le implicazioni per i diritti delle persone con disabilità e delle loro famiglie. Il riferimento al contesto italiano, e in particolare all’esperienza della Toscana con il consolidamento di quello che è stato definito *modello toscano disabilità* (Bilotti, Degl’Innocenti 2024; 2025), non è da intendersi come semplice caso locale, ma come riferimento paradigmatico di un più ampio processo di riforma dei sistemi di welfare locali in chiave diritti-umana. In questo senso, come già approfondito in altri recenti studi e ricerche, l’esperienza toscana rappresenta un laboratorio significativo per il tentativo di istituzionalizzare approcci basati sul Progetto di Vita individualizzato e personalizzato, sulla valutazione multidimensionale e su pratiche di co-produzione orientate ai diritti, mettendo al tempo stesso in luce le tensioni tra innovazione normativa e persistenze di logiche abiliste nei sistemi di welfare locali. Il caso toscano diviene per questo un’immagine-simbolo viva, che permette di vedere e interrogare le tensioni tra innovazione normativa e persistenze abiliste che attraversano, in forme diverse, molteplici contesti locali e regionali. In questo senso l’abilismo potrebbe essere anche utilizzato per svelare come permanga, soprattutto nella pubblica amministrazione, l’utilizzo di dispositivi di governo che producono o che concorrono a produrre, una certa inclusione differenziale dove la persona con disabilità si include -o ha accesso ai processi di inclusione-, solo se è conforme a certi parametri tipici della produttività e dell’autonomia neoliberale. A fronte di un dibattito internazionale sull’abilismo che privilegia analisi focalizzate su singoli livelli (dall’esperienza soggettiva dello stigma alle dimensioni normative e di policy) il contributo propone una prospettiva multilivello capace di leggere l’abilismo come dispositivo relazionale così come strutturale. L’originalità della proposta non risiede tanto nell’introduzione di nuove categorie concettuali, quanto nel focalizzare e mettere in relazione le micro-dinamiche quotidiane, pratiche organizzative e quadri istituzionali, attraverso cui chiarire come le tensioni tra diritti formali e diritti vissuti siano generate e riprodotte negli spazi di intersezione tra tali livelli.
L’articolo persegue dunque un duplice obiettivo: da un lato fornire elementi utili ad un processo di smascheramento delle logiche abiliste che operano a livello micro,

[1] In questo senso, nella prospettiva interpretativa offerta dalla sociologia si richiama da vicino la violenza simbolica descritta da Bourdieu (1998), lo stigma analizzato da Goffman (1963) e le dinamiche di riconoscimento e redistribuzione individuate da Fraser (2009).

meso e macro; dall'altro, mostrare come il lavoro sociale[2] -inteso al contempo come pratica professionale di servizio sociale e come azione collettiva per la giustizia sociale- possa svolgere un ruolo cruciale nel tradurre i principi dei diritti umani in pratiche concrete di inclusione, empowerment e trasformazione culturale (Bilotti, Degl'Innocenti 2023; Reynaert *et al.* 2022). Preme sottolineare che il riferimento al servizio sociale non va inteso come un posizionamento meramente applicativo o di verifica empirica dei concetti sociologici, ma come una tradizione disciplinare e un campo di pratiche riflessive che da tempo dialoga con la sociologia nell'analisi dei dispositivi di potere, delle disuguaglianze e dei processi di istituzionalizzazione dei diritti (Dal Pra Ponticelli 1987; Campanini 1999; Gui 2004; Tarsia 1999). Il contributo si colloca dunque nello spazio di intersezione tra questi due orizzonti: da un lato, l'analisi sociologica dei meccanismi strutturali dell'abilismo; dall'altro, la tradizione del servizio sociale come sapere situato, orientato alla trasformazione dei contesti e alla traduzione operativa dei diritti umani.

Il contributo intende quindi concorrere alla costruzione di una piattaforma concettuale e operativa capace di tradurre il paradigma dei diritti umani in pratiche di lavoro, di formazione, di policy e di ricerca. Questo rende esplicito lo sforzo di coniugare la prospettiva sociologica orientata all'analisi critica dei processi di strutturazione sociale di dispositivi di potere con la tradizione di ricerca e di elaborazione del servizio sociale italiano come disciplina e pratica riflessiva, impegnata alla trasformazione delle condizioni di vita e l'ampliamento delle possibilità di agency dei cittadini. L'incontro tra questi due orizzonti propone un approccio trasformativo tenendo assieme la lettura strutturale delle disuguaglianze con la costruzione partecipata dei processi professionali istituzionali fondati su diritti umani.

1. *Quadro teorico e stato dell'arte*

Come anticipato, negli ultimi decenni il dibattito internazionale sulle disabilità ha conosciuto una trasformazione profonda e radicale, spostandosi dal modello medico-individuale, centrato sulla correzione del deficit e della menomazione, a un paradigma sociale/ambientale. I DS hanno avuto un ruolo cruciale in questo cambiamento, denunciando dal basso i limiti di un approccio che riduceva la disabilità a questione clinica e affermando, invece, la centralità delle barriere ambientali e culturali nella produzione e riproduzione dell'esclusione (Oliver, Barnes 2012; Goodley 2011, 2013). La Convenzione ONU del 2006 ha sicuramente sancito questa svolta, ponendo al centro il principio di autodeterminazione e la piena cittadinanza, in linea con le lotte dei movimenti delle persone con disabilità e delle loro famiglie. Tuttavia, come osservano diversi studiosi, il riconoscimento formale dei diritti non è sufficiente a scardinare resistenze culturali e istituzionali (Tarantino 2024). Logiche paternalistiche, assistenzialistiche e medicalizzanti (oltre che di segregazione vera e propria) continuano ad agire in molti contesti, spesso in modo invisibile o naturalizzato (Genova 2023). È qui che il concetto di *abilismo* si rivela particolarmente utile per

[2] Nel contributo è utilizzato il termine "lavoro sociale", quale traduzione dell'inglese *social* work, in senso analitico e descrittivo per riferirsi al più ampio campo delle pratiche di intervento orientate ai diritti, senza entrare nel dibattito terminologico che attraversa il contesto disciplinare italiano. Il riferimento al servizio sociale e agli assistenti sociali riguarda invece, di volta in volta, la professione e i soggetti investiti di uno specifico mandato istituzionale nei sistemi di welfare.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 165-180
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.09

un'azione di svelamento. Nato nella riflessione critica anglosassone (Campbell 2008; Wolbring 2012), esso consente di leggere la disabilità non come caratteristica individuale, ma come prodotto di un sistema di potere che privilegia corpi e menti considerati "normali", relegando gli altri a una condizione di inferiorità o di devianza. In questa prospettiva, l'abilismo si avvicina ad altre forme di dominio simbolico e strutturale offrendo una lente focale utile nel comprendere quanto siano radicate e persistenti le disuguaglianze nonostante i tentativi di riforma che hanno interessato - recentemente- anche il nostro Paese[3]. Proseguendo lungo questa traiettoria, può essere utile citare il recente lavoro di Lundberg e Chen (2024) nel quale si propone la nozione di *structural ableism* mettendo in luce le dimensioni sistemiche del potere abilista e il loro radicamento nelle strutture di policy e di governance. Le autrici chiariscono come il suo superamento richieda un lavoro trasformativo sui dispositivi istituzionali, capace di ridefinire gli standard e le pratiche attraverso cui il welfare produce inclusione.
È possibile quindi sostenere che l'abilismo agisca a più livelli. Sicuramente a livello micro, quanto l'abilismo si traduce in stereotipi, stigma e processi di interiorizzazione, così come in pratiche quotidiane di resistenza e resilienza (Costa *et al.* 2012; Scavarda 2021). A livello meso, esso si manifesta nei contesti organizzati, scolastici e lavorativi, dove pratiche apparentemente inclusive possono invece riprodurre segregazione o paternalismo (Genova 2023; Scavarda 2024; Tarantino 2024). A livello macro, infine, riguarda le politiche e i quadri normativi, che pur ispirandosi al modello dei diritti umani, possono incorporare premesse (o esiti) abiliste, come mostrano studi intersezionali su disabilità, politiche migratorie e sociali in prospettiva comparata (El-Lahib, Wehbi 2012).
La ricerca italiana offre esempi utili per evidenziare le tensioni presenti sui diversi livelli. Nello specifico, come anticipato in un recente contributo sul tema della non discriminazione (Biemmi, Viviani 2025; Bilotti 2025), l'esperienza della Regione Toscana, con il lavoro di consolidamento del modello di valutazione e accompagnamento delle persone con disabilità sviluppato antecedente alla riforma sulla disabilità introdotta con il Dlgs 62/2024[4], rappresenta un laboratorio emblematico. Lungi dall'essere un caso meramente locale, essa costituisce un esempio paradigmatico di come un approccio right-driven possa tradursi in strumenti concreti di co-produzione tra istituzioni, professionisti e cittadini (Bilotti, Degl'Innocenti 2023; 2024). La Toscana diventa così un laboratorio e una lente utile per interrogare sfide più generali: su come sia possibile superare l'abilismo istituzionale e come rendere effettivo il riconoscimento dei diritti già sanciti a livello internazionale.

[3] Si fa qui riferimento al Decreto legislativo 62/2024 ("Definizione della condizione di disabilità, della valutazione di base, di accomodamento ragionevole e della valutazione multidimensionale per l'elaborazione e attuazione del progetto di vita individuale, personalizzato e partecipato" entrato in vigore il 30/06/2024) rappresenta uno dei principali atti attuativi della Legge 227/2021 recante «Delega al Governo in materia di disabilità». Il decreto introduce un cambiamento paradigmatico: sposta l'attenzione dal deficit individuale alla relazione tra persona e contesto, riconoscendo la disabilità come esito dell'interazione tra condizioni di salute e barriere ambientali e sociali. Al centro del nuovo impianto vi è il *Progetto di vita individuale, personalizzato e partecipato*, strumento cardine per l'attuazione del principio dei diritti umani nella cosiddetta presa in carico, necessaria per superare la frammentazione istituzionale e l'approccio prestazionale.

[4] Si tratta della Riforma prevista dal PNRR – Missione 5 "Inclusione e Coesione" Componente 2 "Infrastrutture sociali, famiglie, comunità e Terzo settore".

2. *Nota metodologica*

Il contributo adotta un approccio teorico-analitico, privilegiando la costruzione di una cornice concettuale quale esito della revisione sistematica della letteratura recente integrata con materiali empirici secondari. Sebbene esistano numerosi studi che documentano pratiche inclusive ed esperienze di discriminazione, non è ancora consolidata una sistematizzazione in chiave sociologica capace di utilizzare la categoria analitica dell'abilismo come lente multilivello, connettendo esperienze individuali, pratiche organizzative e quadri normativi. La metodologia si configura, quindi, come una triangolazione teorica e un confronto trasversale: le evidenze empiriche sono lette e utilizzate come stimolo concettuale in un processo di abduzione teorica (Sacchetti 2012), volto a costruire categorie interpretative utili per fornire esempi concreti, ulteriori piste di ricerca e percorsi di formazione sui diversi livelli. In questo quadro, il riferimento all'esperienza della Regione Toscana non ha finalità di analisi di caso o di contributo alla valutazione delle politiche, ma assume un valore esclusivamente euristico: i materiali richiamati, tratti da ricerche precedenti e documenti di policy, sono utilizzati per mettere in dialogo il framework teorico sull'abilismo con dinamiche istituzionali concrete, senza pretese di esaustività o generalizzazione.

3 *Osservando attraverso le lenti dell'abilismo*

Come anticipato, l'abilismo si configura come un dispositivo trasversale che attraversa simultaneamente le dimensioni micro, meso e macro della vita sociale individuale e collettiva. Nei sotto-paragrafi che seguono, tali articolazioni vengono analizzate distintamente, al fine di rendere più leggibili le specifiche forme attraverso cui l'abilismo opera ai diversi livelli.

3.1 *Abilismo, stigma e soggettività: il livello micro*

A livello micro, lo stigma e *l'internalized ableism* mostrano come la discriminazione non sia solo un fatto esterno, ma un processo che incide sull'identità, producendo forme di auto-limitazione. Qui il contributo classico di Goffman (1963) resta centrale, ma viene arricchito dalle analisi contemporanee che evidenziano anche strategie di resistenza e narrazioni alternative (Scavarda 2021). I processi di stigmatizzazione e interiorizzazione dell'abilismo rivelano come la discriminazione non sia soltanto un fatto esterno o episodico, ma un meccanismo che agisce nel profondo della soggettività, influenzando la percezione di sé e la possibilità di aspirare al godimento di una piena cittadinanza (Bilotti, Dondi 2024). Come ha mostrato Goffman (1963), lo stigma è una costruzione sociale che delimita i confini di ciò che è considerato normale e produce identità screditate. Anche a partire da tale impulso, le analisi contemporanee hanno arricchito questa prospettiva**,** evidenziando come le persone con disabilità non siano meri destinatari di processi di esclusione, ma soggetti attivi nella produzione di narrazioni alternative e strategie di resistenza (Costa *et al.* 2012; Scavarda 2021; Shakespeare 2023), esempi di autodeterminazione e ri-significazione dell'esperienza come avviene per altre forme di discriminazione. Tarvainen (2021) parla di "doppia stigmatizzazione", per indicare la sovrapposizione tra la disabilità e la condizione di solitudine sociale che ne deriva, un intreccio che alimenta senso di estraneità e perdita di riconoscimento. Vaughan e colleghi (2025) mostrano come, nel campo della salute mentale e del genere, l'abilismo intersechi il sanismo e il sessismo (Leblanc, Kinsella 2016), dando luogo a un regime di aspettative contraddittorie: le persone con disabilità sono chiamate a essere al tempo stesso vulnerabili e pienamente autonome, bisognose di aiuto ma responsabili del proprio destino. O'Connell (2024) sposta l'attenzione sulle dimensioni linguistiche e comunicative, sottolineando come anche le forme del discorso pubblico possano essere abiliste. Nelle istituzioni educative, la centralità della lingua parlata e dei modelli di comunicazione uditivo-verbali diventa una norma che esclude i soggetti sordi o con modalità comunicative differenti dal diritto alla parola pubblica e alla rappresentanza. Queste ricerche convergono sull'idea che lo stigma funzioni come una *tecnologia del sé* (Foucault 1976 [2014]): un meccanismo di interiorizzazione della norma che induce i soggetti a sorvegliare e correggere la propria differenza. La stessa logica che produce normalizzazione e conformità può però anche generare spazi di emancipazione quando le narrazioni della disabilità vengono riappropriate e condivise come strumenti di visibilità e trasformazione collettiva. Nel contesto italiano, Scavarda (2021), Valtellina (2024, 2025) anche assieme ad alcuni/e attivisti/e hanno mostrato come i giovani con disabilità cognitiva o appartenenti allo spettro autistico trovino nelle pratiche di storytelling, nei laboratori teatrali e nei gruppi partecipativi spazi di rielaborazione del sé e di ricomposizione del legame sociale. Sono queste esperienze capaci di rivelare che la costruzione dell'identità non avviene in isolamento, ma attraverso processi collettivi di riconoscimento e scambio simbolico. In tale quadro, il lavoro sociale può assumere una funzione cruciale come facilitatore/mediatore di contro-narrazioni e promotore di comunità di senso, sostenendo la valorizzazione dei saperi esperienziali e la loro integrazione nei processi di conoscenza e decisione professionale (Valzania, Ruberti, Bilotti 2013). Come hanno messo in luce recenti ricerche empiriche in Toscana (Bilotti 2025; Bilotti, Degl'Innocenti 2023), il professionista anti-abilista, o, meglio, promotore di diritti, si configura infatti spesso come mediatore, un traduttore istituzionale, capace di trasformare i racconti individuali in dispositivi di cambiamento organizzativo e culturale. Un approccio anti-abilista al livello micro implica quindi almeno tre orientamenti fondamentali:

1) riconosce la persona come cittadino/a e come portatrice di un sapere esperto per esperienza, un sapere situato che produce conoscenza e non solo titolare di bisogni;

2) conosce ed è capace di valorizzare il lavoro in rete e di rete come pratica politica, in grado di rinegoziare le gerarchie di competenza tra persone utenti dei servizi e professionisti della cura e dell'aiuto;

3) promuove con creatività strumenti espressivi e narrativi come arte, media digitali, autobiografie, forum di auto-aiuto come mezzi per far fiorire l'empowerment, restituire agency ai soggetti e visibilità pubblica alle loro esperienze.

In questo livello, il servizio sociale può svolgere una funzione decisiva nel facilitare la produzione e la diffusione di contro-narrazioni e di riconoscimento dei saperi esperti per esperienza, contribuendo così nel contrasto dei processi di interiorizzazione abilisti e a sostenere percorsi di soggettivazione non conformi alla norma.

3.2 *Abilismo istituzionale e pratiche organizzative: il livello meso*

A livello meso, nelle organizzazioni e comunità (scuole, servizi sociosanitari, luoghi di lavoro), si giocano processi chiave di inclusione/esclusione. Studi recenti hanno messo in luce come, paradossalmente, alcuni servizi del welfare possano funzionare da barriere istituzionali anziché da strumenti di emancipazione (Genova 2023). In Italia, ad esempio, l'inclusione scolastica -pur essendo stata una conquista storica- evidenzia ancora confusioni concettuali e pratiche tra integrazione, inclusione e "bisogni speciali", rischiando talvolta di non soddisfare pienamente i diritti degli studenti con disabilità (Bocci 2025). Allo stesso modo, servizi diurni creati specificamente per persone con disabilità possono finire per segregarle in spazi separati, mentre i programmi di inserimento lavorativo mirato spesso faticano a scalfire pregiudizi e barriere culturali nelle aziende (Tarantino 2024). Anche alcune strutture residenziali rischiano di assumere la connotazione di *istituzioni totali* goffmaniane, limitando l'autonomia delle persone utenti, e le carenze di sostegno domiciliare lasciano un eccessivo carico di cura sulle famiglie. Questi fenomeni indicano il persistere di logiche assistenzialistiche e paternalistiche che, pur animate da intenti protettivi, di fatto rendono irraggiungibile l'acquisizione di diritti alle persone non conformi alla norma e il perpetuare di forme di violenza simbolica sottile ma pervasiva. All'interno di istituzioni educative e servizi sociali, l'abilismo assume la forma di barriere istituzionali incorporate in pratiche e linguaggi organizzativi, manifestandosi non solo in pratiche esplicitamente segreganti, ma anche in procedure e dispositivi simbolici che trattano la persona con disabilità come "paziente" o oggetto di cura, che definiscono chi ha voce e chi resta oggetto di decisione. A questo livello, il rischio è una inclusione condizionata: servizi e scuole che, pur dichiarandosi inclusivi, riproducono separazioni "ordinarie" (aule, laboratori, day-services) o pratiche lesive (fino all'isolamento e alla segregazione). La prospettiva della de-istituzionalizzazione e del "families not institutions" (Hollins 2025) suggerisce di leggere professionalità e setting come beni relazionali, cioè come infrastrutture sociali che generano legami, significati e potere d'agire. In educazione, il passaggio richiesto è dagli accomodamenti individuali alla progettazione di ecosistemi inclusivi (Suárez-Orozco 2025). Nel lavoro, i dati comparativi mostrano come indicatori positivi possano nascondere esclusioni (percorsi paralleli) suggerendo interventi mirati su accomodamenti, accessibilità e matching tra mansioni e funzionamenti (Allmendinger 2025). L'esperienza della Regione Toscana mostra come la co-produzione possa costituire un antidoto, pur evidenziando le resistenze di sistemi ancora ancorati a logiche assistenzialiste (Bilotti, Degl'Innocenti, 2023; 2024). Come osservano Holler e Ohayon (2024), le istituzioni del welfare europeo tendono spesso a tradurre la disabilità in una categoria amministrativa, neutralizzando la dimensione politica dell'esperienza vissuta. Le regole, le modulistiche e i protocolli diventano strumenti di normalizzazione che impongono ai soggetti di adattarsi al linguaggio tecnico e ai tempi della burocrazia. In questo senso, l'abilismo non è un'anomalia del sistema, ma una componente strutturale del suo funzionamento quotidiano capace di disabilitare il cittadino/a. L'esperienza del modello toscano offre un esempio paradigmatico delle possibilità e dei limiti della trasformazione anti-abilista. I processi di co-produzione hanno introdotto pratiche di collaborazione tra operatori, persone con disabilità e reti associative, generando nuove forme di corresponsabilità e apprendimento istituzionale (come, ad esempio, le comunità di pratiche sperimentate con successo in Toscana). Tuttavia, Bilotti e Degl'Innocenti (2023; 2024) evidenziano che tale innovazione si confronta con resistenze organizzative profonde, dovute a culture professionali tuttora

ancorate a logiche assistenzialiste e a sistemi di valutazione centrati sul deficit, sulle percentuali di menomazione. In molti casi, la partecipazione è interpretata come consultazione e non come potere decisionale, con il risultato di riprodurre la distanza tra esperti professionisti e destinatari. Le persone con disabilità vengono coinvolte come "testimoni" o "casi rappresentativi", ma raramente come co-autrici di politiche e servizi. Questo scarto riflette un più ampio problema epistemico: la difficoltà delle istituzioni a riconoscere il valore conoscitivo dell'esperienza vissuta. Come suggerisce Priestley (2019), l'inclusione non è un evento ma un processo politico che richiede continui aggiustamenti strutturali e culturali. In questa prospettiva, il lavoro sociale svolge una funzione di mediazione meso-istituzionale, operando come cerniera tra l'esperienza micro delle persone e la dimensione macro delle politiche. Il professionista può agire come "agente di cambiamento organizzativo", introducendo pratiche riflessive, promuovendo audit di accessibilità, facilitando spazi di confronto tra persone utenti dei servizi e operatori, incoraggiando la sperimentazione di linguaggi condivisi. L'adozione di metodologie partecipative e di supervisione etica consente di trasformare le routine organizzative in laboratori di apprendimento collettivo. In questo senso, le istituzioni non sono soltanto luoghi di potere, ma campi di possibilità in cui l'abilismo può (deve) essere nominato, discusso e progressivamente disattivato attraverso il dialogo professionale e la co-costruzione di significati. Il livello meso rappresenta dunque il punto di snodo dell'intero sistema anti-abilista: è qui che le intenzioni etiche si confrontano con la resistenza della prassi, e dove la co-produzione si misura con i vincoli della burocrazia. Solo ripensando le strutture organizzative come spazi di cittadinanza condivisa sarà possibile collegare la dimensione relazionale della cura con quella politica del diritto.
A livello organizzativo, il servizio sociale professionale opera come dispositivo di mediazione istituzionale, interrogando pratiche routinarie e linguaggi professionali e promuovendo l'attivazione di processi di co-produzione, apprendimento riflessivo e rinegoziazione del potere posizionale.

3.3 *Abilismo strutturale, policy e regimi di cittadinanza: il livello macro*

A livello macro, l'abilismo si presenta come un ingranaggio strutturale inscritto nei tessuti normativi, nelle maglie dei sistemi di welfare e nei regimi simbolici che definiscono la cittadinanza. Non agisce solo per mancanza di risorse o discriminazione esplicita; la sua azione più pervasiva si manifesta soprattutto attraverso le forme di razionalità amministrativa, economica e morale che, in ultima analisi, definiscono cosa significhi per un cittadino essere "attivo", "autonomo" o "partecipe" nella società contemporanea.
A livello delle policy, l'anti-abilismo coincide con riforme abilitanti: rimuovere barriere, finanziare ecosistemi inclusivi oltre che gli accomodamenti ragionavoli, includere le tecnologie in una visione e-inclusion non "aperta ma immobile", bensì dinamica e adattiva (Pozzo 2025). In chiave comparativa, le riforme del welfare (UK) mostrano che alcune traiettorie possono produrre nuova vulnerabilità se slegate da sostegni effettivi (McEldowney 2025). Sul piano culturale, i media restano un dispositivo cruciale: narrazioni pietistiche o eroiche alimentano l'abilismo simbolico, mentre una comunicazione responsabile può dare/ridare piena cittadinanza. La cornice

etico-politica richiamata dal magistero (contro la "cultura dello scarto") indica un orizzonte di dignità intrinseca e appartenenza.
Nell'ottica descritta, le strategie di inclusione rischiano di divenire strumenti di normalizzazione, quando il riconoscimento dei diritti è vincolato all'aderenza a precisi standard di comportamento e autonomia considerati come normali. La sfida diviene dunque colmare il divario tra i diritti formali e le pratiche concrete, smontando le rappresentazioni sanitarizzanti, pietistiche o risarcitorie che ancora dominano il linguaggio delle istituzioni. A questo si rifà l'abilismo strutturale di Lundberg e Chen (2024) ovvero all'intreccio talvolta esistente tra efficienza economica e legittimazione morale: anche quando si richiama la retorica dei diritti, le politiche tendono a privilegiare i corpi percepiti come produttivi o recuperabili per lasciare ai margini (o scartare) chi è considerato non recuperabile. Wang (2025), nel contesto asiatico, evidenzia fenomeni in cui l'inclusione delle persone con disabilità assume i tratti di un "abilismo benevolo", una strategia che celebra la diversità come simbolo di progresso, pur lasciando intatte le disuguaglianze strutturali.
In Europa, i regimi di welfare fondati sull'attivazione hanno spesso tradotto la partecipazione in obbligo e la responsabilità in requisito per l'accesso ai diritti. Come osserva Fraser (2009), ogni politica redistributiva produce anche un ordine simbolico di riconoscimento: chi non aderisce ai codici dell'autonomia o della produttività rischia di essere percepito come "non meritevole". L'abilismo, in questa prospettiva, esercita una funzione di svelamento di una certa grammatica morale del welfare, delimitando i confini dell'appartenenza politica e sociale. Nel contesto italiano, sembra che i recenti orientamenti normativi e le conseguenti politiche pubbliche sulla disabilità mostrino un duplice movimento. Da un lato, riforme come il D.Lgs. 62/2024 rappresentano un progresso, introducendo la valutazione multidimensionale e il *Progetto di Vita* come diritto soggettivo. Dall'altro, stiamo osservando in presa diretta il permanere di un divario tra innovazione normativa e cultura istituzionale, in cui la disabilità continua a essere interpretata come deficit da gestire anziché come condizione sociale da trasformare. Le pratiche di valutazione restano prevalentemente medicalizzate, i servizi frammentati e le risorse distribuite secondo logiche categoriali più che di equità (Bilotti 2025). Se nei paesi con tradizione post-socialista la de-istituzionalizzazione è rimasta un processo incompiuto, ostacolato da politiche incapaci di scardinare la cultura della tutela come mostrato dal recente studio di Šumskienė et al. (2021), allo stesso modo, nei contesti mediterranei la transizione verso un welfare partecipativo è frenata da inerzie organizzative, scarsa integrazione interistituzionale e una sostanziale debolezza degli Enti di terzo settore come attore politico autonomo.
La prospettiva anti-abilista può affrontare tali sfide ma solo attraverso un profondo cambiamento epistemico prima che normativo: occorre ripensare la conoscenza come pratica collettiva e plurale, in cui i saperi esperienziali delle persone con disabilità e dei loro familiari, divengano risorsa per la programmazione, la progettazione, l'attuazione e la valutazione delle politiche pubbliche. Questo ovviamente sosterrebbe la prospettiva per cui le disabilità non sono (solo) un oggetto di policy, ma un punto di vista privilegiato che permette di mettere a fuoco un orizzonte comune di giustizia sociale.

In questo quadro il lavoro sociale, collocato tra micro e macro, può svolgere chiaramente un ruolo strategico in un processo di ridefinizione del sapere e del potere. Promuovendo ricerca partecipata, partecipando alla valutazione delle politiche e costruendo reti di advocacy, gli assistenti sociali possono agire come professionisti capaci di tradurre i linguaggi dei diritti in pratiche istituzionali concrete e trasformative.
Il livello macro, dunque, chiude il cerchio dell'analisi multilivello, offrendo gli elementi per evidenziare come l'abilismo non sia solo un problema etico o culturale, ma un dispositivo di governo. Svelarne le sfumature più o meno esplicite e contrastarlo, significa in un certo senso costruire un nuovo patto di cittadinanza, fondato sul riconoscimento della vulnerabilità come dimensione costitutiva dell'umano e sulla partecipazione come condizione di una democrazia realmente inclusiva.
Sul piano delle politiche, il servizio sociale professionale può contribuire a rendere effettiva la traduzione dei diritti, partecipando ai processi di programmazione, valutazione e advocacy e agendo come attore corresponsabile, capace di mettere in relazione norme, risorse e sostegni, diritti.
La Tabella seguente sistematizza in sintesi le principali articolazioni dell'abilismo come dispositivo multilivello emerse dall'analisi.

Tabella 1. *L'abilismo come dispositivo multilivello: articolazioni analitiche tra micro, meso e macro*

Livello di analisi	Manifestazioni dell'abilismo	Dispositivi / meccanismi	Traiettorie anti-abiliste
Micro (soggettivo-relazionale)	Stigma, interiorizzazione della norma, auto-limitazione, doppia stigmatizzazione	Narrazioni normalizzanti, aspettative di autonomia e produttività, linguaggi abilisti, e pratiche comunicative escludenti, mancati sostegni alla comunicazione e all'accomodamento ragionevole	Contro-narrazioni, empowerment, valorizzazione dei saperi esperti per esperienza
Meso (organizzativo -istituzionale)	Inclusione condizionata, segregazione ordinaria, paternalismo istituzionale, assistenzialismo	Procedure, protocolli, linguaggi organizzativi, valutazioni centrate sul deficit/menomazione	Co-produzione, pratiche riflessive, mediazione professionale, comunità di pratiche
Macro (policy e cittadinanza)	Abilismo strutturale, inclusione differenziale, selettività dei diritti	Regimi di attivazione, razionalità amministrativa, criteri di meritevolezza	Riforme abilitanti, governance partecipativa, riconoscimento dei diritti come pratiche

4. *Il ruolo del servizio sociale*

In questi orizzonti, alla luce dell'analisi multilivello proposta, il ruolo del servizio sociale può essere letto non come un ambito professionale separato o meramente applicativo, bensì come funzione trasversale che attraversa i livelli micro, meso e macro, operando come spazio riflessivo di mediazione e interpretazione tra esperienze soggettive, pratiche organizzative e cornici istituzionali. Questa peculiarità lo rende un vero e proprio dispositivo di connessione tra biografie, istituzioni e politiche. A livello micro, il servizio sociale professionale agisce sostenendo processi di empowerment e autodeterminazione, ma anche contrastando la "violenza simbolica compassionevole" che tende a ridurre la persona a oggetto di cura. Attraverso approcci centrati sulla persona, il professionista diventa facilitatore di dignità e autonomia. A livello meso, ha la possibilità di sfidare logiche organizzative che incorporano presupposti abilisti e oppressivi, introducendo pratiche di co-produzione, di personalizzazione. L'esperienza toscana di lavoro sugli strumenti valutativi per le equipe multidisciplinari (UVM-D) e in particolar modo il lavoro per la messa a terra dei Progetti di Vita è paradigmatica in questo senso: l'esperienza regionale dimostra come il coinvolgimento diretto delle persone con disabilità non sia un atto opzionale, ma il nucleo stesso di un welfare orientato ai diritti (Bilotti, Degl'Innocenti 2024). Chiaramente anche nella esperienza toscana molto c'è ancora da lavorare soprattutto considerando il cambiamento culturale richiesto dalle delibere regionali oltre che dalla riforma nazionale sul fronte culturale ma la strada è oramai intrapresa. A livello macro la situazione è un po' più complessa, almeno nel panorama nazionale. Se è vero che le federazioni internazionali hanno da tempo riconosciuto il servizio sociale come professione impegnata nella difesa e nella promozione dei diritti umani (IFSW, 2018), chiarendo in tal senso il ruolo pro-attivo nella costruzione delle politiche pubbliche e nelle campagne di sensibilizzazione, a livello nazionale la situazione è più complessa. In una recente ricerca promossa dalla Fondazione nazionale assistenti sociali (Guidi, Mordeglia 2024) ha offerto il primo quadro sistematico sulle *policy practice* degli assistenti sociali in Italia, ossia sull'insieme delle azioni con cui i professionisti, singolarmente o collettivamente, contribuiscono a influire sui processi decisionali e organizzativi che incidono sulla vita delle persone e delle comunità. Lo studio fa emergere come tali pratiche restino ancora poco riconosciute e scarsamente sostenute dai contesti organizzativi, pur rappresentando una delle dimensioni più significative della responsabilità politica della professione. La ricerca evidenzia inoltre che, nonostante l'esistenza di un solido quadro etico e deontologico che riconosce "il ruolo politico e sociale della professione" (CNOAS 2021), la traduzione concreta di tale mandato nelle politiche e nelle organizzazioni resta disomogenea e spesso ostacolata da culture burocratiche e manageriali. Tuttavia «gli assistenti sociali non sono solo implementatori di politiche, ma veri e propri agenti di cambiamento, capaci di contribuire alla costruzione di un welfare inclusivo e orientato alla giustizia sociale» (Guidi, Mordeglia 2024: 10). Come ha osservato recentemente Shakespeare (2025), tra le voci più autorevoli e riconosciute dei DS a livello internazionale, se parte della ricerca dei DS fatica ad avere impatto perché non si lascia orientare da domande pragmatiche e dal coinvolgimento diretto delle persone con disabilità, è vero anche che il servizio sociale nella doppia veste di professione e disciplina può fare da ponte tra diritti e contesti, accompagnando percorsi di traduzione del paradigma dei diritti in dispositivi relazionali e innovazioni organizzative.

Conclusioni

Il contributo ha tentato di offrire una riflessione su come l'abilismo non sia un fenomeno marginale, bensì un dispositivo sistemico che attraversa i diversi livelli della

vita sociale e i mondi vitali cui tutti noi apparteniamo. In questa prospettiva, il servizio sociale professionale emerge come ambito in cui tali dinamiche risultano particolarmente visibili, poiché collocato in prossimità delle esperienze biografiche delle persone, delle pratiche organizzative dei servizi e dei quadri istituzionali che regolano l'accesso ai diritti (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2010; Garrett, Bertotti 2017). Questa posizione di confine ha consentito di osservare in modo privilegiato le articolazioni multilivello dell'abilismo e le tensioni che accompagnano i processi di traduzione dei diritti umani in assetti istituzionali, pratiche professionali e dispositivi di intervento.
La prospettiva multilivello consente di evidenziare le connessioni tra dimensioni apparentemente distinte -micro, meso e macro- mostrando come troppo spesso ancora si rinforzino reciprocamente nella riproduzione dell'esclusione dalla vita comune. Tale impostazione, oltre a offrire un contributo interpretativo, permette di individuare spazi di trasformazione e di azione professionale e politica. A livello micro, l'abilismo si traduce in stigma, barriere comunicative e processi di interiorizzazione del pregiudizio (*internalized ableism*), che incidono profondamente sull'identità delle persone con disabilità. Tuttavia, la letteratura ha anche messo in luce strategie di resilienza e resistenza: famiglie e caregiver rifiutano sempre più spesso le etichette svalutanti, rivendicando contro-narrazioni alternative della disabilità e dando vita a processi di empowerment individuale e collettivo (Scavarda 2021; Bilotti, Dondi 2024) capace di influenzare politiche e orientamenti culturali di fondo. A livello meso, l'abilismo si manifesta nelle organizzazioni e nei servizi, spesso in modo sottile e naturalizzato. Le scuole continuano a oscillare tra integrazione e inclusione, senza superare del tutto approcci compensativi (Bocci 2025); i servizi sociali e sociosanitari, pur dichiarandosi orientati alla protezione, rischiano di riprodurre logiche assistenzialiste e medicalizzanti (Genova 2023). La letteratura parla in questo senso di *abilismo istituzionale* (Holler, Ohayon 2024; Bilotti 2025): norme, regolamenti e procedure che, anche senza intento discriminatorio, finiscono per limitare l'accesso a diritti e opportunità. A livello macro, l'abilismo si intreccia con politiche e rappresentazioni culturali. La CRPD ha chiaramente rappresentato un punto di svolta epocale, ma il divario tra diritti sanciti e realtà concreta rimane ancora evidente nel nostro Paese. In Europa, nonostante la Strategia per i diritti delle persone con disabilità 2021–2030, parte integrante del pilastro sociale europeo, persistono ritardi nell'attuazione delle misure sull'accessibilità e sul sostegno alla vita indipendente, alla non discriminazione e alle pari opportunità. A livello culturale, inoltre, rappresentazioni medicalizzanti, procedurali e pietistiche continuano a dominare il discorso pubblico, rafforzando l'idea che la disabilità sia tragedia personale (Oliver 1990, 1996) anziché parte della diversità umana.
Il contributo di questo lavoro è aver proposto un framework che connette i tre livelli, tentando di superare alcuni riduzionismi. L'abilismo non può essere letto unicamente come pregiudizio individuale né come deficit organizzativo: è un dispositivo che regola appartenenze e cittadinanze, definendo chi è pienamente riconosciuto come soggetto di diritti e chi viene relegato in una posizione subordinata. In questo senso, la sociologia critica e i DS convergono: i primi offrono strumenti per decostruire i meccanismi di dominio invisibile (stigma, violenza simbolica, riconoscimento) (Fraser 2009), i secondi permettono di declinare tali strumenti sulla specificità della disabilità come categoria socio-politica (Campbell 2008; Wolbring 2012). Da questa prospettiva

emergono alcune implicazioni. Sul piano scientifico, è necessario e urgente continuare a sostenere ulteriori indagini empiriche comparative che testino il modello multilivello, mettendo in dialogo esperienze di contesti differenti. Sul piano politico, occorre sostenere processi che portino i policy maker a superare definitivamente logiche assistenzialiste e medicalizzanti, rafforzando la capacità delle istituzioni di agire come promotrici – e non ostacoli – della piena cittadinanza. Sul piano professionale, il lavoro sociale ha il compito di agire come ponte tra i livelli, traducendo i principi astratti dei diritti umani in pratiche concrete di inclusione e giustizia sociale. Come sottolinea l'IFSW (2018), il lavoro sociale è chiamato a posizionarsi esplicitamente come professione impegnata nella difesa dei diritti, assumendo un ruolo politico oltre che tecnico.
In conclusione, contrastare l'abilismo significa smantellare un paradigma che naturalizza le disuguaglianze e costruire una società capace di riconoscere la diversità come risorsa. La sfida non è solo giuridica o organizzativa, ma culturale e simbolica. Ed è in questa sfida che soprattutto il lavoro sociale, con la sua capacità di connettere micro, meso e macro, può svolgere un ruolo trasformativo, contribuendo a rendere effettiva la promessa di giustizia e inclusione contenuta nella CRPD.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Allmendinger J. (2025), *On the Inclusion of Disabled Persons in the Labor Market: Lessons from the Disability Employment Gap*, in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition. Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), Città del Vaticano: 142-161.

Bilotti A. (2025), "Superare l'abilismo istituzionale: esperienze di partecipazione e riconoscimento dei diritti nelle politiche toscane per le disabilità", in Biemmi I., Viviani A. (a cura di), *Politiche e strategie per l'uguaglianza di genere e l'inclusione. Temi, ricerche e prospettive dei CUG delle Università di Siena e Firenze*, Open Access Series, FUP (Florence University Press), Firenze.

Bilotti A., Degl'Innocenti C. (2024), "Potere, partecipazione e lavoro interprofessionale nelle Unità di Valutazione Multidimensionale Disabilità (UVMD) in Toscana: primi esiti da una ricerca empirica", in Ciraci A.M., Domenici V., Petagine A. (a cura di), *Giornata della ricerca 2023 del Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione*, Volume I, Roma TrE-Press: 329-343 ISBN: 979-12-5977-425-5 Open Access https://romatrepress.uniroma3.it/

Bilotti A., Dondi A. (2024), *Oggi è domani. Proposte di welfare responsabile per costruire insieme il durante e dopo di noi*, FrancoAngeli Collana Open Sociology in OperAccess. ISBN 9788835127949

Bocci F. (2025), *Pluriversi. Modelli didattici inclusivi e percorsi di liberazione*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce.

Bourdieu P. (1998), *La domination masculine*, Seuil, Paris.

Campanini A. (2012), *Servizio sociale e sociologia. Storia di un dialogo*, Lint Editoriale, Trieste.

Campbell F. K. (2008), *Exploring internalized ableism using critical race theory*, in "Disability & Society", 23(2): 151-162. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590701841190

CNOAS (2021), *Linee di indirizzo per l'attuazione del lavoro sociale di comunità*, Consiglio Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali, Roma.

Commissione Europea (2021), *Strategia per i diritti delle persone con disabilità 2021-2030*, Commissione Europea, Bruxelles.

Costa L., Voronka J., Landry D., Reid J., McFarlane B., Reville D., Church K. (2012), *"Recovering our stories": A small act of resistance*, in "Studies in Social Justice", 6(1): 85-101. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v6i1.1070

Dal Pra Ponticelli M. (1987), *Lineamenti di servizio sociale*, Astrolabio-Ubaldini, Roma.

Dal Pra Ponticelli M. (2010), *Nuove prospettive per il servizio sociale*, Carocci, Roma.

El-Lahib Y., Wehbi S. (2012), *Immigration and Disability: Ableism in the Policies of the Canadian State*, in "International Social Work", 55(1): 95-108. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872811413128

Foucault M. (1976), *La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 2014.

Fraser N. (2009), *Scales of Justice. Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Garrett P.M., Bertotti T.F. (2017), *Social work and the politics of "austerity": Ireland and Italy*, in "European Journal of Social Work", 20(1): 29-41

Genova A. (2023), *Disabilità. Tra barriere istituzionali e violenza simbolica*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Goodley D. (2011), *Disability Studies. An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Sage, London.

Goodley D. (2013), *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, Routledge, London.

Goodley D., Liddiard K., Runswick-Cole K. (2018), *Feeling disability: Theories of affect and critical disability studies*, in Disability & Society, 33(2): 197-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1402752

Gui L. (2004), *Le sfide teoriche del servizio sociale. I fondamenti scientifici di una disciplina*, Carocci faber, Roma.

Guidi R., Mordeglia S. (a cura di) (2024), *Le policy practice degli assistenti sociali. Una ricerca nazionale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Holler J., Ohayon M. (2024), *Ableist structures and care regimes in European welfare systems*, in "Social Policy & Administration", 58(1): 88-104. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12955

Hollins S. (2025), "An Ordinary Life: Imagining a World in which Disability is a Normal Part of Life", in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition. Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), Città del Vaticano: 39-54.

IFSW (2018), *Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles*, International Federation of Social Workers, Berna.

Kim E.J., Skinner T., Parish S.L. (2020), *A study on intersectional discrimination in employment against disabled women in the UK*, in "Disability & Society", 35(5): 715-737. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1702506

Leblanc S., Kinsella E.A. (2016), *Toward epistemic justice: A critically reflexive examination of sanism*, in "Studies in Social Justice", 10(1): 59-78.

https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v10i1.1324
Lundberg A., Chen Y. (2024), *Structural ableism in healthcare governance*, in "The Lancet Regional Health – Americas", 19: 100624. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2024.100624
Marchisio M. (2023), *Politiche per la disabilità e governance dei diritti*, Giappichelli, Torino.
McEldowney J.F. (2025), "Living with Disabilities: The Consequence of Welfare Reforms in the UK and Thoughts for the Future", in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition. Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), Città del Vaticano: 401-428.
O'Connell S. (2024), *Deaf education and linguistic ableism in Scandinavia*, in "Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research", 26(1): 12-27. https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.9460
Oliver M. (1990), *Politics of Disablement*, Springer, London.
Oliver M. (1996), *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
Oliver M., Barnes C. (2012), *The New Politics of Disablement*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
ONU (2006), *Convenzione sui diritti delle persone con disabilità*, Nazioni Unite, New York.
Pozzo R. (2025), "Research and Innovation for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities: A Science Policy Survey", in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition. Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), Città del Vaticano: 357-364.
Priestley M. (2019), *Disability Politics and Community Care*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
Reynaert D., Desimpelaere P., Van Audenhove L. (2022), *The capabilities approach and disability policy: Recognizing diversity, promoting participation and challenging ableism*, in Alter – European Journal of Disability Research, 16(4): 286-298. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2022.09.001
Sacchetti F. (2012), *Abduzione e scoperta nella ricerca sociale*, in "Studi di Sociologia", 4: 403-427.
Scavarda A. (2021), *Pinguini nel deserto. Strategie di resistenza allo stigma da Autismo e Trisomia 21*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
Scavarda A. (2024), *L'abilismo nei linguaggi e nelle pratiche sanitarie*, in "eHumanista/IVITRA", 25(1): 157–171.
Shakespeare T. (2023), *Disability: The Basics*, Routledge, London.
Shakespeare T. (2025), "Living a Life Like Yours", in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition. Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS), Città del Vaticano: 347-356.
Suárez-Orozco M. M. (2025), "Education for All: Children, Disabilities, and the Global Compact for Education", in Alford H., Ferrucci F. (eds), *Disability and the Human Condition*, PASS, Città del Vaticano: 274-299.

Tarantino C. (a cura di) (2024), *Il soggiorno obbligato. La disabilità fra dispositivi di incapacità e strategie di emancipazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Tarsia T. (2019), *Sociologia e servizio sociale. Dalla teoria alla prassi*, Carocci, Roma

Tarvainen M. (2021), *Loneliness in Life Stories by People with Disabilities*, in "Disability & Society", 36(6): 864-882. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1877083

Valtellina E. (a cura di) (2024), *Teorie critiche della disabilità*, Mimesis, Milano.

Valtellina E. (a cura di) (2025), *Sulla disabilitazione. Introduzione ai Disability Studies*, UTET Università, Torino.

Valzania A., Bilotti A., Ruberti A. (2013), *"Questa è la mia storia". Per una valutazione d'impatto dei percorsi di inclusione socio-lavorativa attraverso i racconti di vita*, Pacini editore, Pisa.

Vaughan P., Boydell K., Blayney A., Hooper A., Taylor S., Lenette C., Lappin J., Dew A. (2025), *"We Are Mirrored in Your Gaze": Experiences and Outcomes of Stigma and Discrimination for Women with Disability and Mental Distress*, in "Disability & Society": 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2025.2470727

Wang L. (2025), *Benevolent Ableism and the Commodification of Deaf Labour in China*, in "Disability & Society", 40(2): 175–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2235901

Wolbring G. (2012), *Expanding Ableism: Hypo- and Hyper-Ableism in Science and Technology*, in "Societies", 2(3): 75-83. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc2030075

Arts-based education between inclusion and liberalization: a comparative overview of Europe[1]

Silvia Tarassi, Ilenya Camozzi, Kemal Ahson

In recent years, there has been a weakening of the role played by public institutions in the development of educational and cultural policies aimed at addressing social inclusion (Dubet 2002; Sennet 1999; Touraine 2010). Their emancipatory potential has increasingly given way to neoliberal logics of merit, competition, and quantification (Sandel, 2020; Grimaldi et al., 2016). On the one side, governance has shifted from centralized State models to decentralized networks involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022). While this diversification has fostered innovation and plurality, it often risks reinforcing inequalities and weakening coherent strategies (O'Brien 2014).

On the other side, at the European level, education and culture have been increasingly framed as means for economic development and innovation, strongly shaped by neoliberal paradigms that emphasize competitiveness and labor market adaptability (O'Connor 2024). Strategic frameworks such as the New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2018) and the Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 have stressed the development of soft skills through arts-based education (ABE), cultural participation, and non-formal learning.

This paper critically examines national and EU cultural and educational programs, focusing on the tension between inclusion and liberalization. Drawing on comparative research from the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project aimed at analyzing arts-based education policies and programs across various European countries, we highlight the contrasts between countries with strong traditions of public cultural welfare and others, such as Italy (Bodo, Bodo 2019), where fragmented policies and a reliance on the Third sector have limited the role of arts-based education in fostering social inclusion.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a weakening of the role played by the State and public institutions in the development of educational and cultural policies aimed at addressing educational poverty and social inclusion (Dubet 2002; Sennet 1999; Touraine 2010). The emancipatory and democratic potential of educational institutions appears to have yielded to a neoliberal market logic focused on merit, competition, and quantification (Sandel 2020; Grimaldi *et al.* 2016). The result is a general weakening of these institutions' ability to drive social change.

On the one hand, a shift from centralized State models toward more decentralized, networked governance structures involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships has emerged (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022).

[1] This research was supported by the CLiViE project funded through the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101132285.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 181-200
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.10

While this pluralization of players can foster innovation and flexibility, it also raises concerns about equity, access, and the coherence of long-term policy strategies and the consequent risks of reinforcing inequalities and social exclusion and failing to counteract educational poverty (O'Brien 2014; Belfiore 2022).
On the other hand, decentralization have undermined the importance of national governments in addressing cultural and educational policies (Sassatelli 2006). At the European level, there has been an increasing emphasis on positioning education and culture as strategic tools for economic growth, social inclusion, and innovation. This shift has been strongly influenced by neoliberal paradigms shaping policies (O'Connor 2024) which frame education not only as a public good but also as a means to enhance individual competitiveness and labor market adaptability. Central to this agenda, as reflected in strategic frameworks such as the New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2018) and the Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, is an emphasis on the development of soft skills often promoted through arts-based education (from now on ABE).
This paper discusses this controversial framework, shedding light on its implications for social inclusion for young people and children in Europe. The article focuses on the complex funding system and on public governance. It highlights significant differences between European countries. While Nordic and Eastern European countries seem to be able to guarantee social inclusion, though on the basis of different political traditions, the Italian case, as an example of the Mediterranean area, reproduces mechanisms of social inequality from early childhood onwards.
Firstly, the paper presents the theoretical debate and examines national and EU cultural and educational programs. It then considers the tensions between inclusion and instrumentalization in current policy orientations, starting from an analysis of ABE policies in European countries. It draws on the comparative research conducted as part of the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project, which analyzed ABE policies and programs addressed to children and young people across various European countries. The paper compares national contexts with stronger traditions of welfare and publicly led policies to those, such as the Italian one (Bodo & Bodo 2019), where the Third sector plays a prominent role and where educational and cultural policies have often lacked continuity and coordination, as well as an effective role in fostering social inclusion.
The paper also allows for the identification of a plurality of welfare arrangements in which the state and the Third sector jointly contribute to the provision of arts-based education programmes. Within these configurations, the Third sector may play a pivotal role in processes of co-creation and civic participation, operating in partnership with public bodies. From this perspective, ABE can be situated within the broader debate on plural welfare and social citizenship (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). Contemporary welfare systems can be understood as hybrid configurations in which public institutions, market actors and third-sector organisations jointly contribute to the production of social goods. Within this framework, culture and education are not merely policy domains, but constitute key dimensions of citizenship and substantive equality (Ferrera 2013; Zamagni 2015).

The paper concludes by presenting some critical challenges that need to be addressed in order to foster social inclusion through ABE and comments on the role that public and private bodies can jointly play.

1. *The role of cultural and educational policies, from welfare to public-private partnership*

A critical debate has emerged in recent years around the change in the role played by public bodies in addressing policy strategies in education and culture. Such a shift marks a departure from the traditional role of the public sector as a provider of universal services. Public policies have been whittled down both in terms of their strategic view but also in terms of providing funding. This change can be seen at the local (Banks, Oakley 2024; Minetto, Tarassi 2024), regional, national (Frederickson, Smith 2003), and even European level (O'Connor 2024). It has been generated by the decline of public power, the fragmentation of institutional authority, and especially the diminished role of public bodies in addressing the common good. Public entities have been ever more obliged to answer not only for their public mission but also for their economic sustainability. The lack of financial and human resources has increasingly pushed public actors to guarantee financial sustainability and balance their budgets. The principle of the balanced budget, once a technical administrative requirement, has become a driver able to reshape policies and practices (Turrini 2019): public funds are justified less in terms of social value and more in relation to economic sustainability and measurable returns. This principle reflects a pragmatic response to austerity following the economic crisis and marks a deeper transformation of the public mission. Public bodies must redesign their missions as organizations that are forced to "do more with less," following the principles of efficiency and cost-benefit analysis (Osborne, Gaebler 1992; Harvey 1989).

This dynamic has been described as reflecting an entrepreneurial logic in which governments act less as traditional providers of welfare and more as entrepreneurial actors (Harvey 1989; 2007; Osborne, Gaebler 1992). In this model, public authorities adopt practices borrowed from the private sector, such as performance management, marketing (Harvey 1989) and need to behave like market-oriented enterprises, seeking alternative funding sources, working on a project-oriented basis instead of long term strategies, and developing private partnerships to be sustainable. The public sector is thus becoming more entrepreneurial and privatized, while private organizations are responding to a public mission and to social responsibility, thus becoming more public. This inversion is making the provision of public services under models of public-private governance more common. A transition from public management toward more decentralized, networked governance models involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships has therefore emerged (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022).

This transition can also be interpreted through the lens of plural welfare regimes and differentiated welfare cultures, often described as forms of "liberal neo-welfarism" (Ferrera 2013). Rather than representing a withdrawal of public authorities, the growing reliance on public–private partnerships reflects a reconfiguration of welfare provision in which responsibility for cultural and educational rights is redistributed across public institutions, market actors and community-based organisations. From this perspective, the Third sector assumes a structurally ambivalent role within what has been defined as “civic welfare” (Zamagni 2015): on the one hand, it may compensate for public retrenchment and cost-cutting; on the other, it can operate as a key arena for civic co-production, depending on the regulatory, institutional and financial frameworks in place.

In this framework, there has been a shift from government, in terms of the direct administration of services, to governance, understood as the management of networks of relationships (Rodes 1996; Peters, Pierre 1998). In a model of government, there is a direct control over cultural and educational services which are funded, designed and implemented by public institutions, while in networked governance, the role of the public sector has become less about direct provision and more about mediating among a plurality of actors, including private foundations, NGOs, cultural associations, universities, and community groups to deliver cultural and educational programs (Peters, Pierre 1998; Turrini 2019). In this model, public institutions no longer operate as unique providers but also as facilitators, mobilizing resources, mediating interests, and building partnerships.

This shift towards the privatization of public bodies has also been affected by neoliberal approaches where “human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 22). Neoliberal ideology is based on the belief that markets function as self-regulating systems capable of producing outcomes more effectively than public intervention (Harvey 2005). According to neoliberal discourse, it is assumed that the individualized and deregulated private sphere, instead of the public sphere, represents the most efficient way to organize social and economic life, displacing the legitimacy of public forms of governance (Lipman 2011). In this framework, policies and programs directly managed by the public sphere are portrayed as inefficient, bureaucratic. Such narratives also serve to legitimize the privatization of services in education and culture, shifting responsibility toward the entrepreneurial capacities of individuals. The diminishing role played by public bodies is also a consequence of this neoliberalist turn as public entities are considered bureaucratic and resistant to change. This process has brought about a privatization of public services in the fields of education and of culture, with philanthropic organizations absolving themselves of their public mission and provision of public services while private organizations develop educational and cultural activities under public commission or concession, or under public-private partnerships or sponsorships. Education is increasingly populated by a third space constituted by philanthropists and non-profits (Reckhow, Snyder 2014; Tobiason 2019).

As proposed within the “Third Way” framework (Lewis, Surender 2004), civil society, public authorities and market actors should be understood as mutually interdependent in the provision of welfare services such ABE. Within this approach, public-private partnerships are conceived not merely as instruments of service delivery, but as governance arrangements aimed at safeguarding a public mission and ensuring the provision of public goods.

However, while the pluralization of private and public players may enrich ABE by drawing on diverse expertise and leveraging additional resources, it also introduces

challenges: pluralization of players raises concerns about equity, coherence of long-term policy strategies and risks reinforcing inequalities as decision-making becomes fragmented among multiple actors whose priorities may not coincide with the public interest and with a strategic view (Rhodes 1996; Jessop 2002).
From this point of view, the critical analysis of the privatization of ABE is however relevant because it raises concerns regarding the accessibility and equity of educational opportunities and the risk of weakening the public mission of culture in favor of economic returns (Giroux 2014).

2. *The policy approach considering culture and education as commodities*

The need to consider the economic return of cultural and educational activities rather than their value as public goods has been strongly affected by neoliberalist approaches to policy making in recent decades. This change began when culture was perceived as a means of economic development for cities facing a post-industrial crisis (Oakley, O'Connor 2015).
The culture and creative industries policy approach (Hesmondhalgh 2019), which was later adopted at the European as well as national levels, has affected our understanding of culture as an industry and as a commodity to be consumed rather a public good to be shared. This approach affected our understanding of culture, but also of education and, in particular, ABE (O'Connor 2025) and in the provision of public services. At first, the shift from a welfare state providing public services to an entrepreneurial state meant systematic cuts to cultural and educational services which were not considered as valuable as the ones having a direct economic return.
The economistic view of culture risks transforming culture into a commodified product, framing it in terms of economic impact and ability to generate economic development and urban regeneration. Such an approach marginalizes the intrinsic value of culture as "art for art's sake" and its contribution to producing collective identities, social cohesion, civic participation. Culture and ABE are regarded as exclusive goods, as discretionary luxury products to be individually consumed rather than a common good which should be commonly accessible. Indeed, it has been argued that, "as art and culture are cut from education, or made prohibitively expensive," it is "effectively privatizing whatever remains of the system of public goods" (Mazzucato, O'Connor, Bennett 2025, 9). The consequences of adopting an economically-focused approach to culture result in culture being considered solely as an industry, privileging its economic sustainability rather than the need to guarantee the widest possible access.
O'Connor's critique highlights the need to move beyond a narrow economic evaluation of culture and to embrace a holistic approach that recognizes its educational and transformative potential, considering art and culture as part of livability (Calafati *et al.* 2023), as a "foundational" human right as outlined in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which states that "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."
The need to consider culture as a common good changes the perspective in which to consider public policies, not just as a matter of public subsidies but also of building up an infrastructure, including regulations, capacity building, legal frameworks, and legal-regulatory infrastructure. In this view, the primary role of cultural policy is to

find ways of sustaining and expanding the production of and participation in culture by the widest possible range of people. The question of culture as a public good is about the right to full participation on the one hand, and on the other, about how to ensure the continued functioning of the interconnected public and private system of art and culture (Mazzucato, O'Connor, Bennett 2025, 7).
On the contrary, policy landscape dominated by a neoliberal logic that privileges competivness and measurable outcomes also significantly impacts our understanding of culture and education, especially regarding the kinds of skills that education should provide. This approach has profound implications in the management of cultural organizations as well as educational institutions such as universities and schools.
The paradigm of the entrepreneurial public entity, already consolidated in urban policies (Harvey 1989; Jessop 2002), has extended to educational and cultural organizations. In a context marked by a scarcity of resources and increasing competition, schools, universities, and cultural institutions have been asked to be self-sustainable, entrepreneurial, and accountable (Ball 2012; Olssen, Peters 2005), and to reorient their activities toward generating economic revenue.
According to many authors (Bennett 1995; Sandel 2020), economic sustainability should be counterbalanced by the safeguard of civic mission in order to avoid increasing inequalities in access to cultural literacy. When educational cultural activities are treated primarily as commodities, they risk becoming exclusive services available only to those who can afford them, thus contradicting the very idea of culture as a public good (Biesta 2017; Giroux 2014). This approach affects educational institutions, which are increasingly influenced by a broader marketization of education (Brancaleone, O'Brien 2011), namely by market logics, performance metrics, individual responsibility and employability (Ball 2012; Brown 2015; Davies, Bansel 2007). Within schools, this entrepreneurial approach also translates into competition for visibility and prestige: schools are pressured to adopt managerial models of governance that prioritize performance metrics over meaningful learning experiences. Educational programs are pressured to demonstrate impacts through measurable outcomes such as student employability or rankings (Anholt 2007; Gray 2008). According to Apple and Au (2009), education has been reframed, with schools considered as competitive enterprises, learning as an economic investment, students as "disimagination machines" (Giroux 2014), entrepreneurial subjects, as self-managing agents responsible for maximizing their own human capital (Bröckling 2016). In this critical debate, the use of high-stakes standardized tests has become a way of defining school and student competition as the data produced by the tests can then be used as the metrics for competition in the educational marketplace (Apple 2006). As Au states (2016), these rankings, even though promoted as being meritocratic, in fact promote and exacerbate structural and racialized inequalities. Consequently, educational institutions tend to increase stratification and exclusion, reproducing social hierarchies through mechanisms of testing, ranking, and accountability (Apple 2004; Au 2016). While a number of projects have been put in play at the policy level to avoid the risk of marginalization and exclusion in education and ABE, according to the authors (Apple 2004; Au 2016), they risk remaining fragmented efforts without a structured strategy. According to Ball (2003), the system

of accountability explains education through inputs, outputs, outcomes to assess performance, thus cutting out any form of aesthetic or social value.
The use of standardized and quantitative metrics has favored scientific subjects and inhibited the integration of the arts into education. As Aróstegui (2019) argues, this unidimensional approach to evaluation in which only what is measured counts, values the STEM subjects rather than the Arts and Humanities as "the nature of the artistic reality is beyond the nature of the measurement tools" (Aróstegui 2019, 8). This approach is contained in the report *Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts Education* (OECD 2013), which underlines that there are insufficient data proving the relation between ABE and the development of skills in students and that "evidence of any impact of arts learning on creativity and critical thinking, remains largely inconclusive, partly because of an insufficient volume of experimental research on these matters and also because of the difficulty of adequately measuring these skills" (OECD 2013, 258). In this and other reports and declarations, ABE, even though it is theoretically valued, is not implemented within school curricula because it cannot be measured. There are attempts to evaluate the arts in the school curricula from a qualitative point of view, but they not integrated into a measurement system (Horsley 2009).
In some cases, the intrinsic value of the arts is located in developing "artistic skills" and "artistic habits of mind" (OECD 2013, 18-19), though the impact of ABE is not really seen as related to the development of other skills, technical and social skills, even though these are often promoted through ABE, as reflected in other documents at the European level such as the *New European Agenda for Culture* (European Commission 2018) and the *Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026*. The development of creative skills is seen to be a good thing at the economic level (Craft 2002), and ABE is linked to objectives of economic growth, social innovation, and employability, as a means of enhancing individual competitiveness and labor market adaptability (Ranczakowska 2025). This framework can also be seen in the report *Education at a Glance 2025* (OECD 2025) where, among the outputs, it is valued according to question "how does educational attainment affect participation in the labour market." Biesta (2017) warns that, when the arts are valued solely for their instrumental benefits, the potential of the arts to educate about critical engagement, aesthetic judgment is weakened. Although ABE recognized, its value and potential are rarely central in policy making, with the arts long occupying a weak position in educational curricula (Horsley 2009; Shaw 2018). ABE is widely recognized as a critical component of holistic learning, yet it is largely underfunded, undervalued, and inconsistently implemented in educational programs (Sanz-Camarero *et al.* 2025). Systemic barriers ranging from financial constraints to the dominance of standardized testing, have led to the marginalization of ABE in public systems. There commitment is symbolic and there are several challenges for the integration of ABE, as the instrumentalization of the arts, undervaluing of the arts, poor teacher training, and neglected assessment. These challenges depend upon the different policy approaches adopted in each context, thus requiring a comparative approach.
The following section explores how these diverse political and cultural traditions shape distinct policy approaches, producing different balances between instrumentalization and inclusion. The comparison made among European countries looks at the different

educational and cultural policies in play in different national contexts which have an impact on the implementation of ABE.

3. Comparative analysis of ABE across Europe: funding logics and policy traditions

ABE in Europe reproduces the broader tensions between neoliberal policy agendas and traditions of welfare-based cultural democracy, therefore providing a lens through which different political models can mitigate the pressures of neo-liberalisation. Even though it can be assumed that a general process of privatization, entrepreneurialism, and decreasing public funds can be found in all countries, the ways in which each country responds to these challenges significantly changes.

The development of ABE across European countries shows how different governance arrangements can influence the accessibility and meaning of the arts in education. These traditions shape the ways in which ABE is valued as a public good or as an economic instrument, to be evaluated in terms of efficiency, competitiveness, and measurable outcomes (Harvey 2005; Ball 2012; Brown 2015).

While EU frameworks emphasize culture and education as strategic resources for economic development, employability, and innovation (European Commission 2018), the ways in which individual States translate these priorities into practice vary widely, reflecting institutional legacies.

As shown by the research presented here, countries have started adopting the recommendations of UNESCO and the EU, with slower or faster implementation, and have established national curriculum reforms and defined national plans for the arts that present a comprehensive approach to ABE.

From a methodological point of view, this study builds upon the comparative research framework developed within the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project, which examined ABE policies and programs targeting children and young people in seven European countries (Finland, Germany, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland and Italy). The comparative analysis was grounded in the systematic review of seven national reports, each independently produced by the project partners. Each national report was developed through desk research following shared overarching guidelines. All reports had to include a policy review addressing regulatory frameworks, governance models, funding schemes, the organisation of school systems and a mapping of ABE initiatives implemented in formal and informal settings.

Partners applied context-sensitive strategies in identifying sources and collecting data, reflecting the diversity of national information systems and inherent limitations of available data.

In terms of case selection, all ABE programmes and policies included in the analysis were targeted to children and young people (aged between 10 and 16 years old), and were explicitly integrating artistic or cultural practices within educational aims. Within these selection criteria, each country mapped initiatives operating at national, regional, or local levels, acknowledging that the heterogeneity of ABE landscapes across Europe makes exhaustive coverage difficult, particularly in the informal sector. Data collection procedures varied across countries according to the structure of their institutional ecosystems. For instance, in Germany data were mainly retrieved from institutional and official sources such as government web portals and national or regional statistical platforms, allowing for the compilation of a more comprehensive dataset. In contrast, in countries where information on informal ABE provision is less centralised, mapping required consulting a wide range of non-institutional sources. In these cases, information was often gathered through the analysis of websites of arts organisations, cultural associations, foundations, and third-sector bodies, whose initiatives are typically not systematised within public repositories. These asymmetries in source availability represent an intrinsic limitation of the comparative exercise and influence the degree of detail and consistency achievable across national contexts. Following the preparation of the national reports, a cross-country comparative analysis was conducted. This process involved identifying convergences and divergences in policy approaches, funding models and ABE initiatives across the seven countries. The comparison aimed not only to highlight structural differences but also to interpret how each system positions ABE as a public good in itself or as an instrumental tool and the implications of these orientations for issues of inclusion.

Overall, while all States formally acknowledge the role of culture and education as universal rights, the comparative analysis reveals substantial variations in the ways these principles are translated into concrete programmes.

The differences in approach can be found in policy strategies, funding streams, mapping and range from welfare-oriented models to fragmented, project-based systems. Among this dichotomy there is, in fact, a continuum of approaches applied to different degrees. It is therefore not just a matter of comparing funding provision but also the policies, laws, strategies in play which are made up of a diverse range of practices, such as building the infrastructure to foster ABE, data and analysis in the field, spaces and cultural centers, representative bodies, associations, networks, communities of practices, training for teachers and educators in the field, promotion, and communications. The analysis looks at the different funding models adopted by these countries to find similarities and differences in the policy making strategies being adopted. It later considers how different funding models can also be related to different policy strategies.

As the comparative analysis shows, countries with larger public support are also the ones having integrated strategic programs and policy frameworks recognizing the role of the arts for education to foster inclusion. Conversely, the countries with smaller public support are also the ones with a fragmented approach to ABE in terms of recognition, regulation, and infrastructure, and thus inhibit equal access for all to cultural and educational opportunities.

3.1 Funding logics and the risks of privatisation and exclusion

The comparative analysis maps the funding architectures underpinning ABE across seven European countries involved in the CLiViE project. The comparisons among these countries reveal divergences in the ways ABE is supported, reflecting not only the availability of resources but also the political traditions and governance models shaping cultural and educational systems.

While public support systems align more closely with the ideal of ABE as a public good and as a means to foster social inclusion, even they are not immune to neoliberal pressures. Across all contexts, declining public resources and the privatization of social and educational services have pushed institutions to adopt innovative fundraising strategies, develop public- private partnerships, and diversify their revenue streams.

Across these diverse systems, a common pattern emerges: all countries are increasingly compelled to diversify their funding mix strategies. The funding mix varies according to the different traditions and policy strategies adopted by each partner country and can be divided into four main categories of funds and revenues provided by different organizations: the EU; national, federal, regional and local governments; private donors, foundations, philanthropies, and private sponsors; membership fees and ticket sales.

Considering European funds for the support of arts-education projects, these have been adopted especially by Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic. European programs do not have a specific funding scheme directed to ABE; however, ABE initiatives and projects are included within other programs supporting the cultural and creative industries, such as the Creative Europe and Erasmus+ programs.

It is also intended to favor cross-collaborations among organizations in different European countries. However, organizations applying for European funds are required to be entrepreneurial and to operate according to criteria of efficiency and accountability, to reorient their activities toward being self-sustainable. The Creative Europe program encourages organizations to develop entrepreneurial skills and cross-sector partnerships, thereby emphasizing the market-oriented framing of cultural and educational activities (European Commission 2018). The funds function on a project-based approach and on a short-term basis, thus not allowing for long term programs and initiatives in the field.

In terms of the support and direct intervention provided by public bodies at the national, regional and local level, in all the analysed countries, formal ABE in lower and upper secondary schools is directly managed and financed by the Ministry of Education which organizes the school system and determines the amount of teaching in arts domains. Formal education is provided through large-scale ABE projects and programs at different degrees of intervention and structure. Instead, significant differences can be found when it comes to informal ABE initiatives provided through bottom-up and community-led non-formal projects, and programs organized by a wider network of non-formal organizations in the arts field and in the Third sector through public-private partnerships with schools, cultural and educational organizations. Public bodies increasingly collaborate with cultural organizations, and NGOs to deliver educational and cultural initiatives, though with different degrees of public coordination or fragmentation. In other cases, non-formal ABE initiatives are nationally supported and rely on locally-driven initiatives. Federal States or municipalities may directly develop specific local programs in the cultural field or may support cultural and social organizations which are active in the field. Local authorities supporting cultural initiatives or directly providing cultural services (such as libraries or civic museums) also include ABE initiatives, though without directly intervening in school activities.

Moreover, there is a substantial presence of philanthropies developing specific programs and funding schemes in ABE. Private foundations often support specific projects in organizations active in the cultural and educational field and in the Third sector which have to meet the objectives of the call, the mission of the organizations, and the requirements of funding schemes where the need to guarantee self-sustainability and to cover part of the costs is asked. As for EU funds, private funding schemes favor a mechanism of very fragmented project-based activities. ABE initiatives can also be fee-based, requiring an admission ticket. Many organizations adopt an approach that reframes their services, including educational ones, not as part of their mission as instruments of social inclusion, but as opportunities for revenue. In this model, workshops, guided tours, and ABE programs are treated as commodified services, priced according to market dynamics rather than made accessible as public goods. The need to depend upon a pay-for-performance model thus leaves the cost of the activities to families who are asked to pay high fees for cultural-educational programs, making these educational programs exclusive and inaccessible to the general public.

The analysis of these four funding streams enables us to outline three different models of support developed in the seven countries with a larger public, mixed or private support to ABE.

In contexts such as Finland, Germany, and the Czech Republic, with strong traditions of cultural and educational welfare, ABE is rooted within long-term strategies and sustained through public investment. Here, national and federal governments support various ABE initiatives through funding and programs and mobilize considerable resources, meaning ABE is treated as a right and a vehicle for participation. In these cases, initiatives are funded and supported by legislation and are provided for free. In particular, in Finland, the legal framework for culture is reinforced by an innovative funding model that allocates gambling revenues to the arts, enabling municipalities to sustain cultural organizations, music and arts schools accessible to all at low cost. In Finland, art and music schools receive State subsidies that allow them to provide ABE at a minimal cost to families.

In Germany, the *Culture Makes You Strong* (*Kultur macht stark*) program, launched in 2013, is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and aims to fund local partnerships between schools, civil society organizations to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can access free arts activities (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2022). The Czech Republic also combines national and local funding with EU funds, such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and the National Recovery Plan and NextGenerationEU, showing a multi-level system with public investment.

In countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, there are instead mixed support systems as the sustainability of ABE relies on a hybrid funding mix. Thus, these countries have a multi-source funding structure for ABE, combining State, municipal, private, and EU contributions. While ABE in schools is mostly managed by ministries of education, informal initiatives depend on EU resources, private foundations, and sponsors and, in some cases, on tickets sale and private contribution of families. The responsibility for ABE is dispersed across networks of actors. Being mostly based upon external and private funding schemes, it creates a project-based, fragmented environment in which sustainability and continuity are at risk. In this project-based approach, organizations struggle to maintain programs once external funds finish, thus preventing the development of a long-term strategy for ABE. This dependence on external resources may therefore favor a fragmented, project-based environment with little continuity, relying upon temporary funding cycles even though it is partly integrated with public support.

For example, a scheme developed in Lithuania provides children with state-funded vouchers covering various ABE programs, like access to theater performances, concerts, and museum visits, while summer camp programs and non-formal education vouchers supplement access to the arts (Lithuanian Ministry of Culture 2019).

The most fragile model is visible in countries with weak public support, notably Italy. Here, ABE depends heavily on philanthropic foundations, charities, and third-sector organizations and mostly on families contributing to the costs of these activities. These countries have a less comprehensive approach to ABE, which is less guaranteed for all age groups and thus do not foster policy strategies enhancing access for all. While regions and municipalities promote specific initiatives, the lack of a national framework means provision is fragmented and project-based. Programs supported by banking foundations, such as Fondazione Cariplo in Lombardy, have expanded access to arts for schools and communities, but these remain unevenly distributed and are not very widespread experiences so they cannot promote a long-term impact.

Moreover, in the Italian case, public institutions often outsource ABE initiatives and services to external private operators. These private or semi-private providers often work on short-term contracts and create programs on a short term basis according to the economic availability and bureaucratic constraints of the schools and of institutions. This contributes to making the offer of ABE initiatives very fragmented reducing the long-term impact on students. In other cases, these educational services are outsourced to private operators, thus setting participation fees according to market logics. As a result, didactic activities are often offered at high costs, effectively transforming them into revenue-generating services rather than inclusive public programs. This weak public support has led to a reliance on fee-based programs which can restrict access to ABE due to high costs, impacting inclusion and accessibility. ABE is mostly developed in out-of-school activities or in informal activities which are not free. In practice, this means that ABE initiatives are exclusive, and their accessibility depends upon geographical location, the cultural and educational offer, and also upon the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of families. In the absence of public or private support for these activities, organizations have to set participation fees according to market forces which risks reinforcing inequalities.

The similarities and differences in funding approaches across the seven European countries have significant impacts on the accessibility of ABE. Where public investment is strong and complemented by coordinated strategies, ABE is situated as a tool for social inclusion, providing equal opportunities for children and young people regardless of their backgrounds. By contrast, in contexts where public support is limited, ABE risks reinforcing rather than counteracting inequalities, as participation depends upon the financial capacity as well as the cultural capital of families, thus becoming a privileged and exclusive services and individualized commodity.

As the paper will now show, inclusive or exclusive funding mechanisms are also strongly linked to public frameworks and strategies.

3.2 Policy structures, political traditions and governance arrangements

Across these diverse systems, public, mixed and private, all countries appear to be increasingly obliged to diversify their funding structures. However, disparities are based on the strength or fragility of public governance, which leads to diverse public arrangements.

Therefore, these three funding models (public, mixed, and private) bring about three different policy frameworks in which recognition, investment, policy regulation, and infrastructure for ABE is guaranteed or not.

First, there are national contexts, namely Finland, Germany and partly the Czech Republic, with welfare-based traditions and with strong policy frameworks. These countries also have a more strategic and comprehensive approach to ABE and culture. Their ABE is embedded in long-term public strategies with a long tradition, often integrated into national curricula and supported by dedicated funding streams and by public-private partnerships. These systems reflect traditions of welfare where access to the arts is safeguarded as a universal right and as means to foster social inclusion and equal access.

These countries have developed programs meant to combine formal and informal education, favoring ABE activities through specic funded schemes, and guaranteeing free access.

In the case of Finland, the incorporation of education and culture in the same Ministry has facilitated the development of comprehensive ABE policies and programs. Here, the arts are embedded within national curricula from the earliest stages of education, supported by sustained public funding at both the State and municipal level.

In particular, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education includes music, visual arts, crafts, and drama, integrating the arts into everyday schooling. Finland can also boast of a diverse network of associations and representative bodies institutionally recognizing the role-played by ABE such as the Association of Finnish Children's Cultural Centers which also releases guidelines like the *Quality Manual for Children's Arts and Culture* (2022). Finland exemplifies how welfare traditions, good infrastructure together with a good network of organizations, can mitigate neoliberal pressures, maintaining the arts as public goods and reinforcing their role supporting social inclusion and participation.

In Germany, culture is formalized and universally recognized; there is a will to foster ABE through partnerships between schools, institutions, and associations, backed by federal and regional programs with the aim of fostering social inclusion and equal access to quality education for all. There is a strong commitment to reaching diverse communities, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, through specific programs like the previously mentioned *Culture Makes You Strong* (*Kultur macht stark*) project**.**

In Eastern European contexts, such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, the history of education and ABE is linked to political history: for those countries affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall, changing from a centrally planned economy to a capitalist (market-driven) system, the period following the 1990s was characterized by national reforms, including those of the educational system. These changes also impacted ABE. While arts subjects are included in national curricula, public support is limited, and non-formal ABE is often dependent on EU and private funds. However, in these countries, there is still an idea of a unified and public school system with the aim of guaranteeing access to basic education, and for this reasons there are specific programs overcoming financial and personal barriers to participating in culture, especially among those threatened with social exclusion. In these contexts, a framework based on a hybrid governance model and on project dependence can be found where there is still a commitment to guaranteeing common access to ABE. Within this multi-source funding system, these countries still have a policy strategy for ABE, as in Poland's *Very Young Culture* program (*Bardzo Młoda Kultura*), which connects schools, institutions, and NGOs to strengthen participation.

Conversely, the Italian case highlights the challenges of weak public leadership and fragmented governance. Italian cultural and educational policies have historically been characterized by lack of continuity and coordination in terms of regulations, funding, infrastructure, with the Third sector, (Bodo, Bodo 2019) replacing this public shortcoming. In Italy, the absence of a secure public framework has brought about a privatization of services, a mix of fragmented initiatives, frequently dependent on project-based funding, philanthropic interventions, and participant fees. Here, ABE risks reproducing rather than reducing inequalities, as access is conditioned by geographic location and socio-economic status (Camozzi, Simonella, Tarassi 2025). Divergences may be found not only across families and students with different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, but they also strongly depend upon geographical provenience. Cities and peripheral areas having diverse cultural and educational offerings with diverse public and private support may differently foster or inhibit inclusion and exclusion in absence of a national strategic framework. Countries having a national strategic framework may, conversely, better counteract these geographical disparities.

In Italy, there have been some attempts to overcome this fragmentation, such as *Plan for the Arts* (*Piano delle Arti*) (2017), but its implementation is still weak within the Italian school system and lacks coordination and monitoring to show a real impact. Italy, with a school system focused on the Humanities, is thus not promoting ABE as a mean to foster inclusion and is not leveraging diverse educational backgrounds which are, in fact, increasing. Individual efforts by civic society are made, but there is not a structural approach in public policy. The Italian case clearly shows how, when public institutions are weakened, cultural and educational initiatives are depending upon the individual consumption and accessibility of each school or family, thus limiting inclusion, reinforcing a recognition of culture and ABE as a commodity rather than a public good.

As the comparative analysis has shown, when national governments continue to sustain a robust framework of cultural, social, and educational welfare, as in the cases presented of Finland or Germany, culture and ABE can still be defended as public goods. Where governance is fragmented and weak, as in Italy, ABE risks becoming commodified, reinforcing rather than reducing social inequalities.

Conclusion

The complex and varied development of ABE in Europe is rooted in distinct funding systems, political traditions, plural welfare regimes (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015), and governance structures that mitigate the economic pressures imposed by neoliberalism and entrepreneurial public bodies (Harvey 1989; 2007). While EU institutions increasingly view culture and education as strategic resources for growth, employability, and social inclusion (O'Connor 2016; Belfiore 2012), national public bodies differ in their implementation and balancing of these objectives within the contemporary neoliberal framework. These divergences demonstrate the dependence of neoliberal and entrepreneurial approaches on traditions of public governance and cultural policy.

From the perspective of social citizenship, the comparative findings suggest that ABE constitutes a critical testing ground for contemporary plural welfare regimes and differentiated welfare cultures embedded in diverse national contexts (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). Where welfare is embedded in robust public frameworks and supported by coherent and coordinated governance structures, ABE contributes to substantive equality and to collective access to cultural resources. By contrast, in contexts where welfare provision relies predominantly on fragmented, project-based and market-oriented mechanisms, ABE tends to become increasingly individualized and selective, thereby reinforcing rather than mitigating existing social inequalities.

In particular, our study, based on the *Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe* (CLiViE) project, illustrates how neoliberal and entrepreneurial logics are mediated differently across Europe. In Nordic and Central European countries, welfare systems guarantee ABE to be accessible for all. In Eastern Europe, reliance on EU funds and governance networks produces fragile, project-based provision, even though a public vision is still present. The Italian case represents an emblematic example of what has been described as "strong civic welfare" (Zamagni 2015), grounded in the principle of subsidiarity (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). In this context, the provision of cultural and educational services relies heavily on Third-sector organisations and local initiatives, making Italy a particularly illustrative case for examining both the potential and the limits of civic welfare arrangements. Paradoxically, weak State leadership and reliance on fragmented, uncoordinated third-sector initiatives, together with the absence of strong public support, have been shown to foster social exclusion instead of combatting it. ABE initiatives, which are mostly supported by private donors or individuals, are strictly interconnected with two processes: the marketization of these initiatives and the individualization of access to them. In the first case, ABE seems tailored to specific social groups who are able to access it economically; in the second case, ABE initiatives seem responsive to the need of privileged social groups to differentiate themselves socially from other social groups.

These considerations of the different implications of ABE in Europe raise issues about the role and meaning of the arts and culture and their recognition in different national contexts. The arts and culture are not monolithic categories but encompass practices with different symbolic weight (Griswold 2008; Mangset 2012). Recognizing these disparities helps to clarify how certain forms of art resonate more strongly with cultural traditions and affect differently policy strategies and social legitimazation.

The shift from a discourse of high culture to that of creative industries (Hesmondhalgh 2019) complicates definitions, with policy often instrumentalizing some art forms from an economic point of view (O'Connor 2024) or seeing them as instruments to foster social inclusion.

In this framework, it is interesting to consider how ABE can be placed at the intersection of two logics: the autonomous value of art as aesthetic practice ("art for art's sake"), recognizing its intrinsic values, and the instrumental goals of "education" as a structured system of knowledge and skills to be quantified. Reflecting upon this distictions helps us to understand to what extent ABE should keep its artistic integrity while fulfilling educational goals. Indeed, the comparative picture shows that ABE is not a neutral field but a site of tension among two different visions of culture. These tensions are not uniformly developed across Europe but are mediated by historical legacies and political traditions. Where public governance is strong, the arts maintain a public mission. Where governance is fragmented, ABE risks becoming a commodified and individualized service.
One final point seems relevant to us. It concerns the timeframe of ABE projects. When public support and strategy are lacking and a fragile funding system is used, "project-based" initiatives take hold, which are risky in terms of duration, evaluation, and replicability. This combination of "short-termism" in projects and access that is not always universal only serves to exacerbate the system of inequalities in access to ABE initiatives. Institutions at the national and European level that promote these initiatives should take into account the direct impact that short-term project-based funding mechanisms and economic criteria have on the effective role of ABE in promoting social inclusion and access for all. A key factor for the future of ABE in Europe lies in how the arts are supported as public goods rather than commodified services (O'Connor 2025).

References
Anholt S. (2007), *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Apple M.W., Au W. (2009), *Education, Markets, and the Pedagogy of Personalization*, Routledge, New York.
Aróstegui J. (2019), Evaluation, educational policy reforms, and their implications for arts education, in "Arts Education Policy Review", 120(3): 121-125. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2018.1531657
Association of Finnish Children's Cultural Centers (2022), *Quality Manual for Children's Arts and Culture*, Helsinki.
Au W. (2016), *Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, Standardized Testing as a Racial Project of Neoliberal Multiculturalism*, in "Educational Policy", 30(1): 39-62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916
Ball S.J. (2012), *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neoliberal Imaginary*, Routledge, London.
Banks M., Oakley K. (2024), *Cakes and ale: the role of culture in the new municipalism*, in "Cultural Trends", 34(2): 163-177. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2344468
Belfiore E. (2012), "*Defensive instrumentalism" and the legacy of New Labour's cultural policies*, in "Cultural Trends", 21(2): 103-111. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2012.674750
Belfiore E. (2022), *Arts, Culture and the Conservative Agenda: An Essay on Policy and Ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Biesta G. (2017), *Letting Art Teach: Art Education after Joseph Beuys*, ArtEZ Press, Arnhem.

BMBF (2013–2027), Programm "Kultur macht stark. Bündnisse für Bildung", Berlin.

Bodo S., Bodo C. (2019), *Musei e educazione: Un dialogo necessario*, Electa, Milano.

Bonet L., Négrier E. (2018), *The participative turn in cultural policy: Paradigms, models, contexts*, in "Poetics", 66: 64-73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.12.002

Brancaleone D., O'Brien S. (2011), *Educational commodification and the (economic) sign value of learning outcomes*, in "British Journal of Sociology of Education", 32(4): 501-519. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.578433

Bröckling U. (2016), *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*, Sage, London.

Brown P. (2015), *Education, opportunity and the prospect of social mobility*, in "British Journal of Sociology of Education", 36(5): 678-694. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.820060

Calafati L., Froud J., Haslam C., Johal S., Williams K. (2023), *Foundational Economy: The Infrastructure of Everyday Life*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Camozzi I., Simonella Z., Tarassi S. (2025), *D 2.2 National report on arts-based education contexts and young people*. *The case of Italy*.

Council of the European Union (2022), *Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026*, Bruxelles.

Craft A. (2002), *Creativity and Early Years Education*, Continuum, London.

Davies B., Bansel P. (2007), *Neoliberalism and education*, in "International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education", 20(3): 247-259. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701281751

Decreto Legislativo 13 aprile 2017, n. 60, *Norme sulla promozione della cultura umanistica*, Gazzetta Ufficiale, Roma.

Dubet F. (2002), *Le déclin de l'institution*, Le Seuil, Paris.

European Commission (2018), *A New European Agenda for Culture*, Bruxelles.

Ferrera M. (2013), *Neowelfarismo liberale: nuove prospettive per lo stato sociale in Europa*, in "Stato e mercato", 33(1): 3-36.

Frederickson H.G., Smith K.B. (2003), *The Public Administration Theory Primer*, Westview Press, Boulder.

Giroux H.A. (2014), *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, Haymarket Books, Chicago.

Gray J. (2008), *Accountability and Learning: The Global Shift Towards Testing and Assessment*, in "Educational Researcher", 37(1): 23–30.

Griswold W. (2008), *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Harvey D. (1989), *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism*, in "Geografiska Annaler B", 71(1): 3-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.1989.11879583

Harvey D. (2007), *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction*, in "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", 610(1): 21-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206296780

Hesmondhalgh D. (2019), *The Cultural Industries*, 4th ed., Sage, London.

Horsley M. (2009), *The Evaluation of Learning in the Arts*, in “Curriculum Journal”, 20(4): 423-428. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585170903334901
Jessop B. (2002), *Liberalism, neoliberalism and urban governance: A state-theoretical perspective*, in “Antipode”, 34(3): 452-472. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00250
Lewis J., Surender R. (2004). *Welfare State Change: Towards a Third Way?*, Oxford University Press.
Lithuanian Ministry of Culture (2019), *Culture Passport and Voucher Scheme for Non-Formal Education*, Vilnius.
Lipman P. (2011), *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*, Routledge, New York.
Mangset P. (2012), *Cultural Policy and Democracy: An Introduction*, in “International Journal of Cultural Policy”, 18(5): 521-523. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2012.708865
Mazzucato M., O’Connor J., Bennett O. (2025), *Art, Culture and the Common Good*, Routledge, London.
Minetto A., Tarassi S. (2024), *I festival diffusi. Un nuovo formato organizzativo per le politiche culturali*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.
Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland (2014), *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*, Helsinki.
Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Czech Republic (2020), *Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic until 2030+*, Prague.
Mulcahy K. V. (2006), *Cultural policy: Definitions and Theoretical Approaches*, in “The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society”, 35(4): 31-330. https://doi.org/10.3200/JAML.35.4.319-330
O’Brien D. (2014), *Cultural Policy: Management, Value and Modernity in the Creative Industries*, Routledge, London.
O’Connor J. (2016), *After the creative industries: Cultural policy in crisis*, in “L’Observatoire”, 48: 5–12.
O’Connor J. (2024), *Culture is not an Industry. Reclaiming Art and Culture for the Common Good*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
OECD (2013), *Art for Art’s Sake? The Impact of Arts Education*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
OECD (2025), *Education at a Glance 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
Oakley K., O’Connor J. (2015), *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*, Routledge, London.
Olssen M., Peters M. A. (2005), *Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism*, in “Journal of Education Policy”, 20(3): 313-345. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718
Osborne D., Gaebler T. (1992), *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA).
Pesenti L., Lodigiani R. (2015) *Oltre il welfare mix: approcci al welfare plurale tra convergenza e differenziazione*, http://hdl.handle.net/10807/67820

Peters B.G., Pierre J. (1998), *Governance without government? Rethinking public administration*, in “Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory”, 8(2): 223-243.

Ranczakowska A. (2025), *Skills and Employability in European Arts Education Policies*, in “Arts Education Policy Review”, 126(2): 150-158.

Reckhow S., Snyder J.W. (2014), *The Expanding Role of Philanthropy in Education Politics*, in “Educational Researcher”, 43(4): 186-195. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14536607

Rhodes R.A.W. (1996), *The New Governance: Governing without Government*, in “Political Studies”, 44(4): 652–667. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb01747.x

Sandel M.J. (2020), *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?*, Picador, London.

Sanz-Camarero R., Ortiz-Revilla J., Greca I.M. (2025), *The Place of the Arts within Integrated Education*, in “Arts Education Policy Review”, 126(1): 38-49. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2023.2231139

Shaw P. (2018), *The Marginalisation of Arts in Curricula*, in “International Journal of Art & Design Education”, 37(1): 5-15. https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12111

Tobiason E. (2019), *Public-private Partnerships in Arts Education: Opportunities and risks*, in “Arts Education Policy Review”, 120(5): 210-219. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2019.1570063

Touraine A. (2010), *Après la crise*, Le Seuil, Paris.

Turrini A. (2019), *Public Value and Cultural Policy*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

Zamagni S. (2015), *L’evoluzione dell’idea di welfare: verso il welfare civile*, in “Quaderni di Economia del Lavoro”, vol. 2015(103): 337–360.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 181-200
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.10

La mise en abyme de la recherche.
Repenser le discours scientifique

Video di Patrice Corriveau
Durata: 9 min. 28 sec.

Cette mise en abyme du travail du chercheur, c'est une décision consciente. Quand on a commencé à réfléchir à la bande dessinée, on s'est dit: comment présenter au grand public le travail de l'historien, le travail du sociologue?... [Scansiona il Codice QR per proseguire accedendo al video]

Codice QR per la visualizzazione del video
(tramite smartphone/tablet scaricando una App QR Reader)

Link al video sul canale YouTube Sociologie:

https://youtu.be/5Y_NpzV7MW0
DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.11

Informations sur la vidéo

Une brève description : Ce billet vidéo présente Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde, une bande dessinée issue d'une recherche scientifique sur le suicide au Québec (1763-1986) menée à partir de près de 20 000 dossiers du coroner. Véritable mise en abîme du travail du chercheur, ce billet rappelle aussi l'importance, pour la recherche, d'explorer d'autres voies afin de rejoindre de nouveaux publics.

Idée originale de : Patrice Corriveau

Réalisé par : Étienne Trépanier

En collaboration avec : Patrick Walton et Nicolas Monet

Recherche et conduite de l'entrevue : Nicolas Monet

Montage / postproduction : Étienne Trépanier

Prises de vue : Patrick Walton et Étienne Trépanier

Cette vidéo a été produite par Jurivision, la plateforme audiovisuelle de l'Université d'Ottawa. Nous tenons à remercier Julien Poitras, notre éditeur chez Moelle Graphik, pour la publication de notre ouvrage Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde : Le suicide scénarisé au Québec depuis 1763 à l'origine de ce billet vidéo.

La creazione di un fumetto per la sociologia storica del suicidio in Québec[1]

Isabelle Perreault, Jean-François Cauchie[2]

Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde (2020) is a graphic novel that emerged from a large-scale project in the historical sociology of suicide in Québec, based on the examination and digitization of nearly 18,000 coroner's inquests (1765–1986). By approaching suicide as an "oblique" object of inquiry, the work stages archival research itself and translates ethically and visually sensitive documentary material into a hybrid narrative capable of bridging research and creative practice. Drawing on interviews with the co-authors and an analysis of the comics dispositif, the article identifies three key dynamics that shaped the construction of the album: (i) the combinability of narrative threads (the "classical" emplotment of cases alongside a mise en abyme of the researchers' work), (ii) the balance between distance and proximity through strategies of mediation (the transposition of photographs, attention to details, and socio-historical framing), and (iii) the use of tension and counterpoints. Particular attention is paid to the reception of the work among different audiences, as well as to institutional and editorial constraints (funding, publishing choices, media mediation). In conclusion, the graphic novel is proposed as a research object situated between the arts and the social sciences: not merely a tool for dissemination, but a mode of knowledge production that mobilizes readers' affectivity to make historical-social knowledge accessible, while foregrounding dignity, respect, and responsibility as guiding principles of representation.

Introduzione

«Una mattina, si indossa la gonna, si sorride… non si ha più voglia di nulla». È con le parole della poetessa québécoise Huguette Gaulin, alla quale si deve anche il titolo dell'opera, che si apre il fumetto Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde (2020). Il suo fascicolo, di appena poche pagine, fa parte degli oltre 18.000 altri dossier di "suicidio" censiti dal nostro gruppo di ricerca presso gli Archivi nazionali del Québec nel corso di circa un decennio[3]. Entrare negli archivi, esaminare migliaia di inchieste del coroner, digitalizzare quelle che si sono concluse con un decesso per suicidio, leggere le testimonianze e le lettere in esse contenute consente di comprendere più a fondo un fenomeno sociale – il suicidio – che genera discorsi tanto accademici quanto mediatici e popolari. Il gesto di togliersi la vita possiede una storia, una storia che si scrive inevitabilmente a partire dalle tracce rinvenute negli archivi. In quanto ricercatorə, i nostri metodi e le nostre prospettive teoriche ci conducono a pubblicare articoli e volumi

[1] Traduzione dal francese all'italiano a cura di Edmondo Grassi.

[2] Avec la collaboration de Christian Quesnel, UQO, André Cellard, Université d'Ottawa et Patrice Corriveau, Université d'Ottawa.

[3] Progetto coordinato da André Cellard, Jean-François Cauchie, Patrice Corriveau e Isabelle Perreault.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 203-217
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.12

sull'argomento: progetti di scrittura che affondano le proprie radici nelle parole altrui, ma anche nel materiale visivo prodotto e negli oggetti indicizzati nei fascicoli. Se l'esercizio accademico consente di analizzare un aspetto specifico – o, come afferma Barthes, non la linearità della storia bensì la sua profondità (1951, 500) – tali testi raramente oltrepassano i confini delle istituzioni di ricerca e di insegnamento. Il nostro fumetto è nato da idee, intuizioni e dati, ma anche da incontri.

Questo progetto ha assunto il suicidio come oggetto di indagine in modo obliquo, mettendo in scena ricercatorə che lavorano negli archivi e cercano di attribuire senso a destini appartenenti a un passato più o meno remoto[4]. Il numero di pagine dell'opera – undici di testo, settanta complessive con le immagini – non consente di proporre interpretazioni scientifiche approfondite sulla storia del suicidio e sulla sua complessità. Realizzare un fumetto significa, pertanto, operare delle scelte. Nel momento in cui si è trattato di scrivere e illustrare il discorso attraverso una narrazione che intreccia parole e immagini, l'intelaiatura scenica si è costruita attorno all'idea della necessità di una «ricostruzione della scena così come la persona suicidata avrebbe voluto che fosse ritrovata […] senza voyeurismo né sensazionalismo» e nel modo «più rispettoso» possibile (2020, 11-12).

Il valore aggiunto dell'immagine non è affatto scontato. In quanto porta d'ingresso per evitare un eccesso di realismo, l'immagine – e soprattutto la sua messa in forma fumettistica – consente una produzione scientifica che si apre alla creatività artistica[5]. A tal fine, e sulla base delle interviste realizzate con i co-autori di questo fumetto, abbiamo individuato tre assi tematici che permettono di pensare, a posteriori, il progetto editoriale: i) la possibilità di intrecciare fili narrativi differenti; ii) il delicato equilibrio tra distanziamento e prossimità, attraverso strategie di messa a distanza; iii) infine, strategie di messa in tensione o di controcanto.

1. *Alle origini del progetto di ricerca sulla sociologia storica del suicidio*

Ma, prima di discutere di questo progetto di fumetto, è necessario compiere una deviazione attraverso l'archivio dal quale esso è emerso, al fine di comprendere l'obiettivo primario di questa ricognizione di migliaia di inchieste del coroner sul territorio della provincia del Québec: ovvero indagare, attraverso i fascicoli storici, le percezioni e le reazioni sociali nei confronti del suicidio a partire dal Trattato di Parigi, momento in cui la figura del coroner fa la sua comparsa in ambito coloniale. È all'inizio degli anni Duemila che André Cellard avvia lo spoglio di un fondo archivistico versato alcuni anni prima presso la cancelleria della pace di Montréal. Qui egli scopre migliaia di inchieste del coroner redatte in seguito a decessi avvenuti sul territorio[6].

Le cancellerie delle regioni amministrative della provincia hanno versato tali inchieste

[4] I casi presentati nel fumetto provengono da fascicoli prodotti tra il 1900 e il 1972.

[5] Si veda, a questo proposito, la tesi di dottorato in sociologia di Pierre Nocerino (2020).

[6] Si veda, ad esempio, un primo trasferimento dei nostri dati presso gli Archivi nazionali del Québec: https://www2.banq.qc.ca/archives/genealogie_histoire_familiale/ressources/bd/recherche.html?id=CORONER_SUI%20CIDES_2023

agli Archivi nazionali del Québec nel corso degli anni Novanta. A differenza dei fascicoli giudiziari delle corti di giustizia "ordinarie", che sono stati sottoposti a un processo di sfoltimento (nove dossier su dieci vengono distrutti), le inchieste del coroner, una volta superata la prova del tempo, costituiscono un fondo completo, circostanza del tutto rara. A partire dal 2005, André Cellard, insieme a Patrice Corriveau, ha presentato domande di finanziamento per un progetto dedicato alla sociologia storica del suicidio in Québec a partire dal 1765. L'obiettivo era individuare, esaminare e digitalizzare tutte le inchieste che si sono concluse con un decesso per suicidio all'interno di questo fondo. La scelta metodologica è stata la seguente: digitalizzare tutti i fascicoli che riportavano un verdetto di *felo de se*, *non compos mentis*, *si è impiccato*, *si è sparato*, *distruzione personale*, *distruzione volontaria*, *suicidio*, *suicidio in un momento di follia*, *suicidio in un momento di aberrazione mentale*, *suicidio in stato di scoraggiamento*, ecc. Ad oggi, l'80% dei dossier è stato individuato e digitalizzato, per un totale di quasi 18.000 registrazioni.
La prima inchiesta del coroner censita in ambito coloniale risale al 1765, mentre l'ultima consultabile presso gli Archivi nazionali data al 1986. Sebbene il Trattato di Parigi sia stato firmato nel febbraio del 1763, occorrono due anni prima che venga nominato un coroner nella colonia, John Burke. Secondo la tradizione inglese, il suo compito consiste nel determinare le cause e le circostanze dei decessi ritenuti non naturali e, ove necessario, nell'avviare procedimenti giudiziari (Lessard, Tésio 2008; Ricard 2013). All'epoca, lo spettro delle cause di morte non naturale è ampio, poiché i decessi improvvisi e l'apoplessia figurano tra i verdetti più frequenti. I decessi auto-inflitti sono relativamente rari nell'inventario e, tra XVIII e XIX secolo, vengono spiegati prevalentemente attraverso cause di ordine religioso. Nel 1767, ad esempio, la morte di Miss English a Long Point, sull'Île de Montréal, è descritta nei seguenti termini: «brought to Evil thoughts against her [parola mancante] there unto seduced and laid by the [parola mancante] the Devil a felon of herself feloniously voluntarily [parola mancante] of her malice forethought herself did drowned» (fascicolo BAnQ-Montréal, 1767). È a partire dalla fine del XIX secolo che il ruolo del coroner si definisce in modo più preciso: indagare sui decessi considerati sospetti, violenti o avvenuti in circostanze nebulose. Tuttavia, egli dispone ancora di una propria corte e di una giuria, nonché del potere di ritenere delle persone responsabili di un decesso, prerogative che saranno abolite rispettivamente nel 1967 e nel 1984. Fino a tempi relativamente recenti, il coroner è dunque un agente della Corona, dotato della facoltà di stabilire se vi sia stato o meno un crimine e di applicare le relative sanzioni, tanto in ambito civile quanto penale.
Alcuni fascicoli sono composti da tre pagine, altri da una ventina. Più raramente, si rinvengono fascicoli di 300 pagine o persino di 3000 pagine. La maggior parte contiene le testimonianze, il rapporto di polizia e il referto autoptico. Alcuni fascicoli, più rari, includono lettere o fotografie. Ne consegue che alcune inchieste risultano più eloquenti di altre. In pubblicazioni precedenti, sono state operate scelte volte a campionare un corpus, ad esempio studiando i fascicoli dei giovani sotto i 25 anni oppure quelli di persone che avevano scritto una lettera alle autorità prima del decesso. Per questo fumetto, l'intelaiatura narrativa è scaturita dalla lettura, per oltre dieci anni, di migliaia di fascicoli. Per induzione e iterazione, leggendo un fascicolo dopo l'altro, si comprende anzitutto che

l'atto di togliersi la vita, perché venga letto come tale dalle autorità, deve soddisfare alcuni criteri relativamente chiari. In una pubblicazione del 1978, il sociologo Maxwell Atkinson ne censisce alcuni: la presenza di una lettera o di una minaccia verbale di suicidio, il luogo e le circostanze del decesso, la biografia dei deceduti. Sempre secondo Atkinson, a partire da questi criteri e da una definizione stabilita dagli esperti, i coroner interpreteranno determinati decessi come suicidi; e, inevitabilmente, i ricercatori che lavoreranno successivamente su questo materiale non potranno che vedere le sole inchieste relative a decessi performati e letti come tali (Atkinson 1978, 145).
Nel corso dell'ultimo secolo, mentre le modalità del morire vengono progressivamente configurate come "suicidio", mutano anche le definizioni stesse dell'atto di togliersi la vita. Da lesa maestà (*felo de se*) quale era nei casi di morte volontaria e intenzionale fino alla metà del XIX secolo, il gesto consente presto al/alla suo/a autore/autrice di essere riconosciuto/a non responsabile per causa di alienazione mentale e, così, di revocare le sanzioni nei confronti dei familiari. Tale riconoscimento assumerà la forma di un verdetto di *non compos mentis*. In seguito, la denominazione «suicidio» diviene corrente a cavallo del XX secolo, favorita dall'ascesa della medicina legale con i primi specialisti quali Wyatt Johnston e Wilfrid Derôme. Il termine suicidio, spesso associato a follia, alienazione mentale, aberrazione mentale, permane in questa cornice fino alla fine degli anni Sessanta, decennio nel quale i) la corte del coroner viene abolita (con la scomparsa di un verdetto) e ii) l'atto di togliersi la vita è sempre più qualificato come un decesso privo di responsabilità criminale. La questione non è dunque stabilire che cosa sia un suicidio, bensì indagare quali variabili facciano sì che una morte venga identificata come suicidio. Per effetto di specchio, il modo in cui denominiamo la morte ci dice molto della vita delle persone in luoghi e epoche differenti. Esso ci offre anche materia per riflettere sulle modalità con cui si descrive e si registra la prova che qualifica un decesso come suicidio, così come ci consente di collocare tali pratiche nel loro spazio-tempo socio-storico.

2. *Passare attraverso il fumetto per parlare di suicidio*

Mentre i fascicoli del XVIII e XIX secolo non contengono alcun elemento visivo, quelli del XX secolo includono talvolta schizzi e fotografie. Intorno al 2015, Annie Lyonnais, coordinatrice del progetto, avrà il compito di individuare e condividere con una delle co-ricercatrici, Isabelle Perreault, tutte le inchieste del coroner contenenti fotografie. È interessante notare che tale operazione viene svolta aprendo simultaneamente più fascicoli, rendendoli visivamente molto piccoli sullo schermo, così da identificare con una certa facilità quelli che presentano elementi non testuali. Questa modalità risulta certamente più efficace e rapida, ma soprattutto consente ad Annie di non vedere le fotografie. Nei successivi scambi via e-mail, ella suggerisce di prepararsi un buon caffè prima di aprire il file.
È nel corso di una discussione tra Isabelle Perreault e Isabel Macdonald, che all'epoca stava svolgendo una tesi di dottorato a Concordia sul fumetto e il giornalismo, che viene avanzata l'idea di disegnare due fotografie tratte dalle inchieste del coroner, con

l'obiettivo di «disinnescare la carica emotiva di queste impronte del reale»[7]. Nelle prime pagine del fumetto, in modo fortemente realistico, è possibile leggere lo scambio telefonico tra André Cellard e Isabelle Perreault a proposito di questi disegni, così come l'intervento della compagna di André, allora immersa nella lettura del fumetto *Retour à la terre*, la quale gli dirà: «Ci si avvicina un po' al fumetto come risultato, no?». A seguito di queste discussioni, Christian Quesnel verrà invitato a confrontarsi sul progetto[8].
Fin dal primo incontro con i/le ricercatorə, Christian evocherà una alchimia particolarmente riuscita, con discussioni che avrebbero rapidamente dato il tono a tutti gli scambi successivi. Per rendere conto in modo adeguato della necessità di ricorrere al medium del fumetto, Isabelle gli presenterà una fotografia tratta da un fascicolo. Questa immagine, da sola, dimostrava la necessità di passare attraverso il disegno per far emergere un'iconografia del suicidio e, al contempo, permetteva di misurare la capacità di Christian di lavorare con tale materiale, poiché, secondo lui, non tutti possono essere esposti a una tale quantità di immagini violente. Egli accetterà e prenderà rapidamente il proprio posto, lasciando libero corso alla sua creatività e al suo stile, un realismo onirico realizzato ad acquerello. La sua "missione" consisteva allora nell'assumere la parte di narrazione visiva attraverso un trattamento che gli era già servito per trasporre emozioni molto intense nei suoi lavori precedenti. Il potere evocativo dell'immagine, dei colori e di un realismo intriso di leggerezza doveva consentire di alleggerire la tematica affrontata e, in tal modo, di facilitarne la lettura.

2.1 Fili narrativi combinabili

Il fumetto si è costruito attraverso un costante andirivieni tra i/le ricercatorə[9] e la creazione di una doppia narrazione si è rapidamente imposta. Si trattava, in un certo senso, di collegare tra loro le «scoperte archivistiche» mediante le discussioni tra autori e autrici della narrazione per immagini e per testo. Restava da mettere in relazione questi casi di figura, queste scoperte, tra loro. Nel corso degli scambi e dei continui ritorni tra i/le ricercatorə, il lavoro ha progressivamente assunto la forma di un puzzle, le cui tessere si sono incastrate le une nelle altre in uno sforzo di costruzione narrativa chiara, volto tanto a spiegare alcuni suicidi e le loro storie quanto a rendere visibile il processo di ricerca. Lo scenario risulta così duplice e complementare: da un lato vi è una messa in intreccio narrativa "classica", fondata sulla lettura e sull'interpretazione di diverse inchieste del coroner; dall'altro, una *mise en abyme* del lavoro dei ricercatori, che consente di comprendere il processo che ha condotto ai risultati presentati. L'autore del fumetto assume allora il ruolo di «idiota utile», al quale si rivolgono due dei co-autori. Grazie a un espediente suggerito da Christian, il colore blu permette, in un istante, di collocarsi nel presente, quello del progetto, mentre il seppia ci riporta nel passato, conducendoci a

[7] Ella non sarà disponibile per le fasi successive del progetto. La sua tesi, depositata nel 2018, è consultabile al seguente link: https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/983850/. Uno dei co-ricercatori, Jean-François Cauchie, non sarà a sua volta disponibile a prendere parte al progetto di fumetto; vi è tuttavia rappresentato graficamente.

[8] Patrice Corriveau, co-ricercatore del progetto, risiedeva all'epoca a Città del Messico.

[9] Con il termine *ricercatorə* si intendono il sociologo, gli storici e il ricercatore in fumetto, poiché Christian Quesnel sta attualmente svolgendo un dottorato in arti visive presso l'UQO.

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.12

comprendere meglio, si spera, gli ultimi istanti di persone per le quali la vita è divenuta, un giorno, un peso troppo gravoso da sostenere.
Sul piano della cronologia, era necessario stabilire fin dall'inizio la metodologia e, dunque, riprendere la cornice dei nostri primi scambi. Christian Quesnel compare pertanto con l'immagine nella prima scena, seguita dalle interazioni tra i/le ricercatorə del progetto all'Università di Ottawa. In questo modo, la metodologia — ossia quel quadro costitutivo della ricerca universitaria — si è imposta come parte integrante della sceneggiatura, introducendo le ipotesi di ricerca, i quadri del campo d'indagine, e così via. Il caso, ad esempio, di Marie Lalonde, una giovane franco-ontariana, è divenuto centrale nel fumetto. Questo caso, da solo, rende conto di numerosi fascicoli analoghi rinvenuti in archivio all'inizio del XX secolo. Risulta tuttavia più eloquente perché la giovane donna ha lasciato diverse lettere.

A partire da queste tracce e dal rapporto del coroner, si dischiude un intreccio che fa del medico legale e delle sue osservazioni la chiave della vicenda. Ventenne, Marie era nubile e incinta. Accusata di furto dal suo datore di lavoro, le imputazioni verranno ritirate, ma ella si ritrova in un vicolo cieco: morte sociale o morte fisica. Il suo caso illustra bene le variabili sociali e politiche che, senza determinarlo in senso stretto, influenzano il suicidio. Ancor più: le sue lettere sono molto chiare; desidera che il suo corpo venga ritrovato rapidamente, affinché possa essere esposto nel suo villaggio natale. Il fascicolo di questa giovane donna costituisce una delle chiavi del racconto. A esso si aggiungeranno altri tre esempi: quello di immigrati giunti dall'altra parte del mondo per togliersi la vita a Québec o a Montréal; il suicidio di una giovane coppia a Québec; e il suicidio mediante il fuoco della poetessa montrealese Huguette Gaulin. Decessi che ci invitano a pensare il suicidio al di là della sua criminalizzazione e della sua patologizzazione.
Le prime vignette del fumetto, realizzate soltanto nella fase conclusiva del progetto, ci mostrano gli ultimi istanti della vita di Huguette Gaulin, seduta nel suo piccolo appartamento di rue Berri, a Montréal. In una piovosa mattina di giugno, prende con sé un ombrello e un piccolo bidone di benzina e si dirige verso la Vieux-Montréal. Per un effetto di circolarità, il fumetto si chiude con l'esplicitazione della sua morte e, nell'ultima

pagina, con le parole del paroliere Luc Plamondon, che scrisse una celebre canzone dopo aver letto sul giornale il fatto di cronaca relativo alla sua scomparsa: «Ogni fiore, ogni albero che uccidiamo, finisce per uccidere anche noi» (67)[10]. Tra l'inizio e la fine, vediamo i/le ricercatorə discutere, insegnare, spogliare gli archivi e, soprattutto, confrontarsi su casi che vengono illustrati in seppia. Tra queste «irruzioni del passato», la questione di fondo – quella della storia dei suicidi – ci conduce verso i luoghi comuni del suicidio, come la foresta dei suicidi in Giappone, il ponte Jacques-Cartier, la metropolitana, ma anche verso i mezzi più ricorrenti e "sceneggiati": la corda, l'acqua, il gas. Compaiono inoltre figure note che si sono tolte la vita, mentre vengono discussi i suicidi per imitazione e quelli di gruppo. Questa sezione si conclude con i suicidi amorosi. Di ritorno all'Università di Ottawa, i/le ricercatorə affrontano più nel dettaglio i suicidi dei nuovi arrivati e la morte di Marie Lalonde. Il fumetto si chiude con l'ondata dei cosiddetti suicidi poetici che hanno attraversato il Québec negli anni Sessanta e Settanta, tra cui quello di Huguette Gaulin. Sebbene l'accesso ai fascicoli copra il periodo dal 1765 al 1986, il fumetto si concentra essenzialmente sugli anni compresi tra il 1900 e il 1972.

2.2 Un equilibrio tra distanziamento e avvicinamento

Ma che cosa dire, e che cosa mostrare? Le nostre motivazioni iniziali consistevano nel poter raccontare questa storia senza compromettere la dignità delle persone che si sono tolte la vita. Ci è apparso rapidamente necessario prendere per mano il lettore, conducendolo tanto sul terreno dell'indagine quanto nelle discussioni intorno al progetto. Se era necessario trasformare fotografie in immagini e immagini in fumetto per "creare" una distanza, anche gli elementi socio-storici contribuiscono a mettere a fuoco una prospettiva più distaccata rispetto al tema di questa ricerca. Il fumetto, del resto, si apre già nella prima pagina con una riflessione sulla storicità dello stesso concetto di suicidio, redatta dai/dalle ricercatorə allo scopo di predisporre il quadro per quanto seguirà:

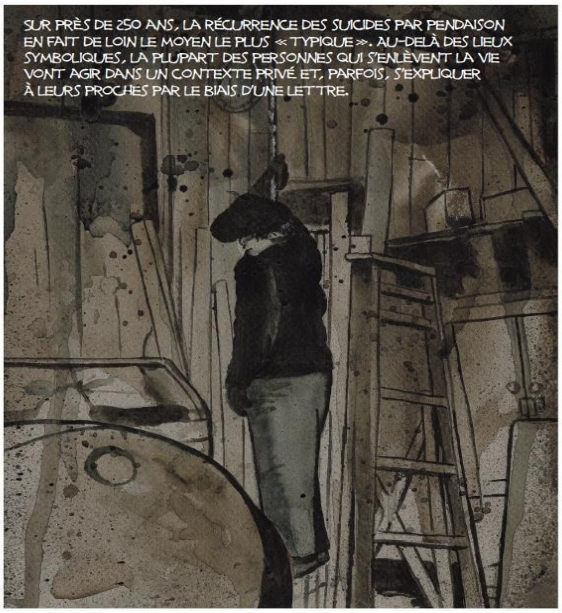
> Suicidio: s.m., dal lat. sui (sé) e caedere (uccidere). Neologismo diffusosi nel XVIII secolo in sostituzione dell'espressione «essersi omicidato». A lungo considerato dal diritto penale alla stregua dell'omicidio premeditato, il suicidio viene progressivamente depenalizzato a partire dal 1872 in Canada, nella misura in cui tale atto è percepito come un problema mentale e sociale più che come una colpa individuale. Il "reato" di tentato suicidio scompare dal Codice penale canadese un secolo più tardi. A partire da Durkheim, alla fine del XIX secolo, il comportamento suicidario ha suscitato l'interesse di una miriade di discipline scientifiche, in particolare la sociologia e la psicologia, dando origine, a partire dagli anni Cinquanta, a un proprio campo di studi: la suicidologia (3).

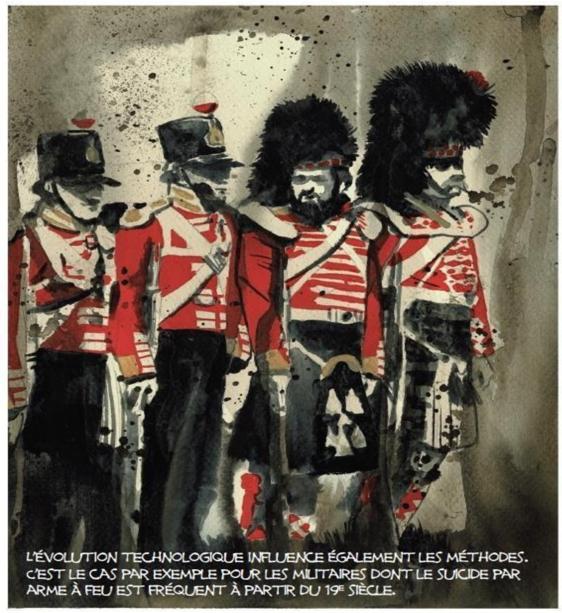
Guardando numerosi fascicoli e fotografie, Christian Quesnel avvertirà un disagio reale: «Penso a quell'uomo con gli occhiali, in piedi davanti alla porta del bagno. Mi sono chiesto perché Isabelle me l'avesse inviato, poiché per me si trattava semplicemente di un uomo in piedi… Solo che, osservando più attentamente, mi sono reso conto, con un

[10] In un primo momento attraverso la canzone « Le monde est fou », interpretata da Renée Claude (1973). Il finale viene poi ripreso da Diane Dufresne con il titolo « Ne tuons pas la beauté du monde » (1979).

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.12

brivido, che era morto! È in quel momento che nella mia testa si è messa in moto tutta la “meccanica” necessaria per saldare le scienze umane e il fumetto. Il mio medium rendeva digeribili i frutti di una ricerca che, per il lettore medio, non lo era».





La prima cosa che Christian ha notato nelle fotografie è stata la banalità degli oggetti e degli ambienti, facilmente riconoscibili, che finisce per accentuare l’estraneità della scena; una sorta di dicotomia in cui un gesto straordinario, il suicidio, convive con oggetti ordinari, elemento che si ritrova raramente nel cinema o nella televisione, dove prevale la dimensione spettacolare. L’autore di fumetti ha individuato proprio in questi oggetti banali una chiave grafica per trasporre il dolore, la sofferenza, persino l’orrore – dalle vittime agli oggetti stessi – senza indebolire il messaggio, ma anzi rafforzandolo attraverso l’onirismo. L’approccio onirico, che ha convinto i membri del gruppo di ricerca, ha inoltre consentito di mostrare più volte, nel corso del racconto, ciò che normalmente è indimostrabile. È il caso, ad esempio, della scena del ponte Jacques-Cartier, direttamente ispirata alle immagini dei *jumpers* del World Trade Center dell’11 settembre, già rielaborate dall’autore per un’esposizione pittorica nel 2006. In questo caso, poiché il discorso verteva sui luoghi comuni del suicidio, Christian ha scelto di raffigurare persone in caduta libera, ma immerse in una sorta di sospensione temporale. La loro moltiplicazione e giustapposizione permetteva di far coesistere temporalità differenti grazie agli abiti dei *jumpers*, che diventavano a loro modo parentesi temporali inscritte nello stesso scenario. Questi corpi sospesi finivano così per assomigliare più a una sorta di balletto aereo. Un dettaglio, per lui, di particolare importanza: ha rappresentato discretamente, in primo piano, il regista Claude Jutra, che si tolse la vita gettandosi dal ponte Jacques-Cartier nel 1986. Si trattava anche di un omaggio a un progetto di fumetto realizzato alcuni anni prima e mai pubblicato, poiché l'opera di Jutra ne costituiva il fulcro.

Alcune scene sono state molto facili da realizzare, poiché egli le ha riprodotte quasi tali e quali. Si pensi, ad esempio, alla disposizione degli oggetti personali su un tavolo da cucina. Quando utilizzava i documenti del coroner, si poneva sempre le stesse domande: è troppo duro per il lettore? È troppo bello? Rischia di nuocere alla leggibilità del racconto? Grazie alla sovrapposizione di testo e immagini, era possibile essere delicati e, al contempo, dire e mostrare la gravità del gesto senza perdere di vista il rispetto dovuto ai morti, ai sopravvissuti e al pubblico in generale. Si trattava di trovare un equilibrio sottile tra distanziamento e avvicinamento. Ciò che la fotografia evocava con durezza doveva essere restituito con delicatezza, e nulla meglio di un'inquadratura ravvicinata su un oggetto o su un dettaglio di una scena di suicidio consentiva di rendere conto della realtà senza trasformarla in una esposizione brutale. Christian porta anche l'esempio di case in fiamme per illustrare questa ricerca di equilibrio: un drone privo di audio, che si avvicinasse mantenendo una distanza rispettosa, permetterebbe di comprendere che esseri umani stanno vivendo gli ultimi istanti tragici della loro vita, senza tuttavia mostrarne i dettagli, senza udire grida di disperazione o di dolore, né percepire l'odore del fumo o dei corpi bruciati. Infine, anche la bellezza delle immagini contribuisce a questo equilibrio, poiché consente di attenuare la durezza del tema. Il bello può persino diventare ciò che rende possibile parlarne, come hanno sottolineato alcune persone in lutto che ci hanno detto di essere riuscite a leggere il fumetto proprio perché lo hanno trovato bello.

2.3 La messa in tensione e i contrappunti

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.12

Durante il processo di creazione del fumetto, la preoccupazione centrale è stata quella della leggibilità del racconto. Il fumetto è un insieme di immagini che, considerate singolarmente, portano con sé una carica iconica frammentaria; ma, quando vengono giustapposte, diventano solidali tra loro e producono senso. Ogni vignetta è dunque preceduta da un'altra che ne costituisce il passato e, a sua volta, precede una successiva, creando quel movimento di lettura indipendentemente dalla presenza o meno del testo. Ogni vignetta viene pertanto letta dal lettore attraverso l'eco di quella precedente. La sfida principale legata alla scelta di ciò che mostrare risiede proprio in questa componente del dispositivo fumettistico. Era necessario misurare l'impatto generato dall'illustrazione di scene più difficili, talvolta persino insostenibili (le fotografie del coroner), all'interno di questa sequenza di immagini solidali, senza perdere il lettore. Un'immagine troppo forte, eccessivamente "gore", avrebbe potuto interrompere la lettura, poiché la sua eco sarebbe risultata troppo potente nelle immagini successive. Il lettore sarebbe rimasto ancorato all'immagine violenta anche tre pagine più avanti, senza riuscire ad assorbire la narrazione che prosegue…
Ci sembrava tuttavia fondamentale non trasmettere il messaggio secondo cui un suicidio sarebbe "qualcosa di bello". Scegliendo alcune immagini più difficili, il gruppo ha scommesso sulla capacità del lettore di sostenerle, a condizione che ciò che gli veniva presentato fosse misurato. In alcuni momenti è stato necessario optare per il "mostrare" scene più brutali. Di fronte alle fotografie contenute nei nostri fascicoli, talvolta è risultato difficile osservarle in un solo colpo d'occhio. Christian ha dovuto interporre la mano tra lo schermo e il proprio campo visivo, decidendo progressivamente di svelare porzioni dell'immagine fino alla sua totalità. È che lo stato di alcune scene veicolava un messaggio estremamente potente, e mancare iconograficamente tali casi avrebbe costituito un errore, privando di interesse tanto il livello documentario quanto quello narrativo. Inoltre, questa scelta, che interviene nel primo terzo del racconto, contribuisce a creare una tensione nel sistema del voltare pagina che caratterizza l'album a fumetti. Tale sistema produce ciò che viene definito "irruzione": la tensione generata da queste immagini sorprende il lettore ed è sufficientemente forte da indurlo a temere il passaggio alla pagina successiva… pur desiderando al tempo stesso compierlo. Christian ha dunque avuto cura di limitare queste immagini brutali e di farle seguire, ogni volta, da tavole più rasserenanti.

Naturalmente, è stato necessario spostare minimamente il piano di vista, per evitare dettagli eccessivamente difficili presenti nelle fotografie. Una strategia per evocare una scena e mantenere un rapporto armonico tra immagine e lettura è stata, per così dire, quella di spostare la "camera". Senza distogliere lo sguardo, occorreva orientare l'angolo di visione accanto al piano focale, mostrando ciò che stava alla periferia del corpo, ciò che era stato trasformato dalle conseguenze del gesto. Si prenda l'esempio di una fotografia di decesso per arma da fuoco: è lecito dubitare che la persona avrebbe voluto lasciare come ultima immagine di sé quella in cui la propria integrità risultava gravemente compromessa. L'unica rappresentazione possibile era allora quella di ricostruire gli schizzi di sangue sul muro e sul soffitto.

Un'ultima questione ha riguardato la copertina. Per facilitare la diffusione commerciale del fumetto, Christian Quesnel e l'editore Julien Poitras hanno scelto entrambi il disegno in cui si vede il grido soffocato di Huguette Gaulin. Questa immagine richiamava in modo realistico il momento in cui, poco prima di darsi fuoco, ella gridò «Avete distrutto la bellezza del mondo», frase che è divenuta il titolo dell'opera. I colori vivaci sono stati allora considerati un elemento essenziale per catturare l'attenzione dei potenziali acquirenti. Tale scelta – nella quale il peso dell'editore e quello di un sondaggio informale condotto tra amici e persone vicine hanno giocato un ruolo centrale – non è stata priva di numerose discussioni. Isabelle Perreault e André Cellard preferivano infatti il contrasto potente del giorno della sua immolazione, quello tra la pioggia e il fuoco. Anche l'immagine della poetessa che cammina sotto la pioggia con il suo bidone di benzina costituiva un efficace contrappunto, per la sua dolcezza, al tema più duro affrontato dal fumetto. Alla fine, la maggioranza ha avuto la meglio ed è stata la prima immagine a diventare la copertina, ripresa dal distributore, dalle librerie e dai media.

3. *La ricezione dell'opera presso pubblici differenti*

Qui verranno affrontate non soltanto le questioni relative agli enti finanziatori e alle case editrici, ma anche quelle che riguardano i media e il pubblico, sia specialistico sia generale.

3.1 Gli enti finanziatori e le case editrici

Realizzare un progetto di fumetto non è soltanto un'impresa di ricerca e di creazione. È necessario anche garantire un finanziamento adeguato alle persone coinvolte nel progetto e sostenere, come di consueto, la pubblicazione di un'opera scientifica presso una casa editrice. Fortunatamente, il progetto di ricerca sulla sociologia storica del suicidio è finanziato dai due principali enti del Québec e del Canada, i *Fonds de recherche du Québec* (FRQ) e il *Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines du Canada* (CRSH). Poiché l'autore del fumetto è anche dottorando, egli è stato remunerato per il lavoro svolto, mentre i/le docenti percepiscono già uno stipendio annuale. Una parte di questi finanziamenti ha contribuito alla sua assunzione come professionista della ricerca. Tuttavia, per portare a compimento il progetto, è stato necessario presentare domande a due ulteriori organismi al fine di finanziare sia il lavoro dell'autore del fumetto sia la pubblicazione dell'opera: il Consiglio delle arti del Canada e l'*Associated Medical Services* (AMS). Se da un lato il Consiglio delle arti avrebbe potuto riconoscere il lavoro di Christian nella sua giusta misura, dall'altro abbiamo ricevuto un rifiuto. La questione ruotava attorno al fatto che il Consiglio delle arti non intende finanziare un progetto artistico in "scienze sociali". Il finanziamento della ricerca in scienze sociali e della mobilitazione delle conoscenze, il cui budget è più consistente, deve provenire dal CRSH. Di fronte a tale rifiuto, ci siamo dunque rivolti a un'associazione con sede a Toronto che finanzia progetti di storia della salute, l'AMS, dalla quale abbiamo ottenuto un sostegno determinante. Questo finanziamento si è rivelato essenziale sia per sostenere il progetto creativo sia per la successiva pubblicazione.

Sul piano della pubblicazione, la sfida si è rivelata ancora più complessa. Il gruppo, salvo un'eccezione, desiderava pubblicare l'opera presso una casa editrice commerciale, per una diffusione più ampia dei risultati della ricerca tanto nell'ambito della creazione quanto in quello della storia. Diverse case editrici sono state dunque contattate, principalmente in Québec. Il progetto è stato rifiutato da più di una, sulla base di argomentazioni quali «non facciamo la promozione del suicidio» oppure «non pubblichiamo fumetti». Una di esse aveva accettato la proposta, ma subordinando la pubblicazione al passaggio attraverso l'Associazione quebecchese per la prevenzione del suicidio, incaricata di valutare i contenuti. Poiché il fumetto è radicato nel passato della provincia del Québec, molti dei temi affrontati non sono più attuali; la difficoltà consisteva dunque nello spiegare il valore storico della ricerca indipendentemente dalle politiche contemporanee di prevenzione del suicidio. Poiché il percorso si è rivelato eccessivamente oneroso, abbiamo cercato un'altra casa editrice e una di esse, di tipo universitario, ha accettato. Tuttavia, la maggior parte del gruppo non desiderava pubblicare presso una casa editrice universitaria. È stato quindi per una serie di circostanze che abbiamo incontrato le edizioni *Moelle Graphik*, una piccola casa editrice di fumetti il cui direttore è al contempo decano di una Facoltà di

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 203-217
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.12

medicina. Abbiamo così potuto contare su una legittimazione di tipo medico, oltre a trovare in lui e nel suo team un editore di grande qualità.

3.2 I media e il pubblico specialistico e generale

Il fumetto è stato inviato in tipografia nel febbraio 2020. Poco tempo dopo, la pandemia è stata dichiarata a livello mondiale e numerose imprese hanno dovuto chiudere per alcuni mesi; tra queste vi era anche lo stampatore. È stato dunque nell'agosto 2020 che abbiamo ricevuto le copie del fumetto, con un lancio bimodale nel mese di settembre e un'importante copertura mediatica, in particolare sulle piattaforme di Radio-Canada. Il lavoro della nostra addetta stampa, Lise Raymond, ha fatto una differenza significativa grazie ai suoi numerosi contatti con giornalisti e commentatori. Abbiamo effettuato oltre trenta invii del fumetto a persone interessate a discuterne. Complessivamente, abbiamo partecipato al telegiornale regionale e a diverse trasmissioni radiofoniche; il fumetto è stato recensito nei principali quotidiani e sui siti specializzati, trovando inoltre riscontro presso gli organizzatori di conferenze rivolte al grande pubblico e a pubblici specialistici. Se i media specializzati in fumetto si sono rivolti a Christian Quesnel, i media generalisti e quelli specializzati in storia hanno invece interpellato Isabelle Perreault.

Dal lato del pubblico più generale, i nostri interventi radiofonici hanno suscitato un flusso consistente di commenti e messaggi da parte degli ascoltatori e delle ascoltatrici. Essi ed esse sottolineavano l'importanza di parlare di suicidio, testimoniavano la perdita di una persona cara e ricordavano quanto fosse significativo poter apprendere di più sulla storia e sul trattamento del suicidio nel passato del paese. Molti si sono detti sorpresi nello scoprire che il suicidio fosse stato considerato un crimine fino alla metà del XIX secolo. L'interesse risultava evidente anche per i nostri casi di figura, come quello delle giovani donne nubili e incinte all'inizio del XX secolo o quello dei nuovi arrivati nel paese. Va qui precisato che tali commenti sono stati formulati in diretta sulla base dei nostri interventi e che le persone non avevano ancora letto il fumetto in quanto tale. A differenza dei giornalisti e di Christian, figura pubblica sui social media, che hanno ricevuto numerosi messaggi da parte di lettrici e lettori, gli altri coautori hanno avuto pochi riscontri diretti. Alcuni amici e colleghi hanno inviato brevi messaggi di ringraziamento, definendo l'opera importante, e tutti avevano in comune il fatto di condividere una storia di vita complessa e segnata dalla sofferenza. Dal lato del mondo accademico, sono state invece rilevate l'assenza di note a piè di pagina e la mancanza di una bibliografia.

Conclusione: il fumetto come oggetto di ricerca tra le arti e le scienze sociali

Se fosse da rifare, io (Isabelle Perreault) modificherei il sottotitolo, che attualmente recita «il suicidio sceneggiato in Québec dal 1763», sostituendolo con «una ricerca di storia del suicidio». Il tema del nostro fumetto affonda le proprie radici in uno studio dedicato alla sceneggiatura della propria morte, che analizzava «i fattori socioculturali che, senza causare il suicidio, ne accompagnano la realizzazione, "modellano" o plasmano il passaggio all'atto» (Gagnon, Perreault 2017, 486). Attraverso l'analisi delle fotografie delle «scene di suicidio» e delle lettere lasciate dalle persone decedute, è possibile rendere conto della ricorrenza delle pratiche suicidarie nel lungo periodo. Tuttavia, in definitiva, solo una parte molto limitata di questo materiale empirico ha contribuito a strutturare la linea narrativa sul suicidio sceneggiato. Ad esempio, delle ventisei immagini relative ai casi di figura – gli amanti, gli stranieri, le donne nubili e incinte, nonché i poeti e gli artisti in Québec – soltanto sette sono state disegnate a partire da fotografie archivistiche reali. La sceneggiatura di tali casi è avvenuta sulla base delle inchieste del coroner e delle lettere di suicidio (due casi su quattro). Il nostro fumetto si è dunque costruito soprattutto sul lavoro di ricerca dedicato alla storia del suicidio in Québec e, in questo senso, oggi sceglierei di assumere come oggetto centrale questa storia più ampia delle trasformazioni delle percezioni sociali nei confronti del gesto suicidario. I casi di figura verrebbero allora integrati per consentire una migliore comprensione delle poste in gioco socio-storiche, tanto nella storia stessa delle modalità di concepire il suicidio quanto nella sua riappropriazione soggettiva da parte dei principali e delle principali interessatə. In breve, questo fumetto mirerebbe a smantellare alcuni miti relativi al suicidio, in particolare quello della sua associazione quasi esclusiva con i disturbi mentali, per mostrare invece come sia lo spirito del tempo a produrre tale associazione. Allo stesso modo in cui la «follia» si è in parte emancipata da segni morali per costruirsi attorno a sintomi che sollecitano una risposta sociale e medica, il suicidio, pur rimanendo ancora oggi prigioniero di una valutazione morale, ha anch'esso acquisito legittimità come oggetto di ricerca a partire dai presupposti di una spiegazione medica. Questo progetto di storia delle percezioni è tuttavia attualmente in fase di sviluppo in una forma più classica, quella del testo, così come il progetto condotto con Jean-François Cauchie, volto a riflettere sugli usi secondari delle prove giudiziarie visive rinvenute negli archivi (2023).

Questo progetto ha inoltre permesso a Christian Quesnel, al contempo, di riflettere in modo approfondito sul proprio medium e di misurare la propria capacità di trattare qualunque tema con una sensibilità particolare, con rispetto e con misura. Ad esempio, dopo *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde*, Christian ha pubblicato, insieme ad Anne-Marie St-Cerny, l'album *Mégantic, un train dans la nuit*. Questo fumetto racconta l'incidente ferroviario che nel 2013 a Mégantic (Québec) ha provocato 47 morti. Una narrazione per immagini tanto più delicata se si pensa ai sopravvissuti e alle famiglie delle vittime. Al momento in cui scriviamo queste righe, Christian sta inoltre portando a termine un'opera sulla vita di Dédé Fortin, fondatore del gruppo *Les Colocs*, che si è tolto la vita in modo spettacolare nel 2000. Anche in questo caso, sono richiesti tatto e modalità operative di grande delicatezza, poiché egli lavora a stretto contatto con amici e familiari del cantante. La collaborazione con le scienze sociali ha lasciato un'impronta che continua a influenzare i suoi progetti attuali, tanto nella ricerca iconografica quanto nelle scelte visive. La narrazione per immagini costituisce una leva emotiva decisiva per il lettore, permettendogli di assimilare i risultati di una ricerca spesso percepita come "fredda". In definitiva, si tratta meno di divulgare campi di ricerca, che di far vivere al lettore una gamma di emozioni in grado di aiutarlo a recepire le informazioni scientifiche che gli vengono trasmesse.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Atkinson M. (1978), *Discovering Suicide. Studies in the Social Organization of Sudden*

Death, Palgrave Macmillan.
Barthes R. (1951), *Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort*, in "Esprit", 19 (178): 497-511.
Cauchie J.-F., Perreault I. (2023, accepté), *Les photographies post-mortem en archives: réflexion sur l'utilisation secondaire de preuves judiciaires visuelles*, in Namian D. et Perreault I., *Fragments d'images: les approches visuelles en recherche. Entre histoire(s), arts et sociétés*, Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa.
Gagnon A., Perreault I. (2017), *La scénarisation de sa propre mort. La régularité suicidaire dans les enquêtes du coroner au Québec (1925-1980)*, in "Déviance et société", 41 (3): 481-503.
Lessard R., Tésio S. (2008), *Les enquêtes des coroners du district de Québec, 1765-1930: une source en histoire médicale et sociale canadienne*, in "Canadian Bulletin of Medical History", 25 (2): 433-460.
Macdonald I. (2018), *Picturing Aid in Haiti: Reflections on the making of a work of graphic reportage*, Doctorat en Communication Studies, Concordia University.
Nocerino P. (2020), *Les auteurs et autrices de bande dessinée: la formation contrariée d'un groupe social*, Doctorat en sociologie, École des hautes études en sciences sociales.
Perreault I., Cellard A., Corriveau P., Quesnel C. (2020), *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde. Le suicide scénarisé au Québec depuis 1763*, Moelle Graphik.
Ricard N. (2013), *Risque, droit et société : les enquêtes du coroner du district judiciaire de Trois-Rivières, 1850-1950*, Maîtrise en Études québécoises, Université du Québec à Trois- Rivières.
Saint-Cerny A.-M., Quesnel C. (2021), *Mégantic, un train dans la nuit*, Éco-société.

Documentary Comics and Visual Sociology: Archives, Bodies, and Memories in *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde*

Edmondo Grassi

The article investigates the epistemological potential of documentary comics as a language of sociological research, taking as a case study the bande dessinée Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde, which stems from a long socio-historical inquiry based on more than 20,000 coroner's files concerning suicides in Québec (1763–1986). Adopting a purposive sampling strategy, the work is treated as a paradigmatic case within a broader set of documentary comics that engage with traumatic archives and collective memories. Drawing on the framework of graphic social sciences, the article shows how the visual–verbal sequentiality of comics makes it possible to articulate in a novel way the triad archives–bodies–memories, translating the bureaucratic seriality of the files into a constellation of embodied and situated scenes. The analysis of the work's formal strategies highlights how the passage from dossier to panel reshapes the status of the document, redistributing testimonial authority among researchers, artist and represented subjects.

1. *From Dossier to Panel: A Social Research Trajectory*

When Isabelle Perreault, André Cellard, Patrice Corriveau, and Christian Quesnel published *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* (in some instances abbreviated as *VADLBDM*) in 2020, transforming more than 20,000 coroner's files relating to suicides in Québec (1763-1986) into a *bande dessinée*, the graphic novel performed an act that exceeds the strictly documentary dimension: it reactivates archival materials, removes them from bureaucratic opacity and cold statistical seriality, and reinscribes them within a narrative form that simultaneously interrogates the body, collective memory, and institutional violence. The very title – the last words spoken by the poet Huguette Gaulin before she set herself on fire in a public square in Montréal on 6 June 1972 – signals the constitutive tension of the work: restoring voice and existential density to lives reduced to administrative records, to names in procedural lists, to the cold impersonality of data and quantity.

It is through works such as this that an inescapable theoretical question opens up for contemporary social sciences: what does it mean to treat the visual–verbal sequentiality of comic panels not only as a representation of social phenomena, but as a specific form of sociological thinking? The proliferation over the last fifteen years of graphic social sciences (Kuttner *et al.* 2017), graphic journalism in the tradition of Joe Sacco, and graphic medicine (Green, Myers 2010; Williams 2012; Moretti *et al.* 2025) points to a methodological transformation that calls into question the very boundaries of academic writing. Documentary comics – in the form of *visual witness* (Chute 2016) – have shown how the sequence of panels makes it possible to restore narrative agency to subaltern or traumatic experiences, to give an embodied dimension to empirical materials otherwise confined to quantitative or legal registers, and to work

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 219-238
ISSN 2724-6078 (online): 10.53119/se.2025.1.13

on the construction of memory precisely where the archive produces amnesia or erasure.
Within this epistemological framework, sociological reflection is called not only to interpret comics as cultural artifacts through the established categories of the sociology of art or cultural studies, but also to critically interrogate the heuristic possibilities that this visual-verbal language opens up for conducting empirical research, communicating findings in forms accessible to non-academic audiences, and working on the construction and transmission of collective memory (Hirsch 2012; Rothberg 2009; Moretti, Della Puppa 2025).
At the center of this *bd* is a vast corpus of coroner's files documenting cases of suicide over an extended period of time, which are reworked into graphic sequences capable of rendering visible bodies, places, objects, relationships – a broad technoscientific apparatus that intersects with the most intimate and unfathomable dimension of the social subject – as well as the words and categories through which institutions have classified voluntary death, and its perception within the social body. In doing so, the archival material is reorganized into scenes and micro-narratives that foreground the embodied and situated dimension of suicide, inscribing it within a specific historical and social landscape.
The aim of this contribution is twofold. First, it seeks to offer a theoretical reflection on the epistemological potential of comics as a device capable of articulating archives, bodies, and memories in ways that differ from the conventional textual registers of social research. While historical sociology has long problematized the relationship between document and trace (Farge 1989), and between archival series and biographical singularity (Ginzburg 1976), the comics medium introduces an additional tension: that between the bureaucratic seriality of the file and the visual-narrative restitution of embodied experience, between the administrative opacity of recorded death and the mnemonic reactivation of lived life. Comics – hereafter used as an umbrella term – thus operate on the constitutive fracture between what institutions inscribe in their recording apparatuses and what subjects traverse in the opacity of lived experience, opening up unprecedented possibilities for a public sociology (Burawoy 2005) capable of addressing in the public sphere issues deemed unspeakable, traumatic, or politically repressed (death remains, even today, the last great taboo in Western societies). Second, the article takes *VADLBDM* as a paradigmatic case (a case study compared with a purposively selected sample) in order to empirically analyse the potential of the work as an example of a comics-based translation of a massive archival compendium, allowing us to observe concretely how the shift from document to comics page produces a specific form of visual historical sociology of suicide. Through an analysis of the narrative, iconographic, and sequential strategies adopted by the work, the article aims to show that comics do not simply "illustrate" or "disseminate" archival research that has already been completed, but rather themselves constitute a research methodology that transforms the epistemological status of the materials, their public accessibility, and their affective regime.
The article is structured in three analytical movements. First, it critically reconstructs the debate on documentary comics (Sacco 2012) and on the graphic social sciences, examining it in light of the epistemological transformations affecting contemporary

forms of sociological writing and representation (Pink 2013). Second, it presents the context of genesis of *VADLBDM* and the specific archival partition on which the work is based, before analysing some of the formal and compositional choices through which this operation is carried out. Finally, it discusses the theoretical and epistemological implications that emerge from this case study for a broader reflection on the relationship between comics and sociology.

2. Documentary Comics and Graphic Social Sciences: Sociological Writing Between Text and Image

The pivotal role of comics in contemporary transformations of communication lies in their nature as a medial chimera: an epistemological creature that produces a representational short circuit in which the linguistic-verbal dimension is amplified by the symbolic code. As such, comics take shape as a misaligned mirror of the social, capable of reflecting the conflicts that traverse it and distorting them just enough to make visible its fault lines, zones of censorship, and power asymmetries that organize the visible. It is in this light that a growing part of contemporary production is mobilized as a form of social commentary, as a device capable of intervening in public debates on education, historical memory, and the contents deemed acceptable within school and media spaces. In other words, through the representation of its temporally and spatially situated narrative, comics contribute to shaping the present, making the drawn page into a laboratory where counter-narratives are experimented with, collective sensibilities are negotiated, and different ways of inhabiting conflict are tested, in figurative form, regardless of the specific story being told.

Comics are structurally configured as an intermedial crossroads by virtue of the co-presence, within the same enunciative space, of codes traditionally considered irreducible: the linear abstraction of alphabetic writing and the – always already stylized – mimesis of the graphic image. As both semiotics (Eco 1964; 1976) and comics-specific studies (McCloud 1993; Groensteen 1999) have noted, this co-presence is not exhausted in simple juxtaposition but generates a composite semiosis in which word and image co-determine one another, establishing a genuinely comics-specific regime of meaning. From this perspective, comics – in their multiple global declinations – reveal their status as an artifice capable of probing the demands of their audiences, both in sociological terms of target groups and as the outcome of a specific textual architecture able to condense, into a few panels, symbolic densities and visual information that mirror the syncopated rhythm of urban life.

It is no coincidence that the first modern serialized comics – such as *Monsieur Jabot* (Töpffer 1833) and *The Yellow Kid* (Outcault 1895) – consistently staged the physical and psychic landscape of the industrial metropolis, displaying the overcrowding of spaces, the verticality of architectures, the proliferation of commodities and signboards, as well as the nightmares, anxieties, and fantasies that accompanied modernization. In this sense, the strip and the page early on offered one of the most effective representations of that urban "space-time" which profoundly reshapes the logic of social relations (Brancato 1994), inscribing on the page the accelerations and discontinuities of metropolitan everyday life. Comics' capacity to give sensible form to these socio-spatial transformations places them, from the very outset, at the crossroads between the culture industry and the mythopoeia of everyday life: a narrative machine which, though embedded in the commercial circuits of popular print media, contributes to stabilizing figures, social types, fears, and desires that become part of a shared repertoire.

The digital transition, far from marginalizing the medium, has confirmed and intensified its epistemological relevance. The graphic and a-referential handling of comics creativity – its evasion of the indexical constraint of the photographic imprint in favour of a form of reproduction entirely mediated by the graphic gesture – has prefigured and made possible the shift in the regime of visuality that marks the passage from the photo-electronic reproducibility of analog techniques to the algorithmic production of synthetic images, which has become paradigmatic in contemporary forms of cinema and post-broadcast television. In other words, comics have functioned as a formal and phenomenological crucible in which to experiment with modes of image constitution and narrative articulation – the use of panel space, the dialectic between story time and discourse time, perspectival deformation, the sequence effect as the production of continuity within discontinuity – destined then to migrate into other media ecosystems, from video art to television seriality, through to the compositional logic of video games.

A paradigmatic case is *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (McCay 1905-1914), a seminal work that revolutionized the grammar of comics through the fragmentation of the page space and the oneiric rendering of perception, while also staging – as Roeder (1984), in his study on fantasy, mass culture, and modernism, shows – the intertwining of dream imagery and the urban landscape of modernity, making the dream a device for thinking the metropolis itself. McCay's experiments with page layout and the management of narrative time constitute one of the earliest laboratories of that complex sequential narration (Kukkonen 2011) which would become one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century comics. It is thus no surprise that the universe of *Little Nemo* literally generated an intense, intimate, and analytical video game experience: in 1990 Capcom released *Little Nemo: The Dream Master*, a platform game for the NES that translates into gameplay mechanics the logic of spatial traversal, perceptual metamorphosis, and suspension of physical laws that constituted the formal core of McCay's Sunday pages. The video game exceeds the dimension of a simple comics adaptation insofar as it inherits and reactivates the work's fundamental epistemological device: the ability to render an impossible space navigable, to give playable form to unreality, showing how the formal inventions of comics operate as a transmedial matrix for other experiential environments.

This trajectory allows us to read comics as a liminal zone, an inhabited field of confrontation, a device capable of articulating continuity and discontinuity between multiple media codifications and their hybridizations. It is precisely this transmedial flexibility, combined with its sequential structure, that makes the medium particularly well-suited not only to represent but also to think social transformations, functioning as a sort of iconic–narrative archive of modernity. Comics pages accumulate over time recurring figures, scenarios, and typical situations (from metropolitan crowds to peripheral neighbourhoods, from wars to precarious labour, from migrations to collective traumas) that can be read as sedimentations of cultural memory (Assmann 1992; Nora 1984) or as visions of possible futures (Nihei 1995; Bablet 2011). In this sense, comics operate as collective memory and archive both because they represent

historical/biographical events and because they preserve and rework the forms through which a society has become accustomed to seeing itself: its legitimate and deviant bodies, its central and marginal spaces, its institutions and its shadow zones.
It is precisely on this dual status – popular medium of the culture industry and device for the symbolic archiving of collective experiences – that contemporary documentary comics are grounded. When graphic narrative chooses to work directly with archival materials, testimonies, judicial or administrative documents, it brings to completion a vocation already inscribed in the history of the medium: making the drawn page a space in which institutional archives and lived memory meet, collide, and at times rewrite one another.
If, as McCloud (2000) has shown, comics can be defined as the deliberate juxtaposition of images in sequence intended to produce meaning and an aesthetic response, documentary comics push this sequential logic to the point where representation becomes testimony. Chute (2016) has suggested reading a significant part of contemporary comics production as a practice of *visual witnessing*: a form of visual testimony that grapples with wars, genocides, state violence, and collective traumas, developing a specific ethics of looking. From this perspective, documentary comics, through the narration of "true stories," assume the responsibility of constructing scenes and subjects that render perceivable events otherwise erased or unspeakable. The testimonial dimension does not derive solely from the mere referentiality of the content, but finds its validity in an ensemble of formal choices: the arrangement of panels, the ellipses between one frame and another, the use of white space, the modulation of accompanying texts. It is in these thresholds that comics become a device of memory, capable of articulating what can be described as a visual archive of violence, in dialogue with – but also in tension with – "official" photographic and documentary archives.
A paradigmatic example in this regard is the work of Keiji Nakazawa, who in *Ore wa mita* (*I Saw It* 1972) and in the subsequent *Barefoot Gen* saga (1973–1987) sets out and foregrounds his direct testimony as a Hiroshima survivor, articulating it through a long-running serial narrative that weaves together autobiography, historical reportage, and political allegory. From a sociological point of view, these works construct a narrative device in which individual memory is continuously renegotiated in light of conflicts over the public memory of the war, institutional silences, and hierarchies between recognized and marginalized victims. The insistent repetition of certain scene – the flash, the destruction, the burned bodies – operates as a form of visual archiving that both accompanies and opposes official photographic archives, restoring narrative agency to subjects otherwise reduced to numbers in victim statistics. Methodologically, Nakazawa's work can be read as a form of long-term graphic auto-ethnography, in which the narrating self becomes an interface between lived experience, collective history, and the public representation of trauma, while the pages present an architecture that can be analysed using the concepts and tools of visual sociology.
A different yet equally significant register for a sociology of visual witnessing is inaugurated by Delisle's graphic reportage. In *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2011), he constructs a drawn participant observation of everyday life in East Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, and Palestinian territories, focusing on devices of

control – checkpoints, walls, gates, guard shifts, waiting times – rather than on the spectacular events of the conflict. From a social research perspective, the effect is that of an ethnography of the everyday under occupation, in which comics make visible infrastructures of power and micro-violence that often escape media attention. In *Hostage* (2017), the kidnapping of a Médecins Sans Frontières worker becomes the pretext for a radical exploration of subjective temporality: the obsessive repetition of rooms, ropes, and bodily postures produces a graphic phenomenology of captivity that foregrounds embodied vulnerability. In both cases, the documentary force of comics does not lie in "faithful reproduction" of facts, but in shaping a situated point of view – that of the foreign observer, the prisoner, the witness – and making it analytically available, in a form closer to ethnographic description than to conventional journalistic reporting.

In the Italian context, Gipi's works offer a further vantage point on the nexus between documentary comics, memory, and social suffering. *Appunti per una storia di guerra* (2004) stages a group of adolescents in a provincial town marked by an unnamed war, recognizable through its material and moral devastation. The choice of a deliberately undefined setting shifts attention away from geopolitical specificities toward the social dynamics of violence: the co-optation of young people into informal war economies, the circulation of weapons, the banalization of trauma. Here, comics document the social by constructing a typology of situations, figures, and languages that restitute a form of morphological realism of contemporary wars, in which the boundary between front and rear, civilian and combatant, is radically blurred. In *unastoria* (2013), by contrast, the overlap between letters from the front during the First World War and the story of a contemporary writer in psychological crisis produces a montage of temporalities and graphic registers that interrogates the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its translation into mental illness. Archival letters become raw material for a reflection on the continuity of forms of suffering, while the fragmentation of the page and the controlled use of colour generate a genuine visual cartography of depression and uprooting.

These cases, although heterogeneous in context, style, and authorial positioning, share several features that are particularly relevant for a sociological reading of documentary comics:

- first, they treat trauma – whether war-related, political, or psychological – not as a punctual event but as a process that traverses subjects, generations, and institutions and that requires forms of archiving different from those offered by official documents alone;
- second, they place at the centre the construction of a situated point of view, avoiding both the claim to "objectivity" and a closure in autobiographical solipsism: the voice of the survivor, the observer, or the fictive narrator is always in relation to apparatuses of power, urban landscapes, and collective memories;
- third, they turn drawing into a method in its own right: the repetition of certain framings, the choice of ellipses, and the management of rhythm from one panel to the next operate as tools of analysis no less than the explicit conceptual categories.

Mickwitz (2016) pushes this perspective further by questioning the still widespread idea that documentary work must necessarily be tied to mechanical recording technologies (photography, cinema, audio). His analyses show how comics can perform documentary functions precisely by virtue of their drawn nature. Far from being a limitation, the absence of a photographic index makes more explicit the performative and processual character of every testimonial act, shifting attention away from a technical guarantee of truthfulness toward the relationship between authors, sources, and readers. In this light, documentary comics are not "less" documentary because they do not record reality, but documentary in a different way, namely through the graphic construction of a space of co-presence between archival traces, individual memories, and interpretive intervention. The distinction between "comics that talk about the social" and "comics that document the social" hinges precisely on this terrain. In the first case, the social is a thematic content – inequalities, racism, war – that can be treated in different registers (satirical, melodramatic, realist) without necessarily entailing any particular work on sources or forms of evidence. In the second case, by contrast, the comic is explicitly constructed on the basis of documentary materials (archives, interviews, trials, reports), making its relationship to sources transparent and placing at the centre the question of how to "make visible" a social phenomenon without reducing it or turning it into spectacle. It is in this space that projects such as *VADLBDM*, which translate documentary materials into graphic sequences, are situated. It is no coincidence that, as early as the 1940s, Matsner Gruenberg (1944) was already urging us to look at comics beyond their dimension as children's entertainment, highlighting their role as social phenomena capable of influencing attitudes, values, and collective imaginaries. Contemporary documentary comics take up and deepen this insight, according to which comics are a social force and counter-spaces in which society documents itself and stages its own fractures.

If documentary comics insist on the link between representation and testimony, the graphic social sciences shift the focus further upstream: the point is no longer simply to take the social as the object of a story, but to adopt comics as a form of writing research itself. Within the broader framework of arts-based research (Leavy 2015), recourse to the graphic language is not conceived as a mere outreach tool or a "popular translation" of already established findings, but as a specific mode of inquiry, conceptualisation, and restitution that intervenes at all stages of the knowledge-production process. In this regard, the study by Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower (2017) on comics-based research has played a programmatic role: comics are described there as a device capable of making identities, artefacts, environments, and interactional dynamics simultaneously present, producing a dense weave in which the conceptual dimension is inseparable from the choice of framing, from the rhythm of panel transitions, and from the management of text within the drawn page. The latter becomes a space in which one thinks through images and sequences, and in which the distinction between "illustration" and "analysis" loses its meaning. It is no coincidence that works such as *Unflattening* (Sousanis 2015) – a doctoral dissertation produced entirely in comics form – have shown how the graphic construction of diagrams, figures, and spatial metaphors can constitute a fully fledged theoretical argument, irreducible to a text that "could have been written otherwise".

For the social sciences, this implies a rethinking of the very form of the article and the research report. Whereas in classical qualitative methodologies the passage from empirical materials to the analytical text takes place through operations of coding, abstraction, and narrative montage, the graphic social sciences introduce an additional level of transformation: analysis also passes through decisions about which bodies to draw and how, which interstices to leave blank, and what regime of proximity to establish between the reader and the represented subjects. In a graphic ethnography, for example, the gesture of choosing a high-angle or low-angle shot, of placing a character at the margins or at the centre of the panel, amounts to taking a position with respect to the power hierarchies that traverse the scene. Drawing is not an "embellishment" of the data but a form of situated interpretation that overlays a visual montage onto the textual one, as demonstrated by recent experiments in a sociology in/of comics (Barberis, Grüning 2021; Grüning, Scavarda 2025). Here, comics are used as methodological manuals, extensions of research projects, accounts of participatory inquiry, and tools for returning to vulnerable groups (migrants, psychiatric patients, young people in marginalised contexts) a degree of control over the narration of their own experiences. Ultimately, this is a graphic declension of public sociology: knowledge does not remain confined within the closed space of the journal article, but is shaped into an object that can circulate in schools, associations, and educational settings, becoming itself part of the social environment it analyses.
Situated within the framework outlined above, the graphic social sciences thus offer sociology a privileged tool for working precisely on the triad archives – bodies – memories. On the one hand, they make it possible to translate documentary materials – transcripts, case files, photographs – into figural configurations that render their embodied implications visible; on the other, they allow for the recording and restitution of the mnemonic traces of the subjects involved in a way that is closer to their sensory experience, without reducing them to the solely verbal form of the interview.
In this sense, comics place at least three central dimensions of sociological practice under tension:

1. The production of data: drawing can already intervene at the collection stage, as a tool for elicitation, for co-constructing narratives, and for restituting observed scenes.
2. The writing of analysis: the page replaces – or supplements – the paragraph, arranging within the same space bodies, objects, institutional backdrops, fragments of dialogue, and concepts.
3. Public dissemination: the comics form broadens the potential publics of research, making complex themes accessible to readers who would be unlikely to engage with a traditional academic article.

This shift is not merely stylistic. It directly interrogates the construction of scientific authority: who is authorised to speak sociologically when research takes the form of a comic book? Only the academic who signs the text? The artist who draws? The subjects who appear in the panels? The graphic social sciences insist precisely on this collaborative dimension, acknowledging that the act of translating the social into images entails ethical and epistemological choices that cannot be reduced to the textual dimension alone. The centrality of the visual in contemporary social sciences – from visual ethnography to the production of maps, graphs, and installations – has called into question how we understand the "document." The introduction of comics adds a further layer of complexity, insofar as the document is not only read and interpreted, but is also graphically rewritten. In this latter move, the boundary between source and interpretation becomes more porous: the panel is at once quotation and commentary, a montage of documentary elements and a space of imaginative projection. Scientific authority no longer resides exclusively in the apparatus of footnotes, in statistical series, or in the argumentative rigour of the text, but is distributed across several components: transparency regarding archival work, the choices of selection and montage, the internal coherence of the graphic universe, and the capacity to render visible social relations that would otherwise remain invisible. For sociology, this implies a twofold movement. On the one hand, it is necessary to develop critical tools for analysing comics as a practice of constructing reality, without relegating them to the role of "illustrative support" for content produced elsewhere. On the other hand, we must interrogate the conditions under which comics can be recognised as a legitimate form of sociological writing, capable of contributing to disciplinary discussions on methods, evidence, and the responsibilities of representation.

3. From Archive to Drawn Body: Documentary Grammar and Scientific Strategies in Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde

3.1 Archival Ecosystem and Apparatus

The *bande dessinée Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* originates from the encounter with an institutional archive that is as imposing as it is, at least apparently, anodyne: in the *greffe de la paix du Québec* more than 20,000 coroner's files were found relating to cases in which the authorities concluded that death by suicide had occurred in the province between 1763 and 1986. These files were produced by a medico-legal apparatus tasked with establishing the causes and circumstances of death: for each case, descriptions of the scene, testimonies from family members or witnesses, police reports, medical records and, from the twentieth century onwards, photographs of places and bodies were collected. It is this heterogeneous set of traces – texts, images, forms – that constitutes the empirical corpus underpinning the scientific project from which the BD derives.

From a sociological standpoint, these files represent a paradigmatic example of "bureaucratic seriality": each dossier is organised according to a relatively standardised grid of information (identity of the deceased person, date, place, means employed, presumed motivations, possible notes on psychiatric history, family context), inscribed in forms that predefine which elements of life and death are deemed relevant and which remain out of frame. The repetition of categories – *"pendaison," "noyade," "intoxication," "suicide probable"* – produces an overview of the phenomenon that privileges statistical aggregation and typological classification over biographical singularity. In other words, suicide appears here first and foremost as the object of a technology of recording and governance: each individual case is absorbed into a series that makes bodies, places, gestures, and motivations comparable, translating the irreducible event of voluntary death into an element of an administrable whole.

Perreault, Cellard, and Corriveau's operation consists precisely in treating this archive not as a simple repository of data but as a historical dispositif for problematising suicide. The choice of the BD is only one of the multiple forms taken by a long-term socio-historical research project, initiated in the mid-2000s and based on the systematic analysis of the coroner's files, from which several scientific articles and further publications have already emerged. The decision to focus on the period 1763–1986 is not only dictated by the limits of source accessibility – after 1986 the coroner's mandate changes and the files are no longer available to the public – but also makes it possible to follow, over a span of more than two centuries, the transformation of the regimes of truth through which suicide is named, explained, and judged: from the religious and moral qualifications of the early modern period to the medical-psychiatric and public health semantics of the XX century.

At the level of the division of scientific labour, the project takes the form of a structured collaboration between three criminologists at the University of Ottawa and a *bédéiste*: the former are responsible for constructing the research dispositif (sample selection, development of analytical categories, historical-sociological interpretation of transformations over time); the latter translates this work into a visual-sequential language, assuming responsibility for the "narration in images" on the basis of scripts and dialogues provided by the research team. This is not, however, a mere technical division of tasks – as Corriveau stated to the present author in an interview on the project in July 2024 – since the collaboration entails a continuous back-and-forth between archive and page, between the demands of documentary rigour and stylistic choices aimed at making highly sensitive material both bearable and intelligible.

In this sense, the coroner's archive can be described as a dispositif that holds, on the one hand, a historical-institutional dimension, insofar as it records the outcome of inquiries that seek to establish the causes of death and, implicitly, to distribute responsibilities and blame (it is a state archive that speaks with the voice of the medical examiner, the justice of the peace, the police), and, on the other, a dimension of scientific and graphic reappropriation, since this same archive is reorganised as material for a historical sociology of suicide. The latter does not limit itself to counting cases but attempts to reconstruct the "stagings" of voluntary death: the way bodies are found, the arrangement of objects, the letters left behind, the social spaces traversed (bridge, prison, farm, bedroom, forest).

VADLBDM is situated precisely on this threshold: on the one hand, it makes explicit from the very first pages the scientific character of the project, introducing, in the form of a *mise en abyme*, the genealogy of the research, the nature of the discursive complex, and the role of each member of the team; on the other hand, it uses the language of comics to remove the files from their bureaucratic opacity, bringing out – through the drawn body – the embodied and situated dimension of the lives recorded in those documents. It is in this passage from archive to drawing that the BD begins to function as a laboratory for a visual sociology of suicide, a theme that will be developed in the following sections.

3.2 Transforming the Archive into Pages: Scenes and Temporalities

In VADLBDM, the translation of the archive into drawn sequences does not take place as a simple illustration of already established results, but rather through a work

of selection, condensation, and montage that is, in itself, a sociological operation. The book explicitly opens inside the research laboratory: in the first pages we see Isabelle on the phone with André, as they discuss the initial illustrations and the difficulties of "putting into images" the final moments of suicides on the basis of judicial files characterised by technical descriptions and "very raw clinical photographs" that do not convey the "final impression" the individuals wished to leave. The decision to involve an artist in order to "recreate the scenes," instead of reproducing the coroner's photographs, makes it clear that the BD does not simply extract content from the archive, but constructs a genuine visual grammar of the *mise en scène suicidaire*, capable of bringing out the scenic and relational dimension of the act where the institutional document records only the cause and modality of death.
The construction of scenes from the files first of all entails a narrative choice: out of nearly 20,000 dossiers, the authors single out case types that condense recurring configurations – "ordinary" and "exceptional" suicides, invisible acts and gestures marked by strong spectacular intentionality – and articulate them into micro-narratives. The passage from file to page is thus not a neutral translation but an act of composition: scattered descriptive elements (place, time, objects found, relatives' testimonies, any letters) are reordered into a scene with a beginning, climax, and coda, with a precise organisation of space and time. The archive, structured around standardised entries and legal categories, is "reopened" into narrative configurations that reassert the presence of bodies, gestures, and environments, restoring the situated density of the suicidal situation.
This work also clearly emerges at the level of the page. The BD alternates panels in which explanatory discourse predominates – long blocks of text that present the corpus, explain the function of the coroner, introduce concepts such as "staging" or the imitation effect – with sequences in which words recede and images bear the weight of enunciation. The page thus becomes the place where the bureaucratic lexicon of the files intertwines with a careful framing: domestic interiors, urban spaces, and transit zones (bridges, railways, hotel rooms) are drawn not as neutral backdrops but as true actants, scenic devices that participate in the construction of the suicidal act.
The management of page space also makes it possible to visualise the dual scalar regime that runs through the corpus. On the one hand, the BD insists on the exemplarity of individual cases, making specific biographical situations and relational configurations recognisable; on the other, certain pages work on seriality: rows of archive boxes, sequences of file numbers, repetitions of administrative formulas constantly remind the reader that each singular scene is extracted from a mass of cases, from a statistical repetition that constitutes suicide as a social problem and not only as an individual tragedy. In this sense, the comic gives visual form precisely to that tension between series and singularity that historiography and historical sociology have long discussed, but which have rarely found an equally effective iconic translation.
The temporal dimension is also profoundly reworked. The corpus covers a span from 1763 to the late twentieth century, yet the BD does not adopt a linear chronology or a rigid periodisation. The narrative proceeds by leaps, juxtaposing episodes distant in time that share scenic configurations or interpretive categories: suicides with farewell letters and silent suicides, overtly theatrical acts and gestures that seek to erase all

traces, cases in which the coroner can reach a confident conclusion and cases in which the verdict remains uncertain. These assemblages produce controlled anachronisms: events separated by decades are placed on the same page in order to show the persistence of certain forms of staging and, at the same time, the transformations in the institutional grammars that qualify them – from the language of sin and guilt to that of mental pathology, and finally to public health concerns. In this way, the comics sequence becomes a privileged tool for thinking together diachrony and recurrence, the historicity of classifications and the continuity of forms of social suffering.

Finally, the decision to include the researchers themselves, their methodological discussions, and their ethical hesitations within the narrative performs a crucial meta-documentary function. The conversations between members of the research team – who comment on the initial illustrations, discuss the possibility of publishing "the entire research in the form of a *bande dessinée*", and reflect on the risks of aestheticising death – stage the reflexive dimension of sociological work. The archive never appears as a neutral repository of facts, but as a set of traces that must be continuously interpreted, selected, and assembled, making the very process of translation visible and transforming the page into a piece of "equipment for the imagination" – to recall the notion of *technologies of the imagination* developed by Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen (2009) – that enables an exploration of the social and affective effects of the forms through which we think and represent voluntary death.

3.3 Suicidal Bodies and Institutional Environments

From the very pages in which we see the researchers discussing the *"photos prises sur les lieux d'un suicide"* described as *"particulièrement gores"* (p.10), the text insists that the *"crue"* lighting and the medico-legal intent *"de bien illustrer les causes et circonstances immédiates du décès"* do not do *"justice à la dernière image"* the person wished to leave of themself (pp.10–11). It is precisely here that the criterion guiding Quesnel's work is formulated: to reconstruct the scenes *"sans voyeurisme ou sensationnalisme"*, replacing the raw indexicality of the photographs with a mode of visualisation capable of conveying the subject's own will to stage their death, while at the same time avoiding the pornography of suffering.

This choice is translated into a series of graphic strategies of distance and modesty. In the narrative sequences, the suicidal body is often present but rarely displayed frontally: it is shown in partial view, partially concealed by the surrounding space (a shadow in a doorway, a figure glimpsed from afar, a suspended silhouette), or evoked through the objects that surround it—the rope, the bottle of poison, the bridge railing, the overturned chair. Whereas the medico-legal file describes in detail the position of the corpse, the injuries, the condition of the site, the comics page prefers to insist on posture and on the relationship between body and environment rather than on anatomical detail. At a sociological level, this shift means that the body is treated not as a mere object of observation, but as a node in a network of relations: what matters is not only "how they died," but where, with what gestures the environment was prepared, which traces—letters, arrangements, money left in plain sight—were set in place for those who remain.

The case of Marie, the young clerk involved in a minor theft and lodged in a *pension de famille* for *"jeunes femmes célibataires,"* offers a particularly clear example of this intertwining of body and institutions (pp.48–53). The pages that reconstruct her story are framed by textual elements that point to a dense institutional landscape: the «Département de police de la cité», the reporting procedures, the «maison Seroggie» in Sainte-Catherine as a supervised space in which young women are placed «sous la supervision d'une 'maîtresse de chambre'» (p. 48). Marie's body does not appear primarily as a medical specimen, but rather as a body regulated by moral and disciplinary dispositifs: the theft, the summons by the detective, the visit to the boarding house, the exchanges between the *gérant*, the police officers, and the *pension de famille* bring to the surface a dense web of gazes that precedes the suicidal act.

The letters Marie leaves – addressed to the *logeuse*, to a lawyer, to the *gérant* of the hotel – are extensively quoted in the text and embedded in the pages that depict their locations: the rented room, the suitcase, the passage from the supervised lodging to the hotel room chosen as the place to die (pp. 51–52). In the explanatory commentary we read that the young woman «règle dans tous les détails le rapatriement de son corps et de ses affaires à Prescott» and that she ensures that the body will be «découvert immédiatement» and in such a condition as not to bring discredit upon the *maison de pension* (p. 52). Here, the body is literally administered by the future suicide: not only the object of a post-mortem bureaucracy, but the object of a meticulous self-bureaucratisation that concerns the way in which it will be seen, transported, preserved. The page visualises this work of pre-mortem ordering by arranging in space the material elements evoked in the letters (suitcase, linen, notes), thereby inscribing the body within a "project" of death that holds together domestic space, institutions, and family memory.

Institutional environments appear not merely as background, but as full-fledged scenic actors. The pages devoted to archival work – shelves, boxes, reading desks at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (p.18) – give form to the transformation of the body into a file; those on Marie and the other young women show the interweaving of boarding houses, municipal police, justices of the peace, and institutions for *filles-mères*, where the prospect of giving birth outside marriage is equivalent to a "social putting to death" and to a life under the sign of exile (pp.53–54, 56). When the text recalls that, had Marie carried the pregnancy to term, she would have had to give birth in an «institution pour 'filles-mères', se voir enlever son enfant et vivre le reste de ses jours avec le statut d'exilée sociale» (p.56), the pages translate this condition into enclosed environments, corridors, neutral rooms: spaces that do not appear in the files, but that exist as the institutional implication of moral and medico-legal classification.

In parallel, the family is present more as a normative and affective horizon than as a directly represented scene. In the pages devoted to Marie's case, familial shame is explicitly evoked: «Tomber enceinte hors mariage équivalait pratiquement à une mise à mort sociale pour une jeune femme désormais considérée comme 'perdue'. Honte et opprobre pour elle et sa famille» (p.55). The comic gives body to this discourse by bringing into dialogue the words of the archive (statements, letters, the coroner's comments) with the representation of the spaces through which the young woman moves: boarding house, shop, hotel, street. The family, although not always visible on the page, operates as a latent institution that defines what can be said and what must remain unsaid, what may be hidden and what must be erased through death. In all these configurations, the BD shifts the focus from the "statistics of suicide" to its corpor(e)ality. Whereas the original archival dispositif tends to produce numbers, categories, and comparable series—rates by age, sex, means employed—the comic continually redirects attention to the situated body: a body that travels in order to escape the gaze of its loved ones (p.44), a body that is prepared so as to be found "in good shape" and quickly identifiable (pp.52–53), a body that undergoes a *mise à mort sociale* even before it becomes the object of a death certificate (pp.55–56). In sociological terms, this means that the BD renders visible the embodied dimension of suicide not as a mere "individual case" within a series, but as a point of intersection between institutional regimes (police, medicine, welfare, family), material spaces, and practices of self-staging.

The graphic representation of suicidal bodies and institutional environments thus performs a twofold reconfiguration: on the one hand, it removes suicide from a purely

statistical–bureaucratic regime of truth, restoring to it a sensible density; on the other, it shows how that very density – postural, spatial, scenographic – is already anticipated and governed by the apparatuses that produce the files. *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* quite literally puts this circularity on the page: the bodies that the archive records as cases are redrawn as subjects who have actively worked on staging their own deaths, transforming the BD into a space in which the sociological analysis of suicide passes through the ways in which a body that is no longer there is looked at, drawn, and positioned in space.

4. Memory, Social Suffering and Public Sociology: Comics as a Device for Public Working-Through

The passage from archival series to collective memory in the BD under analysis can be illuminated through two now-classic notions in trauma memory studies: Hirsch's *postmemory* (2012) and Rothberg's *multidirectional memory* (2009). Hirsch defines as postmemorial the position of those subjects who have not directly

ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.13

experienced a traumatic event and yet inherit its traces through stories, photographs, documents, works of art, developing a strongly affective relationship to a past that does not belong to them in a biographical sense and yet contributes in a constitutive way to their identity. From this perspective, the BD may be read as a postmemorial device: both the researchers and the readers structurally occupy the position of "distant heirs" of the suicides recorded in the coroner's files between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. No one has personally known the individuals whose deaths are evoked; nevertheless, the act of consulting the files, selecting them, graphically rewriting them, and reading them in sequence produces an intense familiarity with those gestures, those bodies, those social landscapes. The BD functions as an interface between a mute institutional archive – organised according to legal categories and standardised forms – and a contemporary public that discovers itself, page after page, implicated in a long history of social suffering and institutional violence.

In this sense, the visual–verbal sequentiality of comics is not merely a narrative expedient: it is the site where the archive is translated into postmemorial experience, where a series of anonymous cases becomes a constellation of presences that interrogate the viewer's present. Rothberg's proposal to think of memory in multidirectional terms further clarifies this movement. As an alternative to a competitive model, which imagines collective memories as struggling for a limited space of recognition, Rothberg insists that narratives of different traumas can enter into resonance, illuminating one another and generating new political and affective configurations. The BD operates precisely within this regime. Although rooted in the historical and juridical context of Québec, it does not present suicide as a closed "local dossier," but as a prism through which to read broader forms of structural violence, exclusion, and disciplining of bodies. The stories of Marie and the other young women, of poor workers, indebted farmers, psychiatric patients, are not offered as picturesque exceptions: they are constructed so as to echo figures and situations recognisable to a contemporary reader, who finds in them recurring motifs such as material precarisation, the stigmatisation of mental distress, the moral sanctioning of non-conforming sexualities, and the selective medicalisation of suffering.

Within this framework, the work performs a crucial function of symbolic condensation by taking up the last words spoken by Gaulin before publicly immolating herself in Montréal in 1972. The album grafts an exemplary gesture that already belongs to Québec's public memory onto the corpus of coroner's files: a suicide made deliberately visible, conceived as an act of indictment against a society experienced as intolerable. Far from merely evoking Gaulin as an iconic figure, the BD uses her sentence as a retrospective interpretive key: the accusation "you have destroyed the beauty of the world" is implicitly addressed not only to the passers-by in that square, but to the institutions, norms, and socio-economic arrangements that, over the course of two centuries, have rendered some lives more vulnerable than others. Gaulin's act, both well known and historically dated, is thus repositioned within a broader constellation of less visible suicides, restoring to the spectacular gesture its belonging to a long and structural history.

From this perspective, the album situates itself within a constellation of graphic novels that take suicide, or suicidal ideation, as a key node through which to articulate individual memory and social critique. In this regard, it is possible to reflect on a purposively selected sample: in *Fun Home* (2006), Bechdel rereads her father's death – officially an accident but constantly suspended between the hypotheses of suicide and fatality – as a turning point in a family genealogy marked by secrecy, internalised homophobia, and bourgeois respectability. The book works on a double archive, both domestic and cultural: photographs, diaries, and letters on the one hand; literary intertexts on the other. The father's possible suicide thus becomes the site where queer memory, the history of the psychiatrisation of homosexuality, and shifts in gender norms intersect, showing how the work of mourning passes through a critical renegotiation of collective imaginaries that have helped make a certain form of life impossible. In *Lighter Than My Shadow* (Green 2013), suicide attempts are inscribed within a long trajectory of eating disorder, abuse, and shame, and are represented through a recurring graphic device: the black cloud that envelops the protagonist's body and distorts its contours. Here the suicidal act is not isolated as an exceptional event, but appears as the intensification of a process of erosion of social presence, produced by the intertwining of normative discourses on the female body, the medicalisation of distress, and family silences. The comic functions as a counter-archive of a therapeutic journey, where medical records and diagnoses are placed alongside images that convey the sensory quality of suffering, offering the reader a visual grammar for thinking about the stigmatisation of mental disorders beyond diagnostic labels. Similarly, in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me*, Forney (2012) stages her own passage through bipolar disorder, including moments when suicidal ideation becomes more pronounced, intertwining notes, sketches, and quotations from art and the history of psychiatry. Here too, comics operate as a postmemorial laboratory: the author mobilises her personal archive – notebooks, prescriptions, memories of therapy sessions – to situate her story within a broader genealogy of artistic figures and therapeutic dispositifs, enabling the reader to reread their own imaginaries of madness and suicide in the light of that history.

Placed alongside the BD under discussion, these works show how the graphic novel can function as a device of public memory of suicide on different scales. In the cases of Bechdel, Green, and Forney, the point of departure is an autobiographical self that opens out toward cultural and institutional archives; in the case of Corriveau et al., it is an institutional archive that is reopened in order to restore biographical density to anonymous lives. In both cases, comics shift the gaze from the individual event to the web of relations, norms, and imaginaries that make it possible, turning the narration of suicide not into a mere exercise in exposing trauma, but into a collective interrogation of the social conditions of vulnerability.In this sense, comics function as a device for the *contemporisation* of the past: the series of cases does not remain confined to the historical time to which it belongs, but is taken up in a present in which suicide stands at the centre of new discourses on mental health, gender, and inequality. The pages do not invite the reader to judge the past with a moralising gaze, but to recognise the continuity of certain dispositifs of suffering – social isolation, shame, selective pathologisation, lack of resources – that cut across centuries. In this way, the coroner's archive ceases to be a mere instrument for retrospectively reconstructing the "causes of suicide" and becomes a social archive available to a public memory that asks how a collectivity has treated, and continues to treat, its broken lives.

As a sequential form that interweaves bodies and contexts, comics offer one of the most effective modes for carrying out this passage: transforming bureaucratic series into constellations of stories, and institutional memory into shared, critical memory, open to confrontation with the present.

Concluding Reflections: Nous avons détruit la beauté du monde?

The analysis of *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* shows, in concrete terms, how a documentary BD can become a visual historical sociology of suicide. The opening pages, in which everyday objects, decorative patterns, and a body seated at a table are arranged in discontinuous fragments (pp.7–8), immediately stage the passage from the anonymity of the archive to the sensible density of experience. The metanarrative sequences devoted to the teamwork between researchers and artist – from the vineyard in Ripon to the meetings at the Université d'Ottawa and at the BAnQ (pp.11–20) – make explicit the translation of the file into image as a methodical, debated, reflexive operation. Further on, the pages that condense into recurring figures the "commonplaces" of suicide (the Jacques Cartier Bridge, the métro, hanging in domestic spaces, vehicles adapted for carbon monoxide: pp. 22–25), or that reconstruct in detail the staging of specific cases – from the foreign traveller who takes his life in a hotel, to pregnant young women such as Marie, through to couples' *pactes suicidaires* (pp. 42–55) – recompose the archival material into a constellation of embodied, situated, relational scenes. It is through these compositional choices – cuts, framings, sequencing rhythm, insistence on small objects and farewell letters – that the comic produces a form of intelligibility of suicidal phenomena that systematically intertwines the statistical and typological seriality of the files with their lived and scenic dimension, making visible what in the coroner's acts alone would remain in the background.

In this movement, Gaulin's sentence performs the function of a symbolic hinge: it is not merely the remainder of an individual, historically dated gesture, but the device that redistributes responsibility across the entire historical span covered by the files, an extreme "lyrical" act that condenses a whole history of socially produced suffering. The accusation does not strike an abstract entity such as "society"; it targets historically specific configurations of power and knowledge. The concrete forms of *prise en charge du suicide* oscillate between criminalisation, psychiatric pathologisation, and the recognition of a "right to die," redefining each time who is regarded as responsible, deviant, ill, or a victim of intolerable circumstances. In this sense, the BD renders visible what the literature on social suffering has highlighted at a theoretical level: that suicide cannot be reduced to an aggregation of individual cases, but constitutes a point of condensation for political, economic, and institutional violences that produce differentially distributed vulnerabilities. At the same time, the operation of reopening the archive situates itself in implicit dialogue with those reflections (Mbembe 2002; Hartman 2007; Stoler 2009) that have foregrounded the violence inscribed in archives and the need for practices of *critical fabulation* capable of restoring agency and opacity to subjects recorded only as cases, files, classified bodies.

The BD takes this question seriously – how to avoid inflicting a "second violence" on the dead through representation – and translates it into formal choices: the attenuation of graphic detail, an emphasis on the social conditions preceding the act, and a careful working-through of voices and farewell letters. In this way, Gaulin's public suicide is not isolated as an icon, but repositioned within a constellation of ordinary suicides that disclose its structural dimension: the title sentence becomes the point at which the lyrical register, the social history of suicide in Québec, and the critique of institutional regimes of classification intersect, producing a device of collective responsabilisation that administrative archives alone are not capable of activating.
For sociological work, this device foregrounds at least three elements that the archive, on its own, can scarcely make visible. First, the scenic dimension of suicide: the files record places and means in the form of variables, whereas the comic restores them as lived spaces, as scenographies in which bodies and objects are arranged according to a logic of staging that involves future spectators – family members, passers-by, institutions. Second, the institutional web that precedes and follows the act: in the pages, the intersections between police, forensic medicine, welfare, family, and spaces of female segregation emerge clearly, rendering tangible what often remains in the background of the file. Third, the work of self-archiving undertaken by the subjects themselves: letters, meticulous instructions concerning the treatment of the body, attempts to govern one's own posthumous memory appear in the BD as practices that transform future suicides into co-authors of their own file and, retrospectively, of their own representation.
From this follows the eminently public character of the operation. *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* is not merely a by-product of an academic research project; it is a form of public sociology that adopts comics as a communicative infrastructure through which a repressed history can be recirculated in the public sphere. The choice of the graphic language enables the research to move beyond the boundaries of the disciplinary circuit without relinquishing rigour: the explanatory apparatus, the thematisation of method, and the attention to the risks of aestheticisation keep the scientific labour underpinning each page clearly in view. At the same time, the visual–verbal sequentiality makes possible a shared postmemorial experience, in which non-specialist readers are enabled to grasp the structural significance of individual cases and to situate their own perception of suicide within long genealogies of classification and stigma. From a normative standpoint, the lesson to be drawn is clear: to take comics seriously as a potential language of the discipline does not mean embracing a trend or seeking "more appealing" channels for an otherwise unchanged sociology. It means recognising that, especially when working on extreme, marginal, and traumatic experiences, the form of restitution is an integral part of the object itself.

References

Assmann J. (1992), *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, C.H. Beck.
Bablet M. [2011 (2018)], *La bella morte*, Milano, Mondadori.
Barberis E., Grüning. B. (2021), *Doing Social Sciences Via Comics and Graphic Novels. An Introduction*, in "Sociologica", 15(1): 125-142. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12773
Bechdel A. (2006), *Fun Home. A Family Tragicomic*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin.
Brancato S. (1994), *Fumetti. Guida ai comics nel sistema dei media*, Roma, Datanews.
Burawoy M. (2005), *For Public Sociology*, in "American Sociological Review",

70(1): 4-28.
Capcom (1990), *Little Nemo: The Dream Master* [videogioco], Nintendo Entertainment System, Osaka, Capcom Co., Ltd.
Chute H. (2016), *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.
Delisle G. (2011), *Jerusalem. Chronicles from the Holy City*, Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly.
Delisle G. (2017), *Hostage*, Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly.
Eco U. (1964), *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazione di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*, Milano, Bompiani.
Eco U. (1976), *Il superuomo di massa. Studi sul romanzo popolare*, Roma, Cooperativa Scrittori.
Farge A. (1989), *Le goût de l'archive*, Paris, Seuil.
Forney E. (2012), *Marbles. Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me. A Graphic Memoir*, New York, Gotham Books.
Ginzburg C. (1976), *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Torino, Einaudi.
Gipi (2004), *Appunti per una storia di guerra*, Roma, Coconino Press. Gipi (2013), *unastoria*, Roma, Coconino Press.
Green K. (2013), *Lighter Than My Shadow*, London, Jonathan Cape.
Green M.J., Myers K.R. (2010), *Graphic Medicine: Use of Comics in Medical Education and Patient Care*, in "BMJ", 340, c863.
Groensteen T. (1999), *Système de la bande dessinée*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
Grüning B., Scavarda A. (2025), *Sociologia del fumetto*, Roma, Carocci.
Hartman S. (2007), *Lose Your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Hirsch M. (2012), *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press.
Kukkonen K. (2011), *Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology*, in "SubStance", 40(1): 34–52.
Kuttner P.J., Sousanis N., Weaver-Hightower M.B. (2017), *How to Draw Comics the Scholarly Way: Creating Comics-Based Research in the Academy*, in "Qualitative Inquiry", 23(3): 369-380.
Leavy P. (2015), *Method Meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice*, New York, Guilford Press (2ª ed.).
Matsner Gruenberg S. (1944), *The Comics as a Social Force*, in "Journal of Educational Sociology", 18(4): 204-213.
Mbembe A. (2002), *The Power of the Archive and Its Limits*, in Hamilton C., Harris V., Taylor J., Pickover M., Reid G., Saleh R. (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2, 19-27.
McCay W. (1969), *Little Nemo*, Milano, Garzanti.
McCloud S. (1993), *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*, New York, HarperCollins.
McCloud S. (2000), *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, New York, Paradox Press.
Mickwitz N. (2016), *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
Moretti V., Della Puppa F. (2025), *The social genres of comics. Impact and innovation*

of comics in social sciences, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Moretti V., Ratti S., Di Marco L., Gagliardi C., Farinella M., Mistrello E., Anderle E. (2025), *Cuore. Biografia a fumetti di un organo*, Treviso, Becco Giallo.
Nakazawa K. (1972), *Ore wa Mita (I Saw It)*, Tokyo, Choubunsha.
Nakazawa K. (1973-1974), *Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen)*, Tokyo, Kôjinsha.
Nihei T. [1995 (2000)], *Noise-Blame*, Modena, Panini Comics.
Nora P. (1984), *Entre mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux*, in "Les Lieux de mémoire", vol. I, Paris, Gallimard: xvii–xlii.
Perreault I., Cellard A., Corriveau P., Quesnel C. (2020), *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde. Le suicide scénarisé au Québec depuis 1763*, Montréal, Moelle Graphik.
Pink S. (2013), *Doing Visual Ethnography*, Los Angeles, SAGE.
Roeder G. H. Jr. (1984), *Coming to Terms with the Comics*, in "Journal of American Culture", 7(1): 69–75.
Rothberg M. (2009), *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
Sacco J. (2012), *Journalism*, New York, Metropolitan Books.
Sneath, D., Holbraad, M., Pedersen, M.A. (2009), *Technologies of the Imagination: An Introduction*, Ethnos, 74(1): 5-30.
Sousanis N. (2015), *Unflattening*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.
Stoler A.L. (2009), *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
Williams I. C. (2012), *Graphic Medicine: Comics as Medical Narrative*", in "Medical Humanities", 38(1): 21-26.

La *graphic medicine* come spazio eterotopico. Rappresentare e ripensare il reale nella ricerca sociale

Veronica Moretti

This article proposes to read comics as heterotopic spaces capable of representing and, at the same time, producing social knowledge. Starting from the process of legitimation of the medium and its hybrid verbo-visual status, the paper shows how graphic sequentiality and the spatialization of narrative generate heterochronies and configurations of meaning that challenge the linear registers of academic writing. The adoption of a Foucauldian paradigm allows the interpretation of comic panels as "counter-sites" in which time, space, and social relations are suspended and reorganized, bringing to the fore marginal voices and counter-narratives. On a political and educational level, comics function as a cultural technology of critique, fostering processes of reflexivity, visual literacy, and the redistribution of epistemic authority within research and pedagogical contexts. Graphic Medicine constitutes a paradigmatic case: through pathographies and situated narratives, comics render vulnerability and uncertainty in care visible, dismantling dominant stereotypes and metaphors.

Introduzione

Negli ultimi decenni, il fumetto ha conquistato uno spazio crescente nel panorama culturale e accademico, superando l'etichetta di prodotto d'intrattenimento "minore" per affermarsi come linguaggio dotato di una propria complessità semiotica ed epistemica (D'Andrea *et al.* 2024; Dorfles 2005). È importante precisare come questo processo di legittimazione non si sia limitato alla sfera estetica, ma abbia riguardato più in generale la capacità di rappresentare, e al tempo stesso di produrre, conoscenze (anche) sociali. Il fumetto oggi, lungi dall'essere solo un genere narrativo, si configura come un medium ibrido, capace di articolare testi e immagini, temporalità e spazi, esperienza soggettiva e processi collettivi (Galvan 2024; Halsall, Warren 2022; Kukkonen 2013).

Questo articolo rappresenta un tentativo, almeno nelle intenzioni di chi scrive, di leggere e commentare il fumetto applicando una visione "alternativa" alle sue interpretazioni classiche.

Per questo, il primo paragrafo servirà ad introdurre il percorso di legittimazione, complesso e mai lineare, che il medium del fumetto ha intrapreso nel corso del tempo. Gli sforzi che segnano un processo di riconoscimento molteplice, per cui il fumetto è entrato a pieno titolo anche nelle scienze sociali e nella comunicazione, sono stati compiuti da diversз studiosз anche nel contesto italiano[1] che ne hanno messo in luce il valore culturale ed educativo. Il "fumetto accademico" – un neologismo che non cerca assolutamente di addomesticare il mezzo all'ambito scientifico – espone la conoscenza a una vulnerabilità pubblica che ne consente al contempo l'apertura,

[1] Sottolineo "anche" in considerazione della vasta letteratura sul tema prodotta a livello internazionale. Si vedano, tra le tante ricerche, quelle di En-Yi Ting (2019), Kinsella (2020), La Marca (2022), Hescher (2016).

permettendo di rendere visibili i processi, i dubbi e le emozioni che accompagnano la produzione del sapere. In questo senso, e ribadendo quanto dichiarato in apertura, il fumetto non rappresenta semplicemente un nuovo mezzo espressivo, ma un terreno di sperimentazione metodologica (Kuttner *et al.* 2021; Rainford 2020; Dean-Coffey 2013), dove la scienza sociale si interroga sui propri linguaggi, sui propri confini e sulle proprie posture epistemiche.

All'interno del secondo paragrafo, ed è qui che risiede la promessa di innovazione del presente contributo, propongo di adattare il concetto foucaultiano di *eterotopia* al fumetto e alla sua applicazione all'interno delle scienze sociali.

Come "spazi altri", utilizzando l'espressione di Foucault stesso, le eterotopie mettono in crisi i modi ordinari di organizzare il tempo, lo spazio e persino le relazioni sociali, consentendo di osservare dall'interno le tensioni e le contraddizioni della società contemporanea. Se applicato al fumetto, tale concetto permette di comprendere il medium non soltanto come rappresentazione della realtà, ma come luogo di sperimentazione critica, in cui la conoscenza sociale si articola attraverso nuove grammatiche visive e narrative. Una specie di sovvertimento che propone nuove logiche e articolazioni.

Proseguendo, cercherò, nel terzo paragrafo, di mostrare come l'applicazione del concetto di eterotopia al fumetto renda visibili importanti sfumature politiche, formative e trasformative. In questa direzione, Cox (2021) osserva che il medium del fumetto risulta ottimale per dare voce a soggettività che negoziano genere, etnie o intersezionalità, proprio perché la combinazione di testo e immagine consente una rappresentazione polisemica e stratificata. Le ricerche di Scott e Fawaz (2018), Chute (2010) e delle studiose raccolte nel volume collettivo di "Intersectional Feminist Readings of Comics" mostrano come la presenza crescente di donne, minoranze etniche, corpi non conformi e provenienti da background marginalizzati stia progressivamente modificando l'orizzonte identitario dei fumetti.

Ampliare le possibilità di identificazione significa contestare norme pregresse di esclusione, ridefinendo chi può essere visto, rappresentato e riconosciuto. E come, ad esempio, chi disegna o viene disegnato negozia la propria rappresentazione e il messaggio veicolato mediante le tavole illustrate.

Infine, mi concentrerò su un esempio concreto di (ri)pensamento dell'applicazione del fumetto, sempre nella sua accezione eterotopica: la Graphic Medicine. Se declinato nel contesto della salute, il fumetto diviene un mezzo privilegiato per rappresentare l'esperienza del tempo nella malattia: non come sequenza lineare (e qui ci rifacciamo ai capisaldi che vedono nella narrazione individuale la possibilità di raccontare l'esperienza dell'*illness*)[2] ma come spazio di simultaneità e risonanza, dove il passato riemerge nel presente e il corpo diventa archivio visivo di memoria, dolore e trasformazione. E dove si possono raccontare storie nuove. Nuove non per chi scrive. Nuove per chi si accinge alla lettura e alla comprensione di fatti personali.

In questo senso, ogni tavola è un'eterotopia narrativa che ospita temporalità divergenti e saperi plurali, permettendo al lettorə di "abitare" il tempo della cura – un tempo diseguale, oscillante e profondamente umano.

[2] Naturalmente, il riferimento qui è quanto proposto mediante l'approccio della Narrative-based Medicine, sviluppato da Charon, che sottolinea l'importanza della narrazione e delle storie di pazienti e professionisti per una comprensione più profonda e umana dell'esperienza di cura (Charon 2006).

1. *In principio era il fumetto*

I processi di legittimazione scientifica e l'affermazione di un tema di ricerca come oggetto di indagine legittimo, capace di attraversare e contaminare confini disciplinari differenti, richiedono tempo. Specialmente nel caso di storie a fumetti. Da linguaggio a lungo percepito come "popolare", marginale rispetto alle arti maggiori[3] o ai linguaggi della conoscenza (Lacassin 1971), il fumetto è progressivamente divenuto un laboratorio teorico e metodologico per le scienze sociali, in dialogo con la teoria dei media, gli studi culturali, la pedagogia e le medical humanities (Chute 2011; Griffin 2019; Green 2015).

La natura ibrida del medium - fondata sull'intreccio di parola e immagine[4], di temporalità e spazialità, di esperienza e astrazione (Groensteen 2007) - consente di rappresentare e al tempo stesso di problematizzare la realtà sociale in forme polifoniche. Attraverso la sequenzialità grafica e la spazialità della pagina, il fumetto mette in scena processi complessi, articolando simultaneamente il piano micro delle biografie individuali e quello macro delle strutture sociali, culturali e politiche (Moretti, Della Puppa 2025). Come tale, il fumetto si colloca a pieno titolo nel campo delle pratiche che uniscono analisi e rappresentazione, teoria e immaginazione, facendo emergere dimensioni dell'esperienza che la scrittura accademica tradizionale tende a escludere o a marginalizzare (Backe 2021). Ed è su queste premesse che l'interesse delle scienze sociali si avvia.

Non sorprende allora quanto il percorso di legittimazione del fumetto come linguaggio e come oggetto di studio si fondi su alcune pietre miliari. McCloud, in *Understanding Comics* (1994), ha dimostrato che il fumetto non è un derivato della letteratura o delle arti visive, ma un linguaggio autonomo con una propria grammatica cognitiva e narrativa. Questa prospettiva, rompendo le gerarchie tradizionali tra parola e immagine, considerato che l'intera opera è essa stessa un fumetto, ha aperto la strada a un ripensamento più ampio del rapporto tra linguaggio, conoscenza e rappresentazione.

Tuttavia, già Eco, in *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), aveva colto l'importanza culturale e simbolica del fumetto quale dispositivo di costruzione dell'immaginario collettivo, capace di riflettere e, al tempo stesso, di produrre i valori e i miti della modernità di massa. Quella tanto discussa dai cosiddetti apocalittici, peraltro.

Sulla stessa linea, Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1957), mostrava come le narrazioni visive, lungi dal limitarsi a rappresentare il reale, lo trasformino, inscrivendo nei suoi oggetti e nelle sue forme quotidiane la trama ideologica di un'epoca. In questa prospettiva, ogni fumetto si configura come una scelta interpretativa e, soprattutto, politica, un'operazione di senso che negozia significati e poteri tra autore, testo e lettorə. La sua forza risiede proprio in questa dimensione dialogica e plurivoca: nella capacità di mettere in comunicazione sguardi diversi, di costruire spazi di confronto e di disaccordo, di far emergere le contraddizioni e le ambivalenze del sociale.

[3] E qui il merito si deve a Claude Beylie che, ampliando la definizione delle "sette arti" di Ricciotto Canudo, ne parla per la prima volta come Nona Arte in un articolo del 1964, *La bande dessinée est-elle un art?*

[4] Anche se qui è doveroso precisare che non tutti i fumetti prevedono la giustapposizione di un registro verbale e testuale. Ne sono un esempio fumetti solamente illustrati, tra cui *The Arrival* (2006) di Shaun Tan; *About Betty's Boobby* (2018) di Vero Cazot e Julie Rocheleau; *The Number 73304-23-4153-6-96-8* (2008) di Thomas Ott.

Su queste basi si è sviluppata la riflessione contemporanea sui fumetti, che ha progressivamente ridefinito il medium come campo interdisciplinare di ricerca. Gli studi di Groensteen (2007) e Barbieri (1991; 2017) hanno contribuito a restituire al fumetto la sua complessità formale e semiotica, mettendo in luce come le sue strutture narrative, i suoi ritmi visivi e la sua sintassi spaziale lo rendano un linguaggio capace di accogliere, in forme ibride, la tensione fra personale e collettivo, fra memoria e rappresentazione. Questa capacità di attraversare generi e contesti ha certamente favorito la diffusione del fumetto anche come linguaggio critico e riflessivo: dal fumetto supereroico e d'avventura alle autobiografie disegnate, dai manga alle produzioni underground, ogni tradizione culturale ne ha ridefinito le funzioni e gli orizzonti di senso.
In questa prospettiva, autori come Labarre (2020), Hescher (2016) e, recentemente, un'opera collettanea intitolata *The Social Genre of comics* (Moretti, Della Puppa 2025) hanno riletto la nozione di "genere" interpretandola come un costrutto dinamico e relazionale, che opera come spazio di negoziazione fra produzione e ricezione, estetica e cultura, individuale e collettivo. Il fumetto, allora, smette di essere una forma stabile per diventare un campo di pratiche discorsive e sociali, un laboratorio in cui si articolano valori, aspettative e tensioni di una determinata epoca. Tale carattere relazionale e contestuale consente di concepirlo come un mediatore simbolico tra autore, pubblico e società, e al tempo stesso come uno strumento per esplorare i processi di costruzione e trasformazione del reale. Permette, inoltre, di esplorare eventi politici e vissuti sociali in modo autentico e sotto forma di vera e propria denuncia sociale[5].
Anche nell'ambito accademico italiano, numerosз autorз hanno contribuito a definirne il valore culturale e analitico. Brancato (2016) ne ha messo in luce il doppio statuto di prodotto dell'industria culturale e fonte storica; Frezza (2008) ha indagato il rapporto del fumetto con la società italiana e con i media di massa; Barbieri (2017) ne ha decifrato i codici e le strutture linguistiche. Cristante (2021) e Calabrese (2017) ne hanno sottolineato la valenza pedagogica e formativa, mentre Grüning e Scavarda, con la recente pubblicazione *Sociologia del fumetto* (2025), hanno contribuito a fondarne una vera e propria disciplina di indagini. Altrз studiosз, come Della Puppa e Walker (2025), ne hanno sperimentato l'uso come strumento di ricerca qualitativa ed etnografica, in particolare nello studio delle migrazioni e delle minoranze. Infine, la *graphic medicine*, che verrà ampiamente discussa all'interno dell'ultimo paragrafo, ha mostrato come il fumetto possa diventare un mezzo per rappresentare la sofferenza, la cura e la vulnerabilità, restituendo dignità e voce alle esperienze corporee e affettive spesso escluse dal discorso medico-istituzionale (Moretti 2025).
È proprio a partire da questa capacità di costruire spazi di pensiero alternativi che cerco di introdurre una comprensione del fumetto come "spazio altro", come eterotopia nel senso foucaultiano: un luogo in cui si intrecciano reale e immaginario, visibile e invisibile, norme e deviazioni. Nel paragrafo seguente, questa prospettiva verrà approfondita per mostrare come il fumetto, attraverso la sua struttura spaziale e narrativa, costruisca mondi possibili, rappresenti luoghi marginali o dimenticati e

[5] Faccio qui riferimento alla graphic novel '30 seconds from Gaza', racconti palestinesi dalla Striscia. "Immagini che la Storia dovrà giudicare".

renda visibili quelle dimensioni del sociale che le forme tradizionali di rappresentazione tendono a escludere.

2. Le eterotopie: da Foucault al fumetto

Il concetto di eterotopia, formulato da Foucault nella conferenza *Des espaces autres* (1967), designa quei luoghi concreti e localizzabili che funzionano come "contrositi": spazi reali che riflettono, contestano e sovvertono l'ordine dominante. A differenza delle utopie, luoghi senza luogo, proiezioni di un altrove ideale, le eterotopie esistono nel mondo sociale e ne costituiscono la controparte critica. Esse sono spazi ambigui e complessi, nei quali il reale e l'immaginario si intrecciano, producendo forme di discontinuità e di inversione. Non si collocano al di fuori della società, ma la attraversano dall'interno, rivelandone le contraddizioni e le tensioni.
Foucault, infatti, definisce le eterotopie come luoghi "altri" che mettono in scena la società in forma riflessa, spesso deformata o ribaltata. In esse, ciò che è marginale, deviante o residuale trova una collocazione simbolica, ma anche una forma di visibilità. Sono spazi che rappresentano la realtà per contrasto e che, proprio attraverso questo scarto, rendono possibile una riflessione critica. Il carcere, l'ospedale, il manicomio o il cimitero, ma anche il teatro, il museo, la nave o il giardino incarnano modalità diverse di eterotopia: luoghi separati, regolati da norme specifiche, dove il tempo e lo spazio assumono una forma altra. Il teatro, ad esempio, comprime mondi e tempi differenti in un unico spazio scenico; il museo accumula e conserva, in un solo luogo, epoche e culture lontane; il cimitero, spostato ai margini della città moderna, riflette il bisogno borghese di separare i vivi dai morti e di dare alla morte un ordine visibile.
Le eterotopie funzionano come dispositivi di rivelazione: mostrano ciò che la società rimuove, sospendono le categorie abituali di tempo, spazio e identità, aprono interstizi in cui norme e ruoli possono essere rinegoziati. Potremmo argomentare che in esse il mondo appare insieme familiare e straniante, riconoscibile e al tempo stesso trasfigurato. In quest'ottica, l'eterotopia non rappresenta dunque un semplice "altrove", ma un modo di pensare e abitare lo spazio in chiave critica: un luogo liminale dove l'ordine sociale si rispecchia e si incrina, dove l'immaginazione produce nuove configurazioni del reale.
Una prospettiva del genere consente di leggere il fumetto come un *altro spazio* culturale. La sua materialità formale – la sequenza delle vignette, i vuoti del *gutter*[6], la giustapposizione di testi e immagini – crea configurazioni che destabilizzano la linearità della rappresentazione. Il fumetto, infatti, mette in scena una pluralità di tempi e luoghi che non coincidono mai perfettamente con quelli socialmente istituiti: frammenti del quotidiano convivono con elementi immaginari, la memoria personale con la storia collettiva, il registro intimo con quello politico.
Se le eterotopie foucaultiane rappresentano luoghi in cui l'ordine del reale viene sospeso e riorganizzato, il fumetto può essere considerato una loro traduzione narrativa: uno spazio simbolico e visivo che disarticola la realtà per restituirla sotto nuove forme di senso. Non a caso, del resto si è progressivamente affermato come uno degli strumenti più originali e accessibili per rappresentare e riflettere sulle grandi crisi

[6] Altrimenti definito come lo spazio bianco fisico tra una vignetta e l'altra.

del nostro tempo, tra cui quella climatica. Le percezioni pubbliche e soggettive del fenomeno sono influenzate da fattori diversi – abitudini individuali, condizioni socioeconomiche, appartenenze politiche e culturali – e spesso le statistiche e i dibattiti istituzionali non riescono a offrire orientamenti chiari o condivisi (Arıkan, Günay 2021; Luo, Zhao 2019).

In questo scenario, il linguaggio del fumetto si distingue per la sua capacità di tradurre l'astratto nel visibile, restituendo in forma narrativa ed emotiva dati e processi che altrimenti resterebbero invisibili. Le tavole permettono di comprimere e dilatare il tempo, stabilendo nessi immediati tra cause e conseguenze, e di rappresentare la simultaneità dei fenomeni – come desertificazione, incendi, innalzamento delle temperature o perdita di biodiversità – che una narrazione lineare difficilmente potrebbe restituire.

Tra le opere più rappresentative vi è *Le Monde sans fin* (2021) di Jancovici e Blain, che intreccia divulgazione scientifica, ironia e riflessione politica per esplorare le trasformazioni energetiche e climatiche del pianeta. In *Climate Changed* (2014), Squarzoni costruisce una riflessione autobiografica che intreccia scienza, biografia e impegno etico, ponendo chi legge di fronte alla dimensione esistenziale della crisi ecologica. Nel quadro che qui si propone, queste due opere vengono assunte come casi guida, poiché consentono di osservare in modo particolarmente chiaro l'intreccio tra narrazione grafica, sapere scientifico e responsabilità etico-politica, che costituisce uno dei nodi analitici centrali del saggio.

E allora, in questa prospettiva, ci è utile richiamare la teoria di Ricoeur sulla *mimesis* narrativa, che ci offre una chiave interpretativa decisiva. Nella trilogia di *Temps et récit* (1983-1985), Ricoeur sostiene che il racconto non riproduce semplicemente l'esperienza, ma la riconfigura attraverso l'*emplotment*, ossia l'organizzazione degli eventi dispersi in una trama coerente. Nel fumetto, tale processo assume una dimensione ulteriore: la narrazione non si limita a ordinare temporalmente l'esperienza, ma la spazializza attraverso la pagina, la sequenza e la giustapposizione visiva. Ogni vignetta è al tempo stesso un frammento e un nodo relazionale, un punto in cui l'esperienza temporale si traduce in configurazione simbolica.

Ed è questa trasposizione spaziale del tempo a rendere il fumetto un luogo in cui le temporalità sociali si intrecciano e si rifrangono, producendo vere e proprie eterocronie – tempi plurali, soggettivi e collettivi che coesistono nello stesso spazio narrativo. Come osserva Elias (1993), il tempo è una costruzione sociale: non una misura naturale, ma un dispositivo che regola e ordina i rapporti fra individui e istituzioni. Ed è così che il fumetto, infrangendo la linearità cronologica e moltiplicando i livelli di lettura, rende percepibile il carattere storico e convenzionale del tempo sociale.

Un caso analiticamente centrale per comprendere questa riconfigurazione narrativa del tempo è rappresentato da Maus di Art Spiegelman, in cui il presente del narratore si intreccia con il passato traumatico del padre sopravvissuto ai campi di concentramento: la disposizione grafica delle vignette, la sovrapposizione dei piani temporali e l'uso del bianco e nero trasformano il racconto della memoria in una cartografia del trauma, dove la cronologia si spezza e il ricordo diventa spazio abitabile.

In una prospettiva comparativa, Persepolis di Marjane Satrapi funziona invece come esempio di supporto, utile a mostrare come dinamiche analoghe si declinino in un diverso contesto storico e geopolitico. L'opera mette in scena la simultaneità tra storia pubblica e intimità biografica, mostrando come la rivoluzione iraniana si rifletta nella formazione di un sé femminile, diasporico e dislocato. L'alternanza di registro politico e familiare, di ironia e tragedia, di parola e silenzio, fa del fumetto un campo visivo in cui la soggettività si ricostruisce nel confronto con le rotture storiche.

Con una funzione prevalentemente esemplificativa, il lavoro di Joe Sacco consente di estendere questa riflessione al campo del graphic journalism. Con la sua *Palestine,* rivela come la forma del reportage grafico possa assumere una funzione analoga: il disegno sostituisce la pretesa oggettività del giornalismo tradizionale con una prospettiva situata, che rende visibili le contraddizioni del discorso mediatico e restituisce dignità alle voci subalterne.

Queste opere grafiche ci mostrano allora come la configurazione narrativa del fumetto agisca come dispositivo di *emplotment* sociale: un processo attraverso il quale le esperienze marginali, invisibili o frammentarie vengono messe in relazione e rese intelligibili. Il fumetto, in tal senso, non racconta solo storie ma costruisce mondi, configurando – riprendendo di nuovo i Ricoeur – un nuovo regime di senso, in cui il vissuto individuale diventa occasione per comprendere le strutture collettive.

La dimensione eterotopica del fumetto, inoltre, si manifesta nella sua capacità di far coesistere lingue, codici e culture. A completamento di questo percorso, e spostando l'attenzione dalla dimensione temporale a quella linguistico-culturale, un esempio emblematico è la rivista libanese *Samandal*, pubblicata in arabo, francese e inglese, che incarna un'autentica "eterotopia traduttiva": un luogo in cui diversi sistemi di significazione convivono e si confrontano, generando un'esperienza di lettura che disorienta e, al tempo stesso, riorienta. Questa pluralità linguistica e culturale non è un semplice segno di ibridazione, ma un gesto politico che sovverte l'ordine monolingue della comunicazione globale e apre a una riflessione sulla traduzione come pratica di mediazione sociale.

Ed è in questa prospettiva che le eterotopie della rappresentazione hanno una valenza intrinsecamente politica: non offrono un luogo neutrale di testimonianza, ma producono uno spazio critico in cui le categorie consolidate vengono messe in crisi. Attraverso la stratificazione delle voci, la sovrapposizione dei tempi e la moltiplicazione degli sguardi, il fumetto documentario e autobiografico funziona come uno *specchio rovesciato* della società: rende visibili le assenze, smaschera le esclusioni, produce nuove forme di appartenenza. Il prossimo paragrafo servirà a guidarci proprio in questo potere trasformativo.

3. Il fumetto come spazio politico, formativo e trasformativo

L'analisi dei fumetti come spazi eterotopici e identitari trova un logico proseguimento nella riflessione sul loro potenziale politico ed educativo. Per chiarire questa articolazione, è utile distinguere analiticamente tre livelli intrecciati ma non sovrapponibili: una dimensione politica, una formativa e una trasformativa. Se, come mostrato, il fumetto mette in scena identità fluide, intersezionali e in costante negoziazione, esso diventa anche un luogo in cui i conflitti sociali e simbolici possono essere rappresentati, discussi e decostruiti (Beadling 2024). La capacità del medium di articolare testo e immagine, di accostare registri linguistici differenti e di coniugare ironia, pathos e analisi sociale, gli conferisce un valore epistemologico che va oltre la

dimensione estetica: il fumetto produce conoscenza, suscita riflessione e stimola processi di apprendimento critico.
Sul piano politico, la sua funzione non è solo quella di rappresentare il mondo, ma di riorientare lo sguardo di chi lo abita. In questo senso, il fumetto agisce, per dirla con le parole di Turner (1969), come un oggetto liminale, capace di collocarsi tra i confini del reale e dell'immaginario, della scienza e dell'arte, dell'individuale e del collettivo. Attraverso la potenza dell'immagine e il ritmo della narrazione sequenziale, mette in moto processi di identificazione e distanziamento che favoriscono la riflessività. Il lettore o la lettrice, immersi in una storia che spesso parla di altri, finiscono per riconoscere parti di sé e del proprio mondo, in un processo di risonanza affettiva che diventa anche cognitiva.
È proprio a partire da questa funzione politica dello sguardo che si comprende la valenza formativa del fumetto. Questa duplicità tra immedesimazione e distanza, coinvolgimento emotivo e analisi sociale, spiega perché il fumetto si sia imposto come strumento privilegiato di riflessione critica e pedagogica. La sua capacità di rappresentare il dolore, la disuguaglianza, la vulnerabilità e la resistenza lo rende un medium profondamente politico. Non solo perché affronta temi sociali, ma perché politicizza lo sguardo, rendendo visibili le strutture di potere che attraversano il quotidiano. Attraverso il linguaggio dissacrante e ironico, i fumetti possono smascherare le norme e i discorsi che regolano la rappresentazione del corpo, del genere, della malattia o della diversità.
La sociologia visuale, in particolare, ha messo in luce come i fumetti operino una forma di denaturalizzazione del visibile: ciò che la cultura dominante dà per scontato – il corpo maschile come neutro, la salute come norma, la tecnologia come progresso – viene messo in discussione attraverso il paradosso grafico, la deformazione, il contrasto cromatico o la rottura della sequenzialità. Questi dispositivi estetici non hanno una funzione decorativa, ma epistemica: producono spostamenti cognitivi, costringendo il lettore a ricollocare i propri punti di riferimento simbolici. Secondo Mirzoeff (1999), la cultura visiva è "nuova" proprio perché concentra la propria attenzione sul visivo come spazio in cui i significati vengono creati e messi in discussione.
Nel suo classico studio sociologico *Art Worlds* (1982, 1), Becker scrive: «All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the artwork we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be». In altri termini, la produzione di oggetti culturali come l'arte, la letteratura – e, naturalmente, il fumetto – è essenzialmente un'attività sociale.
In questa prospettiva, il fumetto può essere letto come una tecnologia culturale della critica (Couldry, Hepp 2018), uno strumento attraverso cui i soggetti e le collettività riflettono sul modo in cui vengono rappresentati e sul potere delle narrazioni. La dimensione partecipativa del medium - dai processi di co-creazione alle pratiche di fandom - alimenta una forma di intelligenza collettiva (Lévy 1997) che non si limita a consumare le storie, ma le rielabora e le trasforma. I lettori diventano così co-produttori di significato, attori di un processo di risignificazione culturale che attraversa confini disciplinari e sociali.

Se la dimensione politica riguarda ciò che il fumetto rende visibile, quella formativa concerne invece il modo in cui esso viene letto, interpretato e appreso. Da un punto di vista educativo, questa caratteristica rende il fumetto uno strumento particolarmente adatto a promuovere forme di apprendimento critico e riflessivo. Come suggerisce Freire (1970), la pedagogia della liberazione non consiste nel trasmettere contenuti, ma nel creare le condizioni perché le persone possano leggere il mondo e non solo la parola. I fumetti, in quanto - spesso ma non sempre - testi verbo-visivi, incarnano perfettamente questa possibilità: invitano a leggere e decifrare codici multipli, a interrogarsi sul rapporto tra immagine e potere, tra voce e silenzio, tra rappresentazione e omissione. L'atto stesso di leggere un fumetto diventa così un esercizio di analisi culturale, un processo di alfabetizzazione critica che coinvolge non solo l'intelletto, ma anche l'immaginazione e l'empatia.
Questa dimensione formativa si manifesta non soltanto nel contenuto, ma anche nella forma del medium. La disposizione spaziale delle vignette, la scelta dei colori, l'uso dei balloon e dei silenzi visivi creano un ritmo interpretativo che stimola la partecipazione attiva del lettore. Come osserva Groensteen (2007), l'organizzazione grafica del fumetto costruisce un "spazio mentale" in cui il senso si genera attraverso il movimento dello sguardo e la capacità del lettore di connettere frammenti dispersi. Questo lavoro cognitivo di ricomposizione diventa un modello per comprendere la complessità sociale: leggere un fumetto significa imparare a navigare tra piani diversi di significato, proprio come nella vita reale si devono interpretare simultaneamente linguaggi, corpi, simboli e contesti.
In ambito accademico e formativo, tali caratteristiche spiegano la diffusione delle pratiche di comics-based learning e di graphic social research, che valorizzano il fumetto come strumento di indagine e di restituzione della ricerca. Attraverso il disegno e la narrazione sequenziale, i partecipanti possono rappresentare vissuti difficili da verbalizzare, elaborare esperienze di vulnerabilità o di esclusione, e restituirle in forme comunicativamente efficaci. L'integrazione del fumetto nei processi di ricerca e formazione – come documentato da autori quali Ndalianis (2011), Kuttner e colleghi (2020) e Giancola (2021) – consente di superare la dicotomia tra sapere esperto e sapere vissuto, tra osservatore e osservato, dando voce a soggettività spesso escluse dalla produzione di conoscenza.
A partire da queste pratiche formative e partecipative, emerge infine una dimensione trasformativa, che eccede l'ambito educativo in senso stretto. Questo potenziale partecipativo apre anche a una riflessione politica più ampia. I fumetti, in quanto prodotti culturali accessibili e diffusivi, si collocano al crocevia tra comunicazione popolare e attivismo sociale. La loro fruizione pubblica, attraverso mostre, festival, performance e social media, li trasforma in strumenti di mobilitazione simbolica, capaci di rendere condivisibili esperienze di oppressione o di resistenza. In molti casi, il fumetto diventa un luogo di alleanza tra ricerca, arte e cittadinanza: un forum visivo in cui si discutono temi come la giustizia sociale, la salute, la memoria o l'ambiente.
Dal punto di vista teorico, questa funzione collettiva del fumetto può essere interpretata alla luce delle teorie della sfera pubblica (Habermas 1991 [1962]) e delle pratiche di cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994). I fumetti producono arene di discorso non istituzionali, in cui la rappresentazione assume un valore politico perché permette di rivendicare visibilità, riconoscimento e appartenenza. Nei progetti di graphic

medicine, ad esempio, il disegno diventa un atto di cura e di testimonianza; nei fumetti queer, un atto di sovversione e di affermazione identitaria; nei comics di denuncia, una forma di archivio emotivo e sociale. In ciascuno di questi casi, l'immagine agisce come strumento di contro-narrazione (Bamberg, Andrews 2004), capace di contestare l'ordine simbolico dominante e di generare nuove grammatiche dell'esperienza.
Le tre dimensioni fin qui discusse – politica, formativa e trasformativa – trovano un punto di condensazione nella dimensione corporea ed emotiva dell'esperienza di lettura. L'aspetto politico e pedagogico del fumetto si manifesta anche nella sua capacità di attivare il corpo e le emozioni, di sollecitare una conoscenza incarnata. Il linguaggio visivo dei comics mette in scena non solo ciò che è rappresentato, ma anche il modo in cui viene guardato: gli sguardi dei personaggi, le posture, i primi piani costruiscono una rete di relazioni affettive che coinvolge chi legge. Questa dimensione sensoriale non è secondaria, ma costituisce un canale di apprendimento etico ed empatico. Come dimostrano le ricerche di Szép (2020), Haan e colleghi (2022) e Tsao e Yu (2016), il contatto visivo e corporeo mediato dal fumetto stimola processi di riconoscimento e responsabilità che rafforzano la capacità di "vedere l'altro" – condizione fondamentale per ogni forma di conoscenza e di cura.
L'eterotopia del fumetto si compie così nel suo potere di generare spazi di trasformazione: spazi che accolgono il conflitto, l'ambiguità e la pluralità come risorse cognitive e morali. Nel suo linguaggio mescolato e nella sua capacità di tenere insieme emozione e analisi, esperienza e conoscenza, il fumetto rivela la possibilità di una pedagogia della complessità – una pedagogia che non si limita a spiegare il mondo, ma aiuta a immaginarlo diversamente. Nel prossimo paragrafo, proverò a raccontare di come un ambito specifico, ovvero la Graphic medicine, riesca ad incarnare uno spazio di conoscenza e di cura. Il tutto in chiave eterotopica.

4. Un esempio concreto: la graphic medicine *come spazio eterotopico di conoscenza e di cura*

In questo paragrafo, riporto una delle espressioni a mio avviso più evidenti della capacità del fumetto di configurarsi come spazio eterotopico: la Graphic Medicine (GM). Definita dal suo ideatore, Ian Williams (2007), come la branca della medicina narrativa che esplora e supporta "l'interazione tra il mezzo espressivo del fumetto e il dibattito sulla salute[7]", negli ultimi anni gli scritti e le ricerche attorno al tema sono prolificati (Moretti *et al* 2025). Che sia la storia di un padre con una figlia disabile[8] – narrata in tono tutt'altro che pietista – o le vicende di una giovane donna con disturbo bipolare, come ben raccontato da Ellen Forney nel suo *Marbles,* queste "patografie" (Green, Mayers 2010) cercano di offrire una rottura rispetto all'isolamento che, spesso, una malattia comporta per il soggetto che ne è abitato. Con la peculiarità che tutte le storie raccontate sono vere.
La GM, dunque, può essere interpretata come un "altro luogo" che esiste nel reale ma che sospende, riorganizza e talvolta sovverte i regimi ordinari di rappresentazione del corpo, della malattia e della conoscenza medica. Un luogo in cui la combinazione di linguaggio visivo - tipica del fumetto – e la narrazione autobiografica – tipica della medicina narrativa – creano uno spazio simbolico e sociale dove la malattia smette di

[7] Si rimanda al sito https://graphicmedicineitalia.org/pagine/la-disciplina/
[8] Penso all'opera di Fabien Toulme, *Non è te che aspettavo*.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 239-254
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.14

essere un fatto esclusivamente clinico per diventare un'esperienza condivisa, affettiva e cognitiva.
Ed è precisamente in questo senso che la pratica narrativa del disegno potrebbe agire come una contro-topografia della cura: un luogo in cui la vulnerabilità si trasforma in risorsa cognitiva e la sofferenza diventa esperienza narrabile e condivisa.
Detta in altri termini, la potenza eterotopica della graphic medicine risiede nella sua capacità di produrre una pluralità di regimi di senso. In un'unica pagina convivono la temporalità lineare della diagnosi, la sospensione del tempo vissuto nell'aderenza alla terapia, il ritmo della memoria e la discontinuità dell'esperienza corporea, oltre alla coesistenza della malattia con le reti sociali entro cui il soggetto è inserito.
La lettura della Graphic Medicine come spazio eterotopico può essere ulteriormente arricchita alla luce delle riflessioni di Zygmunt Bauman sulla retrotopia (2017). Nel contesto di società segnate da incertezza, precarizzazione e perdita di fiducia nelle istituzioni esperte, Bauman osserva come si diffonda una tendenza a cercare nel passato – reale o immaginato – forme di sicurezza, ordine e stabilità simbolica. Applicata al campo della salute, questa dinamica si traduce spesso in una nostalgia per un modello di medicina paternalistica, percepita come più solida e rassicurante rispetto alla complessità e all'ambiguità della cura contemporanea.
Le narrazioni di Graphic Medicine si collocano in tensione con questa retrotopia sanitaria: pur facendo spesso riferimento alla memoria, alla biografia e al passato del soggetto, esse non propongono un ritorno a un ordine perduto, ma rendono visibile l'irriducibile incertezza dell'esperienza di malattia. In questo senso, il fumetto non ricostruisce un'illusione di controllo, ma espone la fragilità come condizione strutturale, producendo uno spazio narrativo in cui l'assenza di certezze diventa condivisibile e, quindi, socialmente elaborabile.
Cercherò adesso di calare questi concetti in due esempi dove l'esperienza soggettiva della vulnerabilità si intreccia con le strutture del sapere medico e le emozioni della cura: entrambi, seppur con sfumature diverse, contemplano l'applicazione del disegno nel contesto della salute mentale, nei luoghi dove la pagina disegnata diventa un "altrove" e dove il confine tra chi cura e chi è curato tra sapere tecnico e sapere esperienziale, si fanno porosi.
Partiamo dal fumetto *Psychiatric Tales* (2010) di Cunningham, in grado di aprire un varco sorprendente. L'autore, ex infermiere psichiatrico e a sua volta portatore di una vulnerabilità personale, costruisce una raccolta di undici racconti che esplorano la vita quotidiana di persone affette da schizofrenia, depressione e disturbi della personalità. Attraverso un tratto essenziale e un linguaggio sobrio, Cunningham restituisce la dimensione umana della sofferenza psichica, mostrando come i pazienti siano intrappolati tra la negazione della loro condizione e la sua patologizzazione definitiva (Moretti, Sacavarda 2021). Nel fumetto non c'è giudizio, né distanza. C'è la fatica del vivere, la confusione, la paura. C'è lo stigma, che appare come un volto a due facce: da un lato la negazione della malattia ("non è niente, bisogna solo reagire"), dall'altro la sua trasformazione in destino ("non ne uscirai mai"). Tra queste due posizioni opposte, l'autore apre uno spazio di respiro, dove la sofferenza viene nominata senza vergogna e la malattia diventa, finalmente, esperienza condivisibile.
Per certi aspetti, l'opera *Psychiatric Tales* segue esattamente la logica che Canguilhem descrive ne *Il normale e il patologico* (1966) dove viene mostrato che la normalità non

è un insieme di parametri biostatistici, ma una capacità di adattamento. Ciò che è normale, secondo Canguilhem, non è ciò che si conforma a una media, ma ciò che riesce a trovare equilibrio nel proprio contesto. Il patologico, allora, non è semplicemente uno scostamento dalla norma: è un nuovo tipo di norma, meno efficace, meno flessibile, ma comunque un tentativo di adattamento. È un modo diverso di essere al mondo.

E nel fumetto di Cunningham il manicomio, la clinica, la stanza del colloquio diventano eterotopie del quotidiano: spazi reali ma separati, in cui il potere, la cura e la paura convivono. Ma sono anche luoghi di possibile riconciliazione, in cui l'alterità – la diversità – viene finalmente ascoltata.

In questo quadro, e come secondo esempio, propongo un'opera che a mio avviso rappresenta al meglio questa capacità del fumetto di mettere in scena l'idea di normalità della pratica medica e i suoi fallimenti: *The Bad Doctor* (2012) di Ian Williams. Il lavoro di Williams rappresenta molto più di un graphic novel: è un racconto che sfida e supera i confini rigidi tra ciò che consideriamo serio o leggero, personale o professionale. Apre dunque un luogo in cui la cura e il controllo si intrecciano, e la vulnerabilità emerge come parte costitutiva dell'essere umano. Che coincide, appunto, anche con l'essere un medico. Williams, infatti, utilizza il fumetto per condurci nella mente e nella quotidianità di Iwan James, un medico di base tormentato dal disturbo ossessivo-compulsivo e da un profondo senso di inadeguatezza nel rispondere alle aspettative del suo lavoro. Dietro il camice bianco, Iwan non affronta solo i problemi dei suoi pazienti – tra cui depressione, pensieri suicidari e isolamento – ma combatte anche i propri demoni interiori, cercando di conciliare dovere professionale e vulnerabilità personale. La forza di *The Bad Doctor* risiede proprio nella sua capacità di trascendere i confini tra questi mondi, mostrando la medicina nella sua dimensione più umana. Le linee che separano medico e paziente, cura di sé e cura dell'altro, si fanno fluide. Williams mostra che la fragilità non è una deviazione dal ruolo professionale, ma un elemento costitutivo dell'esperienza del prendersi cura. In sostanza, smonta gli stereotipi e le metafore che spesso circondano la professione medica. E, come ha mostrato Susan Sontag nei suoi saggi *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) e *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1997), le metafore che circondano la malattia e la cura non sono mai innocenti: riflettono e rinforzano schemi culturali e morali che definiscono chi è considerato "forte" o "debole", "puro" o "colpevole". In questo senso, smontare le metafore dominanti significa anche mettere in discussione gli stereotipi che attraversano la professione medica e il modo in cui viene narrata. In questo senso, il fumetto di Ian Willias si presenta come uno strumento versatile e trasgressivo: versatile, perché attraverso la narrazione visiva riesce a far dialogare mondi differenti – medico, emotivo, etico – in un unico spazio narrativo; trasgressivo, perché mette in discussione l'idea di una medicina intesa come dominio esclusivo del sapere tecnico.

L'ambulatorio del dottor Iwan James diventa allora uno spazio "altro" in cui le identità di chi cura e di chi la cura vuole riceverla si scompongono e si ricompongono. Qui la vulnerabilità del medico si specchia in quella dei/lle pazienti, il linguaggio clinico cede il passo all'introspezione e la malattia mentale – vissuta dal curante stesso – diventa un'occasione di conoscenza reciproca. Come ogni eterotopia foucaultiana, anche questo spazio contiene una tensione: è reale ma separato, quotidiano ma

simbolicamente rovesciato. La routine della pratica medica si trasforma in un laboratorio di riflessività etica, dove il sapere professionale incontra i propri limiti.
Al tempo stesso, l'opera invita a riflettere sui limiti e sulle sfide di queste narrazioni. L'impatto emotivo è forte: leggere *The Bad Doctor* significa confrontarsi con l'idea che anche chi cura ha bisogno di essere curato, e che l'autorità medica si fonda su un'umanità fragile. Non tutti i lettori sono pronti a questo confronto, e non sempre il linguaggio del fumetto è riconosciuto, nelle istituzioni sanitarie e accademiche, come forma legittima di conoscenza. Ma è proprio qui che possiamo riscoprirne la forza sovversiva: nel mostrare che la cura è sempre un atto imperfetto, relazionale, vulnerabile – e che la conoscenza stessa nasce da questa imperfezione.

Concludo aprendo

Questo lavoro ha proposto una doppia mossa: da un lato, ri-legittimare il fumetto come dispositivo cognitivo e non come semplice veicolo illustrativo; dall'altro, interpretarlo – con Foucault – come eterotopia, ovvero come spazio reale ma "altro", in cui l'ordine del visibile viene temporaneamente sospeso e riorganizzato. In questa chiave, le tavole disegnate non sono solo rappresentazioni, bensì laboratori epistemici dove il sociale diventa interrogabile attraverso grammatiche verbo-visive che tengono insieme affetti, corpi, memorie e istituzioni. Provo dunque a riassumere in queste (in)conclusioni tre implicazioni che emergono con chiarezza.
Dal punto di vista epistemologico, la materialità del medium (vignette, gutter, ritmo sequenziale) rende praticabile una mimesi configurativa che, oltre il racconto lineare, spazializza il tempo e moltiplica i fuochi interpretativi. Ne derivano forme di conoscenza "situate" e dialogiche, capaci di accogliere ambivalenze e discontinuità che la prosa accademica tende a normalizzare. Il fumetto, così, non "traduce" semplicemente dati: produce dati e li mette alla prova pubblicamente, esponendo la conoscenza alla verifica sociale della lettura.
La seconda dimensione concerne la politica. Le eterotopie del fumetto mettono in scena una lotta per la visibilità: decentrano lo sguardo, aprono spazio a soggettività marginalizzate e favoriscono contro-narrazioni rispetto ai discorsi dominanti su corpo, genere, razza, malattia, lavoro di cura. La dimensione partecipativa e co-creativa del medium (dal campo alla restituzione) rende negoziabili i confini tra sapere esperto e sapere vissuto, promuovendo una cittadinanza culturale in cui la rappresentazione è contesa, discussa, condivisa.
Infine, un ultimo asse è l'aspetto formativo. Come tecnologia della critica, il fumetto abilita pratiche di alfabetizzazione visiva e di apprendimento riflessivo: leggere (e fare) fumetti significa esercitare connessioni, riconoscere omissioni, maneggiare i silenzi, mettere in relazione tempi e piani diversi del racconto.
Nel mostrare la cura come esperienza incerta, relazionale e vulnerabile, il fumetto redistribuisce l'autorità epistemica e smonta stereotipi e metafore che circondano la professione medica.
Naturalmente, questa postura non è priva di limiti e sfide. Permane, in parte del mondo accademico e istituzionale, una resistenza a riconoscere il fumetto come forma legittima di conoscenza; inoltre, l'impatto emotivo e la prossimità con i vissuti pongono questioni etiche sulla raccolta, sulla selezione e sulla restituzione dei materiali.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Arıkan G., Günay D. (2021), *Public attitudes towards climate change: A cross-country analysis*, in “The British Journal of Politics and International Relations”, 23, 1: 158–174.

Backe H.-J. (2021), *Game-comics and comic-games. Against the concept of hybrids*, in Rauscher A., Stein D., Thon J-N. (eds) *Comics and Videogames. From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions*, Routledge, London: 60-83.

Bamberg M., Andrews M. (eds) (2004), *Considering counter-narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense,* John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

Barbieri D. (1991), *Il linguaggio del fumetto*, Bompiani, Milano.

Barbieri D. (2017), *Semiotica del fumetto*, Carocci, Roma.

Barthes R. (1957), *Mythologies*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Beadling J. (2024), *Comics as heterotopic medium: Lucy Knisley’s graphic memoir Displacement as exemplar of heterotopic comics*, in “ImageText”, 14, 3: https://imagetextjournal.com/beadling-heterotopic/.

Becker H. (1982), *Art worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Brancato S. (2016), *Il segno dei tempi. Fumetto come fonte di storia, pratica sociale e laboratorio di valori*, in “Mediascapes Journal”, 7: 115-130.

Calabrese S. (2017), *Che cos’è il graphic novel*, Carocci, Roma.

Canguilhem G. (1966), *Le normal et le pathologique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.

Charon R. (2006), *Narrative medicine: Honoring the stories of illness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Chute H. (2011), *Comics form and narrating lives*, in “Profession”, 1: 107–117.

Chute H. L. (2010), *Graphic women: Life narrative and contemporary comics*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Cox S. (2022), *Intersectional feminist readings of comics: Interpreting gender in graphic narratives*, Routledge, London.

Cristante S. (2021), *La storia di Harari nel linguaggio dei comics*, in “indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali”, 1, 1: 168-171.

D’Andrea F., Favaro A., Della Puppa F. (2024), *Un linguaggio che attraversa gli oceani, un ponte tra Ca’ Foscari e Cuba*, in Della Puppa F., Cano O. (a cura di), *L’isola che ci abita / La isla que nos habita*, Milano University Press, Milano: 155-187.

Dean-Coffey J. (2013), *Graphic recording*, in “New Directions for Evaluation”, 140: 47–67.

Della Puppa F., Walker S. (2025), *Comics in migration, migration in comics: Methodological reflections and theoretical perspectives emerging from the analysis of two case studies*, in Moretti V., Della Puppa F. (eds), *The social genres of comics. Impact and innovation of comics in social sciences*, Palgrave Macmillan, London:131-157.

Dorfles G. (2005), *Il fumetto tra disegno e racconto*, in Giannetto N. (a cura di), *Poema a fumetti di Dino Buzzati: nella cultura degli anni ’60 tra fumetto, fotografia e arti visive*, Mondadori, Milano: 3-8.

Eco U. (1964), *Apocalittici e integrati: Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*, Bompiani, Milano.

Elias N. (1993), *Time: An essay*, Blackwell, Oxford–Cambridge (MA).
Eszter Szép (2020), *Comics and the body: Drawing, reading, and vulnerability*, Routledge, London.
Foucault M. (2004), *Des espaces autres*, in "Empan", 54, 2: 12–19.
Freire P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Seabury Press, New York.
Frezza G. (2008), *Le carte del fumetto. Strategie e ritratti di un medium generazionale*, Longo Editore, Ravenna.
Galvan M. (2024), *Comics as trans literature*, in Vakoch D. A., Sharp S. (eds), *The Routledge handbook of trans literature*, Routledge, London: 419–428.
Giancola O. (2021), *Socializzazione, integrazione, identità: Il mondo dei supereroi come lente sociologica*, in Visentin M., Giancola O. (a cura di), *Teoria sociologica e industria culturale: Comics, serie TV, letteratura e cinema*, Franco Angeli, Milano: 44-62.
Green M. J. (2015), *Teaching with comics: A course for fourth-year medical students*, in "Journal of Medical Humanities", 36, 4: 375–380.
Green M. J., Myers K. R. (2010), *Graphic medicine: Use of comics in medical education and patient care*, in "BMJ", Mar, 3: 340: c863. https://doi: 10.1136/bmj.c863.PMID: 20200064.
Groensteen T. (2007), *The system of comics*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson (MS).
Grüning B., Scavarda A. (2025), *Sociologia del fumetto. Concetti, metodi e pratiche di ricerca*, Carocci, Roma.
Haan M. M., van Gurp J. L., Knippenberg M., Olthuis G. (2022), *Facilitators and barriers in using comics to support family caregivers of patients receiving palliative care at home: A qualitative study*, in "Palliative Medicine", 36, 6: 994–1005.
Habermas J. (1991 [1962]), The structural transformation of the public sphere, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA).
Halsall A., Warren J. (a cura di) (2022), *The LGBTQ+ comics studies reader: Critical openings, future directions*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson (MS).
Hescher A. (2016), *Reading graphic novels: Genre and narration*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
Kukkonen K. (2013), *Studying comics and graphic novels*, Wiley, Oxford.
Kuttner P. J., Weaver-Hightower M. B., Sousanis N. (2021), *Comics-based research: The affordances of comics for research across disciplines*, in "Qualitative Research", 21, 2: 195–214.
Labarre N. (2020), *Understanding genres in comics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
Lacassin F. (1971), *Pour un neuvième art: La bande dessinée*, UGE, Paris.
Lévy P. (1997), *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*, Perseus Books, New York.
Luo Y., Zhao J. (2019), *Motivated attention in climate change perception and action*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", 10: 1541.
McCloud S. (1994), *Understanding comics: The invisible art*, Harper Perennial, New York.
Mirzoeff N. (1999), *An introduction to visual culture*, Routledge, London.

Moretti V. (2025), *When comics meet health: Graphic medicine*, in Moretti V., Della Puppa F. (eds), *The social genres of comics. Impact and innovation of comics in social sciences*, Palgrave Macmillan, London: 73-11.
Moretti V., Della Puppa F. (eds) (2025), *The social genres of comics. Impact and innovation of comics in social sciences*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Moretti V., Scavarda A. (2021), *Graphic medicine. Una disciplina in cerca d'autore*, in "Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia", 3: 733–754.
Ndalianis A. (2011), *Why comics studies?*, in "Cinema Journal", 50, 3: 113–117.
Plummer K. (2019), *Narrative power: The struggle for human value*, John Wiley & Sons, London.
Rainford J. (2020), *Confidence and the effectiveness of creative methods in qualitative interviews with adults*, in "International Journal of Social Research Methodology", 23, 1: 109–122.
Ricoeur P. (2013), *Temps et récit: La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, Média Diffusion, Paris.
Rosaldo R. (1994), *Cultural citizenship and educational democracy*, in "Cultural Anthropology", 9, 3: 402–411.
Scott D., Fawaz R. (2018), *Introduction: Queer about comics*, in "American Literature", 90, 2: 197–219.
Sontag S. (1978), *Illness as metaphor*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.
Sontag S. (1997), *AIDS and its metaphors*, Harmondsworth, London.
Stephens Griffin N. (2019), *Comics and visual biography: Sequential art in social research*, in "Visual Studies", 34, 4: 319–335.
Tsao P., Yu C. H. (2016), *There's no billing code for empathy. Animated comics remind medical students of empathy: A qualitative study*, in "BMC Medical Education2, 16, 1: 204.
Turner V. (1969), *Liminality and communitas*, in *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca: 41–49.

Recensione a: Barbara Grüning, Alice Scavarda (2025), *Sociologia del fumetto. Concetti, metodi e pratiche di ricerca*, Carocci editore, Roma

Maria Alessandra Molè

Il volume di Grüning e Scavarda rappresenta un contributo originale e innovativo allo studio sociologico del fumetto, affrontandolo non soltanto come prodotto artistico o di intrattenimento, ma come vero e proprio campo sociale, regolato da dinamiche di classificazione, distinzioni simboliche e logiche di mercato. Le autrici propongono di interrogare il fumetto come un fenomeno culturale capace di generare specifiche forme di produzione, ricezione e legittimazione.

Il testo si apre con una domanda: i fumetti sono un prodotto artistico o un prodotto di massa? La risposta, osservano le autrici, non è univoca. Prima ancora di tentare una classificazione, occorre comprendere come le etichette di "arte" e "cultura di massa" si siano costituite storicamente, siano state diffuse e abbiano influito sulle pratiche di produzione e consumo culturale. L'operazione analitica va quindi oltre il fumetto in sé, investendo i dispositivi sociali e simbolici che ne consentono il riconoscimento e la legittimazione. In questa prospettiva, la sociologia del fumetto diventa esercizio di denominazione e di ordinamento di un fenomeno considerato "nuovo", che richiede di essere esplorato secondo due prospettive complementari: una prospettiva strutturale, che analizza l'osmosi tra spazio sociale e spazio simbolico; e una prospettiva processuale, che indaga le dinamiche interne al campo, le traiettorie sociali degli attori e le loro strategie di distinzione.

L'analisi si basa sulle categorie teoriche di Bourdieu, interpretando il fumetto come un "mercato di beni simbolici" (Bourdieu 1993) in cui le distinzioni sociali tra autori, generi, pubblici e circuiti editoriali attivano processi di visibilizzazione e di esclusione. I criteri di definizione e classificazione influenzano la circolazione delle opere, il riconoscimento degli autori e la costruzione dei canoni, influenzando in maniera decisiva le modalità di legittimazione culturale. Le autrici evidenziano come la produzione culturale del fumetto sia regolata non solo da logiche economiche o di prestigio, ma anche dal posizionamento degli autori all'interno del campo, il quale orienta le traiettorie sociali e contribuisce a definire i principi di visione e di divisione che strutturano il settore. Da tali dinamiche emergono i gusti e i sistemi di classificazione attraverso cui interpretiamo e valutiamo il mondo che ci circonda.

Un esempio significativo è quello di Zerocalcare, la cui notorietà si è estesa oltre il pubblico tradizionale del fumetto grazie alla visibilità acquisita sulle piattaforme digitali. In questo contesto, il numero di *followers* diventa un indicatore importante per valutarne la possibilità di pubblicazione. Tuttavia, il rapporto tra popolarità online e potenzialità di lettori non è diretto: le diverse caratteristiche dei social media, rispetto alla carta stampata, attraggono infatti un pubblico solo in parte coincidente con quello dei lettori abituali di fumetti.

Il volume offre anche una ricca ricostruzione storica. Alla fine degli anni Trenta del Novecento il fumetto comincia a guadagnare una certa autonomia: i ragazzi possono

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 255-256
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.15

acquistarlo a basso costo nelle edicole, mentre iniziano a nascere spazi dedicati, come le prime fumetterie e festival, pur restando un fenomeno di nicchia. Negli anni Cinquanta il fumetto si afferma come veicolo di rappresentazioni sociali e come strumento per indagare la realtà. A partire dagli anni Novanta si consolida l'idea di una vera e propria "storicità" del fumetto, che ne consente la periodizzazione e l'istituzionalizzazione.

Particolare attenzione è dedicata alle specifiche *affordances* del medium: il fumetto è una forma espressiva che veicola significati complessi, incorpora riflessività e si fonda su un dialogo costante tra autore e lettore. Esso esprime emozioni attraverso la gestualità dei personaggi, la scelta stilistica e cromatica delle vignette e l'interazione dinamica tra testo e immagine. Le parole dei personaggi non si limitano a raccontare una storia, ma si inseriscono nella sequenza narrativa con diverse grandezze, posizioni e forme, creando effetti di senso che possono risultare distorcenti o comici, stimolando nel lettore interpretazioni multiple. La dimensione cromatica contribuisce a definire atmosfere e climi emotivi, mentre ogni autore imprime la propria soggettività attraverso stile, disegno, composizione e uso del colore, facendo emergere convenzioni e schemi culturali.

Uno dei contributi più stimolanti del volume riguarda l'esplorazione del fumetto come strumento di ricerca qualitativa. La sua natura multimodale – che integra parole, immagini, colori e componenti sensoriali – lo rende un medium partecipativo e creativo, in grado di valorizzare la riflessività e di accompagnare tutte le fasi della ricerca: dalla raccolta dei dati all'analisi, fino alla disseminazione dei risultati. Le autrici illustrano numerose applicazioni possibili: l'uso del fumetto come stimolo narrativo in interviste individuali o focus group; lo *sketch reportage*, che prevede la presenza di un artista che documenta graficamente le interazioni durante le interviste, producendo vignette o sequenze da discutere con i partecipanti; l'inserimento di schizzi e disegni nelle note etnografiche per catturare dialoghi, gesti, suoni, odori e aspetti della cultura materiale.

Il fumetto può, inoltre, essere impiegato per attivare pratiche partecipative, ad esempio invitando i soggetti coinvolti a produrre fotografie o vignette sul tema di ricerca e a commentarle o raggrupparle, favorendo così l'espressione di vissuti, valori e categorie concettuali proprie. Questa metodologia si rivela particolarmente utile per dare voce a popolazioni marginalizzate o a persone con difficoltà di espressione verbale, come adulti con basso livello di scolarizzazione, bambini, persone con disabilità o background migratorio. Gli schizzi o bozzetti possono diventare vere e proprie mappe concettuali, che combinano *visual thinking* e produzione concettuale, e possono essere inclusi in articoli o capitoli per diffondere in modo innovativo i risultati della ricerca.

In conclusione, il volume di Grüning e Scavarda si impone come un riferimento imprescindibile per chiunque voglia indagare il fumetto da una prospettiva sociologica. La loro analisi, al tempo stesso teorica e metodologica, dimostra come il fumetto non sia soltanto un oggetto culturale, ma un linguaggio complesso, una pratica creativa e uno strumento di ricerca capace di arricchire la cassetta degli attrezzi della sociologia qualitativa.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Bourdieu P. (1993), *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Concetti da guardare in "Sociologie". La creazione di uno spazio a fumetti permanente nella *nostra* rivista

Francesco Sacchetti, Erika Cellini

Introduzione: il visuale come scelta epistemologica

Le scienze sociali contemporanee sono attraversate da un profondo e rinnovato interesse per l'approccio visuale (Prosser 1998; Pink 2001; Rose 2001; Margolis, Pauwels 2011) e per l'uso di forme non testuali nella costruzione, rappresentazione e disseminazione della conoscenza (Cox, Irving, Wright 2016; Cancellieri 2023, 105). In questo orizzonte, la decisione di inserire nella rivista, alla sua fondazione, una sezione visuale come spazio per contributi visuali in forma classica o più originali e, a partire da questo numero, una sezione permanente dedicata alla "striscia" a fumetti, non costituisce un semplice esperimento di comunicazione o una concessione alla cultura "pop", ma una scelta epistemologica ponderata: la promozione del visuale come forma legittima di produzione di sapere sociologico al pari delle forme storicamente più riconosciute (O'Sullivan, Kozinets 2020; Cancellieri 2023; Moretti, Della Puppa 2025).

La sezione visuale della nostra rivista si arricchisce quindi del fumetto scientifico o *graphic social science*. Tale medium non è inteso solo come veicolo di disseminazione, ma come uno strumento metodologico dotato di specifiche caratteristiche semiotiche e cognitive capaci di rendere accessibili, evocativi e riflessivi concetti sociologici complessi che spesso sfuggono alla sola descrizione verbale (Moretti, Della Puppa 2025).

L'uso del fumetto nella ricerca sociale si inserisce in un movimento globale verso un approccio multimodale che sfida il logocentrismo accademico (Sousanis 2015; Sacchetti 2016; Causey 2017; Tondeur 2018; Leavy 2020; Cancellieri 2023; Mariani, Sacchetti 2025; Moretti, Della Puppa 2025). In questo senso, il fumetto non si limita a "tradurre" risultati già ottenuti, ma agisce come dispositivo analitico attraverso le sue *affordance* specifiche (Cancellieri 2023, 108).

In primo luogo, il fumetto favorisce una profonda riflessività metodologica: ogni vignetta impone una scelta di inquadramento (*framing*), obbligando lə ricercatorə a dichiarare apertamente la propria posizione e lo sguardo con cui "costruisce" la realtà (Cancellieri 2023, 115). In secondo luogo, questo tipo di medium eccelle nel restituire la *materialità* e la *spazialità* della vita quotidiana, rendendo visibili gli oggetti, i corpi e le micro-interazioni che costituiscono il tessuto del sociale (Cancellieri 2024, 441). Infine, la gestione dello spazio sulla pagina permette di manipolare la *temporalità*, rallentando il ritmo per analizzare dettagli infinitesimali o accelerandolo per mostrare processi macrostrutturali (Scavarda, Grüning 2025, 3462).

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 257-260
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.16

1. *Il debutto della Striscia: visualizzare l'ordine nascosto con Harold Garfinkel*

Si è, dunque, provato a mettere in evidenza il potenziale analitico appena espresso nella prima striscia di questa sezione, dedicata agli esperimenti di rottura (breaching *experiments*) di Harold Garfinkel (1967). L'intenzione è mettere visivamente in scena il cuore dell'etnometodologia: l'idea che l'ordine sociale sia un prodotto continuo e contingente delle attività quotidiane degli attori.

Per la prima striscia abbiamo scelto proprio l'etnometodologia e gli esperimenti di rottura perché il ricorso al visuale ci sembra in continuità con l'impianto etnometodologico. Gli strumenti visuali – e soprattutto il fumetto – consentono di rappresentare la dimensione sequenziale, corporea e spaziale dell'interazione, rendendo visibile le pratiche attraverso cui l'ordine sociale viene continuamente prodotto.

Mostrando simultaneamente parola, gesto e spazio, il fumetto, dal nostro punto di vista, riesce a rendere tangibile ciò che Garfinkel definiva l'ordine "visto ma non notato". Quando lə protagonistə infrange la regola della distanza interpersonale o mette in discussione le espressioni colloquiali ("Cosa significa esattamente 'dopo'?"), il medium cattura non solo lo shock cognitivo, ma anche la reazione corporea ed emotiva dellз interlocutorз. Emerge qui la forza del *pictorial embodiment* (Scavarda, Grüning 2025, 3462): il disegno permette di rappresentare visivamente lo stigma, l'irritazione e il disagio fisico che derivano dalla rottura delle aspettative di fondo.

Un aspetto cruciale per l'efficacia sociologica di questa operazione risiede nella *chiusura* (*closure*), ovvero la capacità di chi legge di connettere le vignette e percepire un intero a partire da parti incomplete (McCloud, Martin 1993, 63; Vivoli *et al*. 2025). Nelle scene della striscia — come quella ambientata in un supermercato e relativa al prelievo di prodotti da parte di unə clientə dal carrello di un'altra/o clientə — il "gutter" (lo spazio tra le vignette) diventa il luogo dove lə lettorə compie un'inferenza attiva: deve ricostruire la norma violata per dare senso alla reazione della vittima (McCloud, Martin 1993, 67).

Il fumetto si configura così come una pratica di "unflattening" (Sousanis 2015, 1): una vera e propria insurrezione contro il pensiero piatto e unidimensionale imposto da una cultura testuale e logocentrica, che tende a rappresentare le norme sociali come entità statiche e cristallizzate. Al contrario, il fumetto ne restituisce la natura processuale, mettendone in luce il carattere dinamico e costantemente negoziato (Sousanis 2015, 15).

Infine, l'introduzione della striscia in *Sociologie* risponde anche a un'istanza di sociologia pubblica. Il fumetto è un medium accessibile che permette di raggiungere pubblici diversificati, democratizzando il sapere accademico senza rinunciare al rigore scientifico (Bartlett 2013; Moretti, Della Puppa 2025). Mediante la visualizzazione di concetti teorici densi – come quelli garfinkeliani – la rivista intende costruire nuovi ponti tra ricerca e società, offrendo punti di ingresso visivi che stimolano l'immaginazione sociologica (Kuipers, Ghedini 2021).

Conclusioni: un invito alla comunità scientifica e un richiamo etico

L'inaugurazione di questa *Striscia* permanente segna un passo decisivo verso una sociologia visualmente consapevole (Cancellieri 2023, 105). Questo piccolo lavoro su Garfinkel è solo il primo esempio di come la nostra rivista voglia utilizzare il fumetto per costituire uno spazio laboratoriale creativo per la teoria sociale.

Invitiamo la comunità scientifica e artistica a proporre contributi che utilizzino il fumetto per esplorare concetti, metodi e riflessioni critiche. L'obiettivo è abitare questo spazio di confine, dove l'immagine non è più sussidiaria al testo, ma diventa il terreno dove la società impara a guardare sé stessa con occhi nuovi e curiosi (Barberis, Grüning 2022).

Come ultima istanza ci preme sottolineare che la realizzazione di un lavoro sociologico a fumetti – quando non è lə scienziatə socialə stessə a produrre concretamente le illustrazioni – si fonda sul dialogo tra ricercatorз e artistз, una collaborazione che richiede trasparenza e rispetto delle diverse professionalità coinvolte (Moretti, Della Puppa 2025). È fondamentale che tali rapporti siano regolati con equità, garantendo il riconoscimento del lavoro creativo (*ibidem*).

Collaborazioni tra ricercatorə e artistə sono fortemente incoraggiate. È fondamentale, in questo dialogo interdisciplinare, definire con trasparenza gli aspetti etici e contrattuali del rapporto: la nostra rivista è in open access e non chiede fee, ma non provvede ad alcun compenso, e ogni autorə dovrà organizzare autonomamente accordi economici e di riconoscimento con lз disegnatorз, avvalendosi anche di fondi di ricerca o altre forme di finanziamento. Questo approccio intende valorizzare con equità il lavoro creativo, nel rispetto delle competenze professionali e accademiche coinvolte.

Riferimenti bibliografici

Barberis E., Grüning B. (2022), *Doing Social Sciences via Comics and Graphic Novels,* AlmaDL, Università di Bologna.

Bartlett R. (2013), *Playing with meaning: using cartoons to disseminate research findings*, in "Qualitative Research", XIII, 2: 214-227. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112451037

Cancellieri A. (2023), *Scienze sociali a fumetti. Caratteristiche e affordances di un campo emergente,* in "Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia", LXIV, 1: 105–123. https://dx.doi.org/10.1423/106731

Cancellieri A. (2024), *Comics and Urban Spaces. Reflecting on a Graphic Anthology of Stigmatised Italian Neighbourhoods*, in "Power", XX, 4: 377-392. https://doi.org/10.3240/115357

Causey A. (2017), *Drawn to see: Drawing as an ethnographic method*, University of Toronto Press.

Cox R., Irving A., Wright C. (eds.) (2016), *Beyond text?: Critical practices and sensory anthropology*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Garfinkel H. (1967), *Studies in ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall.

Kuipers G., Ghedini F. (2021), *Beauty: Triggering the sociological imagination with a webcomic*, in "Sociologica", XV, 1: 143-162. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12774

Leavy P. (2020), *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*, New York – London, Guilford publications.

Margolis E., Pauwels L. (eds.) (2011), *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, London, Sage.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 257-260
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.16

Mariani E., Sacchetti F. (2025), *Registrare, integrare, restituire: etnografia e tecniche multimodali oltre la rappresentazione dell'esperienza*, in "Sociologia della comunicazione": LXIX, 1, 71-93. https://doi.org/10.3280/SC2025-069004

McCloud S., Martin M. (1993), *Understanding comics: The invisible art* (Vol. 106). Northampton, MA, Kitchen sink press.

Moretti V., Della Puppa F. (2025), *Illustrative storytelling and social sciences. Reconsidering boundaries, extensions, and meanings of qualitative research*, in "The Qualitative Report", XXX, 4, 3431–3437. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.8162

Sacchetti F. (2016), *La ricerca visuale riflessiva tra produzione e ricezione: spunti dall'approccio culturale*, in "SocietàMutamentoPolitica", *7,* 14: 57-78. https://doi.org/10.13128/SMP-19696

Scavarda A., Grüning B. (2025), *Towards an Embodied and Graphic Based Qualitative Sociology: Methodological Reflections on Reflexivity and Pictorial Embodiment in the Field of Health and Illness*, in "The Qualitative Report", 30(4). https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.8164

Sousanis N. (2015), *Unflattening*, Harvard University Press.

Tondeur K. (2018), *Le Boom Graphique en Anthropologie. Histoire, actualités et chantiers futurs du dessin dans la discipline anthropologique*, in "Omertaa, Journal for applied anthropology", 703-718. https://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0082.pdfc

Vivoli E., Souibgui M. A., Barsky A., LLabres A., Bertini M., Karatzas D. (2024), *One missing piece in vision and language: A survey on comics understanding. arXiv preprint arXiv:2409.09502*.

Harold Garfinkel

Breaching Experiments:

IDEATO E REDATTO DA

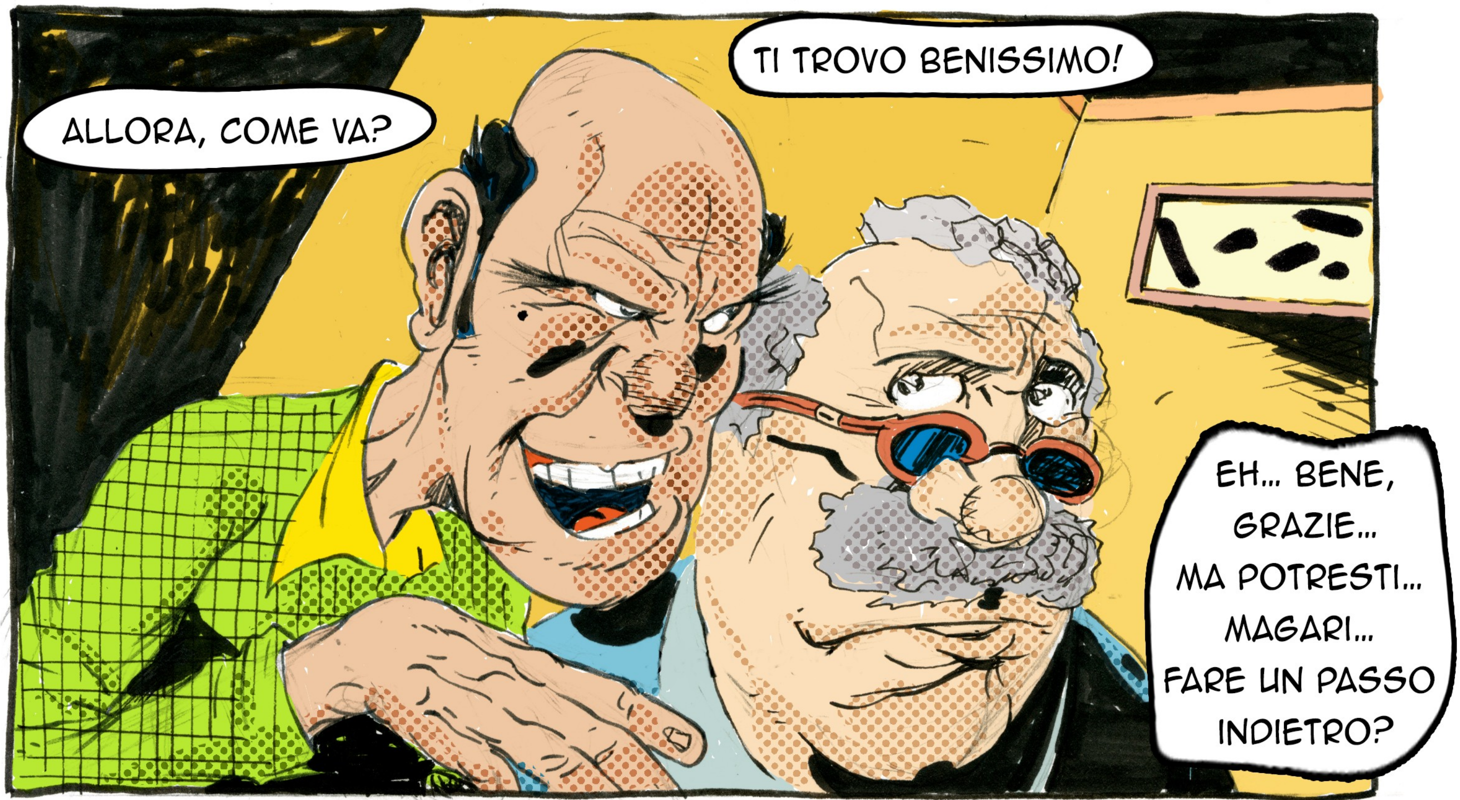
Erika Cellini

Francesco Sacchetti

Illustrazioni e Grafica di Niccolò Storai


BUONASERA. VI RINGRAZIO PER L'ACCOGLIENZA SIGNORE. RINGRAZIO ANCHE VOI SIGNORA. SPERO DI NON DISTURBARE
MA STAI MALE?! SIGNORI?! MA SIAMO LA TUA FAMIGLIA!
VI RINGRAZIO'? MA CHE MODI SONO? CI DAI DEL VOI ADESSO?
VA BENE, CI VEDIAMO DOPO
COSA SIGNIFICA DOPO? TRA QUANTO TEMPO, ESATTAMENTE? E DOVE CI VEDIAMO?
MAH... NON LO SO! È SOLO UN MODO DI DIRE! STAI BENE? NON C'È UN SENSO NASCOSTO!"


Cassa 2
Cassa 3
MA COSA STA FACENDO?! PERCHÉ PRENDE LE COSE DAL MIO CARRELLO?
SEMBRA CHE LEI ABBIA FATTO OTTIME SCELTE, QUINDI LE PRENDO DA QUI INVECE CHE CERCARLE ALTROVE. "
MA... NON PUÒ SEMPLICEMENTE PRENDERE LA MIA ROBA!
OH, MA NON È SUA FINCHÉ NON PASSA ALLA CASSA, GIUSTO?


ALLORA, COME VA?
TI TROVO BENISSIMO!
EH... BENE, GRAZIE... MA POTRESTI... MAGARI... FARE UN PASSO INDIETRO?

Social movements, crises and social change

Geoffrey Pleyers[1]

The following text originates from the conference Social Change is Never Linear, organised by Emanuele Toscano at the Department of Human Sciences of the Guglielmo Marconi University of Rome on 8 September 2025. On that occasion, Geoffrey Pleyers – Research Director at the FNRS at the Catholic University of Louvain and President of the International Sociological Association (2023-2027) – presented the central theses of his recent work on social movements, crises and social change, offering a broad theoretical and comparative reflection. The present contribution is an adapted version edited by Emanuele Toscano, developed in close collaboration with the author on the basis of the transcript of the original talk, with the aim of rendering its argumentative substance in written form while preserving its discursive character[2].

Introduction

As a sociologist, I usually start my investigations with the questions I have, from some change or evolution that troubles or surprises me. Particularly when I witness similar cases or evolutions in society or social movements in different countries, and these changes do not fit in the analytical model that is commonly used by many actors, part of the literature and myself. The book "Social change is never linear[3]" and the analytical proposals I would like to present today mostly draw on research on the evolutions of social movements and major citizens' protests in Brazil and Chile. They reproduce a pattern we have seen at play in several other countries that witnessed mass citizen protests for democracy or for a deeper democratisation in the 2010's.

Like Emanuele Toscano and Daniele Di Nunzio, I belong to a generation of social movement scholars who started research with social movements with the alter-globalisation movements, with its international protests against the World Trade Organisation and the G8 and its extraordinary World Social Forums that gathered up to 170.000 people from 124 countries who claimed that "Another World is Possible". Twenty-five years later, we face an existential question. Do social movements matter? How do we explain that neither the World Social Forums process, nor the more decentralised but global wave of citizen movements in the 2010s managed to pave the way for a less unequal, greener and more democratic world? We witnessed the rise of social movements all over the world, and here we are, in the Trump era, with social

[1] FNRS Research Director at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. President of the International Sociological Association (ISA) (2023-2027). Former president of ISA Research Committee 47 "Social movements and social change".

[2] The full recording of the event is available at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/live/1DVeMl7qUlE?si=Zi4eVaiWskksCep3.

[3] Pleyers G. (2024). El cambio nunca es lineal. Movimientos sociales en tiempos polarizados, Buenos Aires: CLACSO. Available at: biblioteca-repositorio.clacso.edu.ar/bitstream/CLACSO/251093/1/El-cambio-nunca-es-lineal.pdf.

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 265-275
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.18

media belonging to billionaires shaping political subjectivities, promoting hate and the far right and an increasing part of state leaders and citizens who dismiss science.

In 2011 and the following years, many of us believed we were witnessing a “third wave of democratisation”. A global wave of citizen movements demanded democracy in authoritarian regimes and extending democracy in more democratic countries[4]. This included the Arab world, Spain, Turkey, Russia, Brazil, and, later, Hong Kong, Iran, and protests on all continents. Every two or three months, a mass protest erupted throughout the decade. 2019 was again a very dense year for social movements, with mass citizen protests in different continents, notably in Colombia, Chile, Sudan, and Iran. As many actors and sociologists, in 2011 and in the first years of the decade, I believed that we were moving towards a more democratic world, with a “new wave of democratisation”, which was consistent with the promises of the post-Cold War period: liberal democracy – and markets – would progressively extend to every country on the planet.

In 2018, I published another book in Spanish[5] where the balance was much less optimistic. Social movements remain key actors in the transformation of society, I maintained, but this is also worth noting for far-right and reactionary movements, which were on the rise around the world. At that time, a consensus rose that more attention should be paid to these reactionary actors in social movement studies and in social sciences in general. However, even during the first Trump presidency (2017-2021), progressive movements and citizens' protests demanding more democracy kept bubbling up across the world, including in the US, notably with Black Lives Matter, which became a global wave of anti-racist movements. At that time, to put it bluntly and in an oversimplified way, the mood was still that, despite reactionary actors being on the rise and starting to win the national elections in some important countries with Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the US, this may be a parenthesis. There are still strong forces to push for more democracy and a fairer, greener and more tolerant world, notably among young people. Today, the panorama looks much bleaker and darker.

However, it is a mistake to consider this phenomenon as completely new. In Italy, you know better than in any other European country that the trend of electing a corrupt and macho millionaire to the highest political office, in alliance with far-right parties and ideas. The book by Emanuele Toscano and Daniele di Nunzio on Casa Pound[6], published in 2011, showed that it was much more than an electoral issue. Reactionary movements were taking deep roots in the cultural and social world, even before the social and economic crises that followed the 2008 financial crisis. The political, social and cultural rise did not start in the mid-2010’s or with Trump and Salvini.

[4] Glasius M, Pleyers G. (2013), *The moment of 2011: Democracy, social justice, dignity*, in “Development and change”, vol. 44(3): 547–567.

[5] Pleyers G. (2018), *Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI*, Buenos Aires: CLACSO.

[6] Di Nunzo D., Toscano E., (2011), *Dentro e Fuori CasaPound: Capire il Fascismo del Terzo Millennio.*

Over the past 10 years, a long series of books and articles have been dedicated to the "outcomes" of social movements. They analyse cases and specific areas of impact, for example, on political opinion, votes or social commitment of citizens who took an active part in a mobilisation wave. The literature shows that the impact of social movements is generally less direct and clear than expected, likewise for social change. Sociologists and historians show us it is a complex process. However, every time a crisis occurs, some intellectuals proclaim that the crisis is hard, but that it will eventually lead to a better world. Every time a mass citizen protest for democracy rises, and as protesters are still in the street, some analysts proclaim that the country has radically changed.

The point I want to make in the book "Social change is never linear" is that to address these broad questions, we need to accept bringing some complexity in our perspectives on social change and social movements, as well as to the concept of crisis and the connection between crisis and social change. *To understand social movements today, their impacts and their roles, we need to give up the illusion of a straightforward relationship between crisis and social change, as well as between the action of social movements, political change and social change*.

This book presents a series of analyses on social movements, their roles during the pandemic, an analysis of the nature and meanings of the 2019 uprising in Chile, the connection between subjectivation and commitment among young activists and a long chapter on progressive and reactionary religious movements in Brazil and the way they transformed social movements and politics in the country. Rather than presenting each of the chapters, I would like to draw on them to propose four theses on social movements and social change. I do not claim originality in making these proposals. Each of them will probably seem obvious. However, taken together, they articulate a framework that sheds light on some crucial dimensions of social movement today and contribute to avoiding over-simplification, illusions and shortcuts that have been featured in many texts on social movements and their impacts in the past few years. While these four proposals are easy to grasp and may seem obvious, they bring some complexity to the connection between social movements and social change.

1. *Social change is never linear*

The first thesis is the title of the book: *Social change is never linear*. It occurs through advances and setbacks. The relationship between social movements, political change and social change is complex and never straightforward. The transformation of society that social movements contribute to generating is mostly a long-term process. Social change takes place along complex paths along which actors – and many social scientists - pass through the euphoria of sharing indignation, dreams and solidarity with thousands of people in an occupied square, as much as through the disappointments of electoral processes that rarely reflect the depth of social and cultural change driven by social movements.

When mass citizen protests occur, and thousands of people go to the street to demand more democracy and organise on the square, we feel and often share their enthusiasm. It is not a problem to be enthusiastic about a movement; on the contrary, it is. We should not be jaded. When it comes to democracy, and the wish for a less unequal,

Sociologie, Vol. VI, n. 1, 2025, pp. 265-275
ISSN 2724-6078 (online) DOI: 10.53119/se.2025.1.18

greener and fairer world, we share the values of the movement and our fellow citizens. However, when it comes to the analysis, and particularly about the impacts of social movements, we should be more cautious, tame this enthusiasm, and avoid early proclamation that a movement has radically transformed a country. We should remember that social change is never linear.

The case of Chile offers one of the clearer illustrations of this “non-linear” process. In 2011, the country was shaken by a huge student protest, which was then the largest protest since the return of democracy. Students were still on the street when a scholar published a book about the “collapse” of the Chilean economic and social model. The Pinochet dictatorship had imposed a very neoliberal social and economic model, which was pursued by the actors of the democratic transitions in the 1990s and 2000s, and the student protests brought it down.
The following years revealed a much more complex picture of what had changed in the country. The election of Michelle Bachelet, a left-wing politician, to a second mandate in 2013 opened the way for important reforms in higher education policy, including limits on profit in the sector, while falling short of significantly reducing the dominance of private actors. However, in 2017, six years after the mass student movement, the Chilean voters re-elected Sebastián Piñera, the neoliberal president and wealthiest person in the country. The main target of the student movement’s criticism and the symbol of the model they wanted to change was re-elected for a second mandate as president, after a 4-year interim by a centre-left government. Many of the most enthusiastic commentators of the 2011 movement radically changed their opinion and claimed that social movements do not have much impact. Well, the outcome of the 2011 student movement was far from over. From 2017 to 2019, Chile witnessed a series of unprecedented social protests, against the private pension funds in 2017, a feminist movement in 2018, and the Chilean uprising in 2019[7]. The 2011 student movement is widely considered to be one of the main roots of these movements. The re-election of Pinera did not mean the end or the failure of a broad movement to challenge the Chilean social and economic model that rose in 2011. In 2019, millions of Chileans went on the streets to claim dignity and denounce a social and economic model dominated by the economic elite. Of course, some intellectuals wrote again that, this time, it was really the end of the neoliberal economic and social model, that neoliberalism would die in Chile. This major citizens’ movement had a deep impact on the country, including on its political landscape. In 2021, the Chileans elected the youngest Chilean president, Gabriel Boric, who was a leader of a student federation during the 2011 movement. It gave rise to a wave of optimism for progressive actors and intellectuals, and to the election of a very progressive constitutional assembly, mostly composed of elected members who were not members of political parties. Was Chile set to bury its neoliberal social and economic model? A wide majority of citizens rejected the progressive proposal for a new constitution, and the following popular consultations and elections gave sound victories to the far-right parties, with an economic and social agenda to strengthen the neoliberal model[8].

[7] Henríquez K., Pleyers G. (eds) (2023), *Chile en movimientos*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO.
[8] Cortes A. (2022), *Chile, fin del mito: estallido, pandemia y ruptura constituyente*, Santiago, RIL.

The case of Chile and the complex legacy of the 2011 movements, including in fostering another wave of massive democratization movements, makes a clear case for the need to tame the initial enthusiasm and the illusion of a fast process of social change. The initial enthusiasm surrounding the prospect of rapid social change merits a degree of caution. Not only does such optimism misrepresent the ways in which social change unfolds, but it also obscures the necessity of situating transformations within longer temporal horizons, marked by reversals, interruptions, and unintended consequences. Processes of social change are rarely immediate and cumulative. A second reason to tame the initial enthusiasm of those who claim an immediate and radical social change is that excessive enthusiasm generally fuels subsequent disillusionment. Those who anticipate swift and far-reaching transformations as the direct outcome of mass mobilisations are often the first ones to interpret electoral setbacks or partial reforms as evidence of failure. Many of them switch from an over-enthusiastic support for social movements to the idea that protests or social movements are useless, and that activists should focus on the political arena. Conversely, a more processual understanding of social change invites a tempered reading of both enthusiasm and disappointment. Recognising that social transformations happen through steps forward and setbacks, and not always in the anticipated direction, allows us to resist narratives that prematurely declare the exhaustion or irrelevance of collective action. It also helps avoid reducing mass citizen mobilisations to mere illusions sustained by a minority of the population. Social change is never linear. It is a contingent and contested process, shaped by multiple actors, temporalities and debates.

2. *The illusion of salvatory crises*

The second thesis is that the idea that a crisis will eventually lead to a positive change ("salvatory crisis") is sociologically false and politically misleading. However large it is, a crisis does not generate by itself a specific social change. The nature and direction of this change depend on the actors and on their struggle to impose a dominant meaning to the crisis and *advance alternative political, social and economic proposals as a reply to it.*

Every time a major crisis occurs, a series of intellectuals and actors claim that the crisis is bad, but it will eventually generate a brighter, better, greener, and fairer world. They claim that the crisis will *oblige* the dominant actors to adapt their policy, take into account the arguments developed by progressive movements and intellectuals and adopt policies for a less unequal, more democratic and greener world that are presented as the only ones able to get out of the crisis. I do not contest the fact that there are connections between crises and social change. Still, these connections are far more complex, never straightforward, and these outcomes are notably shaped by the debates between actors about the meaning of the crisis.

When the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies paralysed the world, when no one knew how and when we would get out of the crisis, dozens of intellectuals wrote texts that a greener and less unequal world would come out of this period. Slavoj Žižek wrote that to get out of the pandemic, the world would need to implement a new form of communism, with the global organisations that can control and regulate the economy and a global healthcare network, shifting away from a world dominated by markets and finance[9]. Dozens of other progressive intellectuals and social scientists wrote that this was “the real start of the 21st century”, that COVID-19 would oblige corporations and the economy to become greener and less unequal, thanks to this crisis, and that it would foster private corporations to become greener and fairer with their workers. Well, here we are today, five years later. Where is the end of capitalism? Has the world become a fairer and greener world? Have the corporations become more friendly with their employees? All the opposite.

In May and June 2020, I wrote an article arguing against this naïve connection between the pandemic crisis and social change[10], and that the battle over the meanings of the pandemic and the political outcomes was beginning. Six years afterwards, it is clear that progressive actors and intellectuals lost this battle, and that it was by no means obvious that the pandemic would oblige economic actors to adopt different policies and behaviours.

The naïve idea that the crisis is what will eventually lead us to salvation is deeply rooted in Western culture, including in the conceptualisation of Christianity that draws on Greek philosophy to recast the death of Christ as the path to the salvation of humanity. Some Marxist interpretations follow a similar pattern. They expect the final crisis of capitalism, announced as imminent every time a major economic or financial crisis occurs since the mid-19th century, to lead to the proletariat dictatorship and eventually the abolition of classes. The other problematic point is that the crisis seems to be permanent in modernity, and this seems only to get worse. To put it bluntly, we may wonder when the world was not in crisis, when was this good and bright period of time, when modern thinkers did not consider their society as in crisis or undergoing a major historical transformation? I tend to follow Luhman, who considered that crisis is the way modern society sees itself[11]. In modernity, people and intellectuals see themselves and their society as being in crisis.

I do not contest the fact that there are connections between crises and social change, but these connections are far more complex, and the change may unfold in different directions. I developed this argument in the final chapter of the book dedicated to the alter-globalisation movement[12], drawing on an analysis of the actors’ discourses in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. At that time, there was a wide consensus, from the global justice activists to right-wing political leaders: the cause of the crisis was that the financialization of the world had gone too far, and this had to be stopped. Gathered in Malmö, Sweden, for the European Social Forum in October 2018, the global justice activists repeated that their analyses of the economic and financial derivations were proven right by the financial crisis and that “Now, governments will have to take into account our arguments, stop neoliberal policies and put some clear limitations on finance”. The then-president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, a right-wing politician, was on the same line when he claimed that “The ideology of the dictatorship

[9] Žižek S. (2020), *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, Cambridge, Polity.

[10] Pleyers G. (2020), *The Pandemic is a Battlefield. Social Movements in the COVID-19 Lockdown*, in “Journal of Civil Society”, Vol. 16, 4. See also: Pleyers G. (2020), *La pandemia come campo di battaglia. Movimenti sociali durante il lockdown da COVID-19*, in “Sociologie”, 1, 5-71.

[11] Luhman N. (1984), *The Self-Description of Society: Crisis Fashion and Sociological Theory*, in “International Journal of Comparative Sociology”, XXV, p. 59-72.

[12] Pleyers G. (2010) Alter-Globalization. Becoming Actors in the Global Age, Polity Press, Cambridge.

of the market and public powerlessness has died with the financial crisis[13]". This wide consensus that the crisis would generate a fairer and more rational world did not result in the end of the domination of finance on the real economy. All the opposite, a few years later, the dominant discourse was that the crisis in Europe found its roots in overspending in the welfare state, which led to years of austerity policies dominating the agenda.

The repetition of the same scenario, crisis after crisis, leads to a clear lesson: *However large it is, the crisis in itself will not generate social change. The latter will depend on the capacity of social actors to bring out the questions posed by the historic situation and to advance alternative political visions and economic rationality*[14].

Gramsci should be mobilised as he stressed the importance of the struggle for ideological hegemony and its impact on setting the public and political debate. Drawing on him, I would stress that a major stake for social movements is the debate on the interpretation of the crises. The fact that the interpretation that prevails in public debates has no or limited connection with the economic analysis does not prevent it from becoming hegemonic. Since the theorem framed by Dorothy and William Thomas in 1928, sociologists stress the fact that "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences[15]": people's subjective interpretations of reality shape their behaviour, leading to real results, even if the initial belief is false.
My point is thus not to say that a crisis has no impact, but that the interpretation of the crisis is often more important than the crisis itself in generating a specific social change. The nature and direction of social change depend on the capacity of actors to impose an interpretation of the crisis in the political and public spaces.
The idea of a salvatory crisis is clearly misleading. The 2008 financial crisis proved the alter-globalisation activists right, but did not lead to the policy suggested by their analyses. This does not lead me to deny the agency of social movements. My point is that the interpretations of the crisis and the public debate to impose an interpretation of the crisis is a crucial space of agency for social movements. I am still convinced that Alain Touraine's proposal keeps its heuristic value: social movements produce society[16], or at least contribute to producing society. A crucial way they do it is by providing an alternative interpretation of the crises that shake modern societies.

3. *The meaning of social movements is a battlefield*

The third argument I would like to put forward is that *the debate on the interpretation of the protests and of the movement more broadly is a crucial stage on which much of the lasting impact of social movements rests*. So far, it has been widely overlooked by social movement scholars.

---

[13] Sarkozy N. (2008), *Déclaration sur les mesures de soutien à l'économie face à la crise*, 23 Oct. www.elysee.fr/nicolas-sarkozy/2008/10/23/declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-mesures-de-soutien-a-leconomie-face-a-la-crise-economique-internationale-a-argonay-haute-savoie-le-23-octobre-2008

[14] Pleyers G. (2010), *Alter-Globalization*, Cambridge, Polity, 237.

[15] Thomas W.I., Thomas D.S (1928), *The child in America*, Knopf, New York, 1928, 572.

[16] Touraine A. (1973), *Production de la société*, Paris, Seuil.

When we study social movements, we tend to focus on their most vibrant moments, when protests are going on in the streets, and their immediate aftermath. Actually, the game is far from over when the protesters leave the street. Another major stage remains to be played for social movements: the public debate over the importance, interpretation and meanings of the protests.

Usually, these debates start as soon as massive protests rise. Public intellectuals, social scientists, activists, and journalists make meaning of the protests and debate about the importance and nature of the movement. The debate over the importance, interpretation and meanings of the movement largely outlasts its effervescent stage. Years after the actors left the streets, intellectuals and actors of various boards, progressive and conservative, continue to interpret the movement and the crisis it highlighted. Some reduce the mobilisation to a tiny minority; insist on the disorder it caused, and focus on the "vandals" who broke shop windows or confronted the police. Others maintain that the protests embodied a social movement that deeply shook society and questioned some of its core values. Whether attested empirically or not, these interpretations of the movements or of the wave of protests may have a wider social and political impact than the movement itself.

Let me illustrate this with two examples.
In July 2013, I was a visiting professor in Rio de Janeiro, when protests were unfolding across Brazil in the aftermath of citizen movements that millions took to the streets in June 2013. I witnessed these mobilisations first-hand. I observed the demonstrations and conducted interviews with participants. I can testify that this was an overwhelmingly progressive movement. Citizens were demanding better public services, better public transport, better public schools, and more state intervention to reduce inequalities, promote social justice and give better opportunities to low-income families.

Two years later, by 2015, these same protests had been recast in mainstream media and public discourses as popular protests against the left-wing government led by the Workers' Party, igniting hate discourses against Lula, then-President Dilma Rousseff and left-wing parties' militants. The 2013 protests addressed the government led by the Workers' Party, denounced a political culture and pointed to some limits of the political system. Still, it did so from a progressive perspective. In 2015, this meaning of the movement had been recast as the starting point of a cycle of mobilisations that would turn the country against the PT and contribute to the rise of right-wing and later far-right forces[17].
Through sustained efforts across mainstream media, social media, think tanks, workshops for "emerging leaders" organised on campuses, and public discourses, right-wing and far-right intellectuals, citizens active on social media and most of mainstream media recast the June 2013 protests as aligned with right-wing opposition to the government. As I said earlier, the fact that this interpretation did not accurately reflect the initial demands of the protesters does not matter. False interpretations can

[17] Bringel B., Pleyers G. (2019), *June 2013, five years later: polarization and reconfiguration of activism in Brazil*, in L.F. Miguel, *The Brazilian Left in the 21st Century*, London, Palgrave, 237-258.

have very real consequences. In this case, this reinterpretation of the movement arguably had a much deeper impact on Brazilian politics and society than the June 2013 protests themselves. It contributed to a broader political shift, including the rise of far-right mobilisations, the legally contested impeachment process against Dilma Rousseff, and, eventually, the victorious campaign of Jair Bolsonaro, who became president of Brazil in 2018. This reinterpretation of the June 2013 movement and the protests that followed in 2015 are not the only factors in these developments, but they played a significant role in reshaping the political landscape.

A similar dynamic of recasting the protesters' claim and the meaning of the movement has played out in Chile. The 2019 uprising was the largest citizens' mobilisation in the country in the post-dictatorship period. It brought millions of Chileans to the streets all over the country. The movement profoundly shook the Chilean society in its social, political and cultural dimensions. It challenged the neoliberal model[18] that has dominated Chile's politics and society since the mid-1970s. It questioned the public discourse that presented Chile as a wealthy "oasis" and showed the very unequal living conditions in a country where hard work is not enough to have access to minimal living conditions. It raised the fundamental question about what it meant to be Chilean in the twenty-first century[19], calling for a less unequal and less patriarchal society, with more respect for minorities and indigenous people, and offering a possibility to all citizens to "live in dignity" thanks to the earnings of their work.
Yet the rise of upheaval and uncertainty also creates opportunities for reactionary forces. The battle over the interpretation of the movement began during the heydays of the 2019 protests and square occupations. In Santiago and across the country, walls became sites of political expression: graffiti articulated the demands and aspirations of the movement. Yet, during the night, far-right young activists would come and overwrite these messages with slogans such as "Thank you to the police" or "Long live 1973", 1973 being the year of the coup d'état led by Pinochet. The struggle over meaning was literally inscribed on the walls of the city.
Over time, this battle of interpretations intensified. Although millions had participated in the 2019 protests, after the pandemic, the 2019 movement was reframed as a minority phenomenon, dominated by vandals who destroyed shops and urban furniture and violently confronted the police. The academia is, at the same time, a battlefield and a recipient for these evolving interpretations. I recall attending a political science congress in Chile where many presentations described the 2019 protests as involving both left-wing and right-wing mobilisations, comparing the claims of the two camps in 2019, as if there had been two comparable camps in 2019. Factually, the "counter protests" were far from numerous and seldom mobilised more than a few dozen protesters, while millions demonstrated for social change. Nonetheless, the narrative of a symmetrical confrontation between two sides has gained traction.

[18] Cortes A. (2022), *Chile, fin del mito: estallido, pandemia y ruptura constituyente*, Santiago, RIL.

[19] This argument is developed in the first chapter of the book "El cambio nunca es lineal" and in this text in English: Pleyers (2025), *The Chilean awakening in a global decade of social movements*, in Onodera H., Kaskinen M., Ranta E. (eds.), *Citizenship Utopias in the Global South*, London, Routledge, 68-83.

As in Brazil, this reflects the remarkable capacity of right-wing, and especially far-right, actors, think tanks and intellectuals to engage in shaping the public debate and recasting social movements and the crises that shake a society. Social movement scholars have widely overlooked the agency of these intellectuals, journalists and actors who have outplayed progressive actors in organising training for political parties and civil society organisations, write columns in leading newspapers and disseminate their vision of the movement and of the country on social media and mainstream media. Today, most Chileans have a negative opinion of the 2019 movement, even if, just a few years ago, it embodied the hope of a fairer country for millions of them.

The main point I would like to make today is to invite social movement scholars to pay more attention to this "aftermath" of social movements, when this battle for the interpretation of the movement takes place. This debate on the meaning of the movement often shapes the long-lasting impact of the movement or jeopardises its outreach and outcomes. It is a crucial moment when social, cultural, subjective and political transformations are produced. And in my opinion, it is an important stage of the development of a social movement. It should be analysed as such, as an important phase of a movement, rather than as "what happens after a movement".

4. *The Social Sciences in the Battle for Interpretation*

This brings me to my final point, which is at the same time theoretical and epistemological.

As social movement scholars, sociologists, anthropologists or political scientists, we are not external observers of these struggles over the interpretation of a movement. We are part of this process. When we analyse a movement and publish it, our analyses contribute to ongoing debates. Once published, our work can be taken up, mobilised, and reinterpreted by the actors, and feed the debate on the interpretation of the movement.

This is not specific to the study of social movements. Anthony Giddens insisted on the need to consider this "double hermeneutic" when we analyse social reality in the second modernity. He warned us that "the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The 'findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe." (Giddens, 1984, 20).

Actors are producers of knowledge. This is particularly true for activists who take part in social movements with the hope of transforming society. As sociologists or researchers in social sciences, we also produce knowledge, in different ways, with tools, concepts, interviews, surveys, and data. When we analyse a movement and propose our interpretation in a publication, we take part in a battle for the interpretation of the movements, and we should be aware of the role we may play. However, we are not responsible for every use that is made by actors who may mobilise our analyses and interpretations of the movement. We are not the only actors in this battle for the interpretation of the movement, but we are undeniably part of it. This final argument makes the argument made in the first section even more important: to tame the enthusiasm of those who announce a radical change in society as soon as a movement arises.

Conclusion

Social change is never linear. It doesn't happen as fast and is seldom as deep as the activists expect. And it is never a long, peaceful river, as reactionary actors and those who defend global capitalism are also producers of society and counter the progressive movements' claims, arguments and interpretations. We should also remind ourselves that social movements produce society in different ways, not only through effervescent protests.

Today, as we are crossing multiple planetary boundaries identified by scientists as critical thresholds to prevent runaway climate change and ecological collapse, and at a time when the effects of climate change are perceptible by virtually every living being, Donald Trump demonstrates that the dominant worldview guiding global governance does not need to rest on empirical facts and can blatantly deny climate change. His action and political force hinge on interpretation, on the capacity to impose a particular vision of reality and a specific economic rationality within public debate. The key question, then, is how far such a disconnection from hard facts about climate change, natural disaster, or real economy can persist, and which actors and social forces will emerge to contest this logic and effectively challenge this hegemonic worldview.

Analysing the democratic crisis, as well as the crisis of the social and economic model highlighted by progressive movements, remains a central task for social scientists. At the same time, we must avoid conflating our normative aspirations with the claims expressed in the movement, or any supposed direction or necessity of history. Our desire for a fairer society, at a time when global inequalities threaten democracy, and our conviction that urgent and decisive action is needed to address climate change, in the face of accelerating ecological collapse, are legitimate moral and political stances grounded in scientific evidence. Yet, the urgency and legitimacy of these aspirations do not, in themselves, bring about change. Social transformation emerges from complex interactions among actors operating at multiple levels, and the interpretation of contemporary crises and of social movements forms part of these struggles. Our analyses may contribute to these dynamics, but they do not govern them. We should therefore resist the temptation to assume that what we consider the justice of our values or the scientific basis of our analysis of the crisis ensures that the crises or the movement we observe will culminate in the kind of world we hope to see.

Sociologie

VOL. VI, N. 1 • 2025

Riassunti degli articoli

In ordine di pubblicazione

Polat S. Alpman, *Michael Burawoy and the Global Remaking of Higher Education*

(*Michael Burawoy e la riformulazione globale dell'istruzione superiore*)

Questo articolo analizza l'interpretazione di Michael Burawoy dell'università nel contesto del neoliberismo. Spiega il suo contrasto tra università di mercato, università burocratica e università pubblica, e mostra come l'istruzione superiore sia stata attratta entro le logiche di mercato, i finanziamenti competitivi e le metriche di performance. La discussione colloca la critica di Burawoy all'interno di un più ampio dibattito sul lavoro accademico, l'impegno pubblico e l'autonomia dell'istituzione. L'articolo fa riferimento ad alcuni esempi comparativi che mostrano come le pressioni di mercato e manageriali sulle università possano variare a seconda dei contesti. Delinea inoltre il quadro analitico di Burawoy, includendo la sociologia pubblica come forza di contrasto alla mercatizzazione. Valuta anche le prospettive dell'università pubblica in un'epoca di ranking, managerialismo e lavoro accademico precario. Tracciando la relazione tra la missione pubblica dell'università e le riforme guidate dal mercato, l'articolo contribuisce ai dibattiti teorici e a una comprensione analitica di come le università si rapportano allo Stato e al mercato.

Parole chiave: Università neoliberale; Mercatizzazione del sapere; Lavoro accademico; Sociologia pubblica; Università pubblica.

Keywords: *Neoliberal university; Marketization of knowledge; Academic labor; Public sociology; Public university.*

Paolo Do, *Geografie del sapere e disuguaglianze dello spazio educativo transnazionale. Ai confini dell'Università*

(*Geographies of knowledge and inequalities in the transnational educational space. At the boundaries of the University*)

L'articolo propone una lettura transnazionale per studiare l'università contemporanea in relazione con il mercato e lo Stato nazione. Attraverso i casi studio di Singapore e Hong Kong, il contributo analizza come l'università si configuri oggi all'interno di reti globali e inter-istituzionali, operando lungo corridoi regionali e transnazionali di formazione, ricerca e mobilità. In questo contesto, l'università non solo perde il suo radicamento nella costruzione culturale nazionale, ma contribuisce attivamente alla disarticolazione del legame tra Stato, cittadinanza e formazione. Il modello emergente è quello di un'istituzione orientata a logiche manageriali e improntata al principio dell'eccellenza che ridefinisce le categorie di pubblico e privato e i confini stessi della cittadinanza. Lungi dal rafforzare le identità nazionali, le dinamiche transnazionali accentuano le disuguaglianze e ristrutturano le forme di inclusione sociale in uno spazio educativo multiscalare.

Parole chiave: Istruzione transnazionale, Università orientata al mercato, Istituzioni ibride, Disuguaglianze educative, Spazio educativo multiscalare.

Keywords: *Transnational education, Market-oriented university, Hybrid institutions, Educational inequalities, Multiscalar educational space*.

Agnese Desideri, Sandro Landucci, *La transizione del sistema universitario italiano verso un modello di governance formalmente imprenditoriale, sostanzialmente neo-centralista*

(*The Italian university system's transition towards a formally entrepreneurial, substantially neo-centralist governance model*)

Il lavoro esamina la transizione verso un modello di governance imprenditoriale nel sistema universitario italiano. In primo luogo, delinea le principali tappe storiche del sistema universitario italiano. In secondo luogo, si concentra sulla fase di transizione verso un modello di governance imprenditoriale ispirato al New Public Management che fu formalmente realizzato con l'applicazione della L. 240/2010. In terzo luogo, si concentra sui recenti cambiamenti che hanno interessato e stanno interessando la valutazione e l'assunzione dei docenti universitari e più in generale la valutazione delle performances dell'Università, cercando di mostrare come sotto la facciata formale di un sistema di università autonome e imprenditoriali resti un nucleo di orientamenti e pratiche neo-centraliste. Questo lavoro si basa su una ricerca documentale. Inoltre, sono stati intervistati alcuni docenti del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali dell'Università di Firenze in qualità di testimoni privilegiati.

Parole chiave: Governance imprenditoriale, Sistema universitario, Italia, Autonomia, Valutazione.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial governance, Higher education, Italy, Autonomy, Evaluation.*

Federica Floridi, Federica Micale, Silvia Cataldi, *La valutazione miope: la dispersione universitaria oltre gli indicatori*

(*Myopic evaluation: university dropout beyond indicators*)

L'articolo offre una riflessione critica sull'uso degli indicatori quantitativi nei processi di valutazione e di governance delle università in Italia, mettendo in luce i presupposti impliciti che li sostengono. Pur essendo utili per le finalità di programmazione, gli indicatori non possono essere assunti come unico punto di riferimento, poiché possono essere soggetti ad ambivalenze semantiche e non riescono a cogliere la complessità delle esperienze soggettive. Il contributo è articolato in due parti. La prima propone un'analisi critica delle assunzioni culturali tacite e dei bias che sottendono l'uso degli indicatori quantitativi nella governance universitaria italiana, con particolare attenzione al fenomeno della dispersione studentesca. La seconda presenta un caso di studio relativo a un corso di laurea triennale in Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche, combinando un'analisi longitudinale degli indicatori con un'indagine qualitativa. L'obiettivo è promuovere una lettura più articolata dell'esperienza universitaria contemporanea, in grado di includere le dimensioni sociali e biografiche degli attori coinvolti senza negare l'utilità degli strumenti di valutazione.

Parole Chiave: Indicatori quantitativi, Governance universitaria, Dispersione studentesca, Cultura della valutazione, Traiettorie biografiche.

Keywords: Quantitative indicators; University governance; Student dispersion; Evaluation culture; Biographical trajectories.

Christelle Manifet, *Gestire l'iscrizione di nuovi studenti nelle università francesi ad accesso aperto e il cambiamento istituzionale*

(*Managing the enrollment of new students in French open-door universities and institutional change*)

In Francia, un movimento si è da tempo dato il compito di documentare le politiche della seconda metà del XX secolo dedicate all'espansione egualitaria dell'accesso all'istruzione secondaria e superiore e le loro implicazioni attenuate in termini di democratizzazione. Lo stesso movimento è oggi impegnato in una biforcazione volta a documentare le politiche del post-welfare state, che promuovono nuovi valori e nuovi obiettivi per le politiche educative, con effetti compressivi sulle condizioni e sulle modalità di accesso all'istruzione superiore. Se è vero che le università francesi possono essere considerate quelle che hanno portato più lontano il principio di democratizzazione sociale, grazie al loro accesso libero, esse si collocano pienamente all'interno di questa tendenza. Questo articolo documenta tali cambiamenti attraverso una lente funzionale–istituzionale, mettendoli in relazione con le strutture accademiche, politiche ed economiche delle università francesi. Questa esplorazione apre la strada a una discussione sulla crisi dell'università di massa e a porte aperte e sulla sociologia delle istituzioni dell'istruzione superiore.

Parole chiave: Ammissione e selezione universitaria, Università francesi ad accesso aperto, Analisi storica e delle politiche pubbliche, Sociologia delle istituzioni, Istruzione superiore, Francia.

Keywords: University admissions and selection, French open-door universities, Historical and public policy analysis, Sociology of institution, Higher education, France.

Andrea Lombardinilo, Paolo Brescia, *Verso un'università reticolare: il programma Creative Europe e le partnership di ricerca*

(*Towards a reticular University: The Creative Europe Programme and the research partnerships*)

Questo saggio indaga le partnership universitarie sostenute dal programma Creative Europe nel biennio 2021-2022, inserendole nel più ampio quadro programmatico del riformismo universitario e dei suoi discorsi. L'obiettivo è mettere in relazione l'analisi sociologica dei progetti finanziati con una riflessione comparativa a livello europeo, a partire dalle interpretazioni critiche offerte da alcuni eminenti studiosi nel campo dell'istruzione superiore che hanno contribuito a delineare una visione "reticolare" delle università. L'autonomia della ricerca, la sinergia scientifica e l'affidabilità comunicativa costituiscono tre principi fondamentali in un contesto in cui le università devono trasformare la responsabilità istituzionale in una missione al tempo stesso etica ed economica. Per questo motivo, le partnership di ricerca promosse da Creative Europe sottolineano la necessità di concentrarsi sulla trasformazione dell'università da torre d'avorio ad ambiente democratico, come ha evidenziato Habermas a proposito della costruzione di una comunità aperta e partecipativa. Con riferimento alla dimensione sociale e culturale di alcuni progetti universitari finanziati dal programma Creative Europe, questo saggio esamina criticamente le interpretazioni metaforiche delle università intese come "sociali", "civiche" e "in rete": dalla metafora di John Goddard dell'università come ambiente impegnato alla "multiversity" analizzata da Clark Kerr e Nicolas Dirks, fino alla più recente "Omniversity" proposta da Roberta Bassett.

Parole chiave: Università civica, Programma Europa Creativa, Partnership di ricerca, Produzione culturale, Università in rete.

Keywords: Civic university, Creative Europe Programme, Research partnerships, Cultural production, Networked university.

William Persichilli, *Violenza di genere in guerra e (negativa) pace. Un approccio olistico e multiforme per smantellare il patriarcato*

(*Gender-Based Violence in War and (Negative) Peace. A Multifaceted Holistic Approach to Dismantle Patriarchy*)

Una ricerca condotta dall'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità mostra che una donna su tre subisce violenza da parte del partner o violenza sessuale da parte di terzi nel corso della sua vita. Le analisi omogenee della violenza maschile si rivelano inadeguate per comprendere il fenomeno della violenza di genere. In questo saggio, propongo un riconoscimento teorico della letteratura finora disponibile, sostenendo che la violenza di genere, sia in tempo di guerra che di pace, è frutto del patriarcato e che solo un approccio olistico alla pace, basato sul riconoscimento simultaneo della violenza diretta, strutturale e culturale, può fornire una base solida per contrastarla. Avvalendomi di alcuni principi della teoria sociale di genere, e in particolare degli studi di politica internazionale che prendono in considerazione il dibattito globale su pace e guerra, desidero contribuire a delineare una prospettiva più critica per indagare questo tema complesso.

Parole chiave: Violenza di genere, Ricerca sulla pace, Violenza strutturale, Violenza culturale, Galtung.

Keywords: Gender based violence, Peace research, Structural violence, Cultural violence, Galtung.

Andrea Bilotti, *Disabilità tra diritti umani e abilismo: una lettura multilivello*

(*Disability Between Human Rights and Ableism: A Multilevel Reading*)

Negli ultimi decenni la disabilità è stata progressivamente riletta attraverso il paradigma dei diritti umani, superando l'impostazione medico-assistenziale centrata su menomazioni e deficit. Ciò non ha però eliminato le logiche abiliste che continuano a strutturare pratiche e interventi, organizzazioni e politiche. L'articolo adotta una prospettiva multilivello per metterne a fuoco la portata sistemica: dalle dinamiche di stigmatizzazione e interiorizzazione del pregiudizio, alle configurazioni istituzionali che producono inclusioni selettive, fino ai quadri normativi che definiscono, spesso in modo implicito, le soglie della piena cittadinanza. Attraverso il dialogo tra la prospettiva sociologica critica e una parte dei Disability Studies, e con esplicito riferimento al contesto italiano, il contributo riconosce nel servizio sociale un attore centrale in grado di tenere insieme diritti e prassi, sostenendo traiettorie di cambiamento ed emancipazione.

Parole chiave: Abilismo, Diritti umani, Disabilità, Welfare sociale, Servizio sociale.

Keywords: Ableism, Human Rights, Disability, Social Welfare, Social Work.

Silvia Tarassi, Ilenya Camozzi, Kemal Ahson, *Arts-based education tra inclusione e liberalizzazione: una panoramica comparativa dell'Europa*

(*Arts-based education between inclusion and liberalization: a comparative overview of Europe*)

Negli ultimi anni si è assistito a un indebolimento del ruolo svolto dalle istituzioni pubbliche nello sviluppo di politiche educative e culturali volte a promuovere l'inclusione sociale (Dubet 2002; Sennet 1999; Touraine 2010). Il loro potenziale emancipatorio ha progressivamente lasciato spazio a logiche neoliberali fondate sul merito, la competizione e la quantificazione (Sandel 2020; Grimaldi *et al.*, 2016). Da un lato, la governance è passata da modelli statali centralizzati a reti decentralizzate che coinvolgono società civile, attori privati e partenariati pubblico-privati (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022). Sebbene tale diversificazione abbia favorito innovazione e pluralismo, essa rischia spesso di rafforzare le disuguaglianze e di indebolire strategie coerenti (O'Brien 2014). Dall'altro lato, a livello europeo, educazione e cultura sono state sempre più concepite come strumenti per lo sviluppo economico e l'innovazione, fortemente influenzati da paradigmi neoliberali che enfatizzano la competitività e l'adattabilità al mercato del lavoro (O'Connor 2024). Quadri strategici come la New European Agenda for Culture (Commissione Europea 2018) e le Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 hanno sottolineato lo sviluppo delle soft skills attraverso l'arts-based education (ABE), la partecipazione culturale e l'apprendimento non formale. Questo contributo esamina criticamente programmi culturali e educativi nazionali ed europei, concentrandosi sulla tensione tra inclusione e liberalizzazione. Basandoci sulla ricerca comparativa del progetto Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE), finalizzato ad analizzare le politiche e i programmi di arts-based education (ABE), in diversi Paesi europei, evidenziamo i contrasti tra Paesi con solide tradizioni di welfare culturale pubblico e altri, come l'Italia (Bodo, Bodo 2019), dove la frammentazione delle politiche e la dipendenza dal terzo settore hanno limitato il ruolo dell'arts-based education (ABE), nella promozione dell'inclusione sociale.

Parole chiave: Arts-Based Education (ABE), Politiche culturali, Welfare, Neoliberismo, Bene comune.

Keywords: Art-based education, Cultural policies, Welfare, Neoliberalism, Common good.

Patrice Corriveau, *La mise en abyme della ricerca. Ripensare il discorso scientifico*

(*La mise en abyme de la recherche. Repenser le discours scientifique /*)

Questo video presenta Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde, un fumetto nato da una ricerca scientifica sul suicidio in Québec (1763-1986), condotta a partire da quasi 20.000 fascicoli del coroner. Vera e propria mise en abyme del lavoro del ricercatore, il video ricorda anche l'importanza, per la ricerca, di esplorare nuove modalità di comunicazione per raggiungere pubblici differenti.

Parole chiave: Sociologia visuale, Fumetto documentario, Memoria sociale, Archivi giudiziari, Suicidio.

Keywords: Visual sociology, Documentary comics, Social memory, Judicial archives, Suicide.

Isabelle Perreault, Jean-François Cauchie, *La creazione di un fumetto per la sociologia storica del suicidio in Québec*

(*Creating Graphic Narratives in the Historical Sociology of Suicide; Créer une bande dessinée en sociologie historique du suicide*)

L'articolo ricostruisce la genesi e la realizzazione di Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde (2020), fumetto nato all'interno di un ampio progetto di sociologia storica del suicidio in Québec fondato sullo spoglio e la digitalizzazione di quasi 18.000 inchieste del coroner (1765–1986). Assumendo il suicidio come oggetto "obliquo", l'opera mette in scena il lavoro archivistico e traduce un materiale documentario eticamente e visivamente sensibile in una narrazione ibrida, capace di coniugare ricerca e creazione. Attraverso interviste ai coautori e l'analisi del dispositivo fumettistico, l'articolo identifica tre snodi che hanno guidato la costruzione dell'album: (i) la combinabilità di fili narrativi (intreccio "classico" dei casi e mise en abyme del lavoro dei ricercatori), (ii) l'equilibrio tra distanziamento e prossimità mediante strategie di messa a distanza (trasposizione delle fotografie, focalizzazione su dettagli, cornici socio-storiche), (iii) la messa in tensione e i contrappunti. Un'attenzione specifica è dedicata alla ricezione dell'opera presso pubblici differenti, nonché ai vincoli istituzionali ed editoriali (finanziamenti, scelte di pubblicazione, mediazione mediatica). In conclusione, il fumetto è proposto come oggetto di ricerca situato tra arti e scienze sociali: non mero strumento divulgativo, ma pratica conoscitiva che mobilita l'affettività del lettore per rendere accessibile un sapere storico-sociale, mantenendo come criterio guida dignità, rispetto e responsabilità nella rappresentazione.

Parole chiave: Fumetto, Suicidio, Sociologia storica, Archivio, Sociologia visuale.

Keywords: Comics, Suicide, Historical sociology, Archives, Visual sociology.

Edmondo Grassi, *Fumetti documentari e sociologia visuale: archivi, corpi e memorie in* Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde

(*Comics and Visual Sociology: Archives, Bodies, and Memories in Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde*)

Partendo dal caso di studio della bande dessinée *Vous avez détruit la beauté du monde* – opera nata da una lunga indagine storico-sociologica condotta su oltre 20.000 fascicoli del medico legale relativi ai suicidi in Québec (1763–1986) – l'articolo indaga il potenziale epistemologico del fumetto documentario come linguaggio della ricerca sociologica. Adottando una strategia di campionamento ragionato, l'opera è trattata come caso paradigmatico all'interno di un insieme più ampio di fumetti documentari che si confrontano con archivi traumatici e memorie collettive. Muovendo dal quadro delle scienze sociali grafiche, l'articolo mostra come la sequenzialità visivo-verbale del fumetto consenta di articolare in modo inedito la triade archivi–corpi–memorie, traducendo la serialità burocratica dei fascicoli in una costellazione di scene incarnate e situate. L'analisi delle strategie formali dell'opera

mette in luce come il passaggio dal dossier alla tavola ridefinisca lo statuto del documento, redistribuendo l'autorità testimoniale tra ricercatori, artista e soggetti rappresentati.

Parole chiave: Fumetto documentario, Sociologia visuale, Archivi, Suicidio, Memoria.

Keywords: Documentary comics, Visual sociology, Archives, Suicide, Memory.

Veronica Moretti, *La graphic medicine come spazio eterotopico. Rappresentare e ripensare il reale nella ricerca sociale*

(*Graphic medicine as a heterotopic space. Representing and rethinking reality in social research*)

Questo contributo propone di leggere il fumetto come spazio eterotopico capace di rappresentare e, insieme, di produrre conoscenza sociale. A partire dal percorso di legittimazione del medium e dal suo statuto ibrido verbo-visivo, l'articolo mostra come la sequenzialità grafica e la spazializzazione del racconto generino eterocronie e configurazioni di senso che sfidano i registri lineari della scrittura accademica. L'adozione del paradigma foucaultiano consente di interpretare le tavole come "controsìti" in cui tempo, spazio e relazioni sociali vengono sospesi e riorganizzati, facendo emergere voci marginali e contro-narrazioni. Sul piano politico e formativo, il fumetto agisce come tecnologia culturale della critica, favorendo processi di riflessività, alfabetizzazione visiva e redistribuzione dell'autorità epistemica nei contesti di ricerca e didattica. La Graphic Medicine ne costituisce un caso paradigmatico: attraverso patografie e narrazioni situate, il fumetto rende visibili la vulnerabilità e l'incertezza della cura, smontando stereotipi e metafore dominanti.

Parole chiave: Eterotopia, Fumetto, Conoscenza sociale, Graphic Medicine, Patografia.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Comics, Social knowledge, Graphic Medicine, Pathography.

Sociologie

VOL. VI, N. 1 • 2025

Note bio-bibliografiche sugli autori e sulle autrici

In ordine di pubblicazione

Silvia Pezzoli è professoressa associata presso la Scuola di Scienze Politiche "Cesare Alfieri", dove insegna Sociologia dei media e Consumi mediali e presiede il Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Strategie di Comunicazione nella società digitale. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano la sociologia della comunicazione e dei media, con particolare attenzione a identità, rappresentazioni, studi di genere, società digitale e trasformazioni dell'università. Fa parte del progetto DAMEIP: Dati e metadati per implementare la peer review: con S. Becucci, A. Desideri, S. Landucci L'università su misura. Governance, valutazione e ranking in quattro paesi europei, Firenze University Press, Con A Desideri, S. Landucci, "L'emergere della Terza Missione nell'università italiana: tra affermazione del New Public Management ed eclisse dell'autonomia", in L'università dall'autonomia all'eteronomia, Sociologia e Servizio Sociale, 2025; S. Becucci, A Desideri, S. Landucci Cooperazione Interuniversitaria allo sviluppo. Analisi di due casi studio: Laos e Thailandia, in JUnCo Journal, vol. 2, 2024.

Stefano Becucci è docente di Sociologia e Sociologia delle migrazioni presso la Scuola di Scienze Politiche e la Scuola di Economia e Management dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze. Fra le sue ultime pubblicazioni: Smuggling and Trafficking of Migrants in Southern Europe. Criminal Actors, Dynamics and Migration Policies, Bristol University Press, 2024; (a cura di) Violenza di genere e donne migranti. Confronto con le istituzioni e percorsi di fuoriuscita, Kluwer, 2025; co-curatore con V. Scalia, Crimini e caporali. Lo sfruttamento nell'epoca del lavoro flessibile, Futura, 2025; con A. Desideri, S. Landucci e S. Pezzoli, L'università su misura. Governance, valutazione e ranking in quattro paesi europei, Firenze University Press, 2025; "Accelerazione e decelerazione del capitalismo. Tendenze e contraddizioni in epoca digitale", Iride, 3, 2025, pp. 523-533.

Polat S. Alpman is a professor at Yalova University in Istanbul, Turkey. His research interests focus on sociological theory and the sociology of inequalities, with particular attention to issues such as discrimination, migration, citizenship, the state, social class, religion, and urban dynamics. His work lies within the fields of theoretical sociology and social policy, contributing to the critical analysis of contemporary social processes.

Paolo Do è ricercatore in sociologia e collabora con l'Università di Trento e Sapienza di Roma. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano i processi di produzione e circolazione del sapere, le disuguaglianze nello spazio educativo e le trasformazioni del lavoro accademico, con attenzione alle dinamiche del capitalismo contemporaneo e alle relazioni tra conoscenza, lavoro e istituzioni.

Agnese Desideri, assegnista di ricerca presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze. Si occupa principalmente dell'analisi dei sistemi educativi e delle politiche migratorie, con particolare riferimento al riconoscimento dei titoli di studio dei cittadini stranieri in Italia.

Sandro Landucci è ricercatore presso l'Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali.

Federica Floridi è assegnista di ricerca in presso il Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione della Sapienza Università di Roma. Tra i suoi interessi di ricerca figurano: la ricerca valutativa con particolare riferimento alle politiche pubbliche e sociali complesse, ai processi di scolarizzazione e alla all'università e la ricerca; la cooperazione internazionale allo sviluppo; la sociologia delle emozioni. Tra le sue pubblicazioni più recenti: *Self-spoliation and forms of resistance in total institutions: an exploration of time and space in an Albanian communist regime internment camp* (con Cataldi S., Bonaiuto M., Talamo A., 2025, in "Frontiers in Sociology", 10, 1393612); *L'Italia solidale. Un'indagine nazionale sui comportamenti e gli atteggiamenti di amore sociale* (con Cataldi S., Palmieri M., 2025, SOCIETAS, 1-160; *Methodological Challenges: From the First to the Second Wave of the World Love Index* (con Cataldi S., Palmieri M., 2024, Social Sciences, 13(7), 334).

Federica Micale è attualmente assegnista di ricerca presso il Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione della Sapienza Università di Roma ed è interessata allo sviluppo di buone pratiche per una didattica a distanza efficace, indagando come agency e collaborazione possano essere fattori di motivazione e sostegno all'apprendimento. Parallelamente, esercita la professione di psicologa clinica in ambito privato e opera come instructional designer nei percorsi formativi destinati ai dipendenti della Pubblica Amministrazione, oltre a ricoprire il ruolo di tutor didattico in ambito accademico. Tra le sue pubblicazioni: *Il ruolo dei MOOCs come strumento per l'inclusione sociale* (con Cesareni D. 2019, in Benvenuto G., Sposetti P., Szpunar G. (a cura di), *Tutti i bisogni educativi sono speciali. Riflessioni, ricerche, esperienze didattiche*, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Roma: 267-273).

Silvia Cataldi è professoressa in Sociologia presso il Dipartimento di Psicologia dei Processi di Sviluppo e Socializzazione di Sapienza Università di Roma dove coordina il corso di laurea in Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche. In ambito internazionale coordina il Thematic Group 12 "Social Love and Solidarity" dell'*International Sociological Association* ed è vicepresidente del Research Network 20 "Qualitative Methods" della European Sociological Association. I suoi interessi di ricerca si concentrano sulle forme di solidarietà e inclusione sociale. Tra le sue pubblicazioni più recenti: *The Destructive and the Transformative Potentials: An Analysis of Anger and Resentment in Contemporary Times* (con Cataldi L., 2025, in "Sociologia, rivista quadrimestrale di scienze storiche e sociali", Gangemi, anno LIX, n. 1: 67-76); *For an ethics of generosity: Values for ethnography in a time of regulatory ethics* (con Atkinson P., Wästerfors D., 2024, in "Qualitative Research", 0(0).

Christelle Manifet is a sociologist, maître de conférences at the University of Toulouse 2–Jean Jaurès, and a member of the Unity of research Transitions, Organizations, Policies, Inequalities, a joint research unit of the CNRS (UTOPI-UMR5311). Her research interests concern higher education policies, institutions, university system reforms, international comparisons of higher education systems, the history of French universities, and the students strategies and experiences.

Andrea Lombardinilo è professore associato di Sociologia dei processi culturali e comunicativi presso l'Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione, dove insegna Sociologia dell'educazione e Sociologia dei processi culturali. È referente d'ateneo nella Conferenza Italiana dei Dipartimenti di Area Sociologica (CIDAS). I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano i processi di innovazione del sistema universitario, le tangenze tra sociologia e retorica, il rapporto tra scienze sociali, comunicazione culturale e letteratura.

Paolo Brescia è sociologo, dottore di ricerca in Comunicazione presso l'Università Sapienza di Roma e attualmente assegnista di ricerca presso l'Università degli Studi di Cagliari, nonché docente a contratto in Sociologia della comunicazione presso il medesimo ateneo. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano la comunicazione nel settore pubblico e universitario, le applicazioni dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa e le relazioni tra istituzioni governative e cittadini.

William Persichilli is a feminist visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, UK. He is a PhD candidate in Political Sciences and a teaching assistant in General Sociology at the Department of Political and Legal Sciences at the University of Messina, Italy. He was a visiting scholar at the Gender Studies Unit, University of Vienna, and a visiting researcher at the "Kurdish Studies Center" in Diyarbakir, Turkey. Under the guidance of Professor Lidia Lo Schiavo, he conducts a sociological and internationalist research which reconceptualises the notion of "peace" from a "gender" perspective, with a methodological focus on Kurdish feminist movements for peace. He conducted ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork in the Northern Kurdistan region. He is a peer-reviewer for the international journals "Mediterranean Politics"; "About Gender"; and "Open Gender Journal". He is a member of ESA, AIS, and of the University of Cambridge Gender and Sexuality Research Cluster.

Andrea Bilotti è professore associato di Sociologia e servizio sociale presso l'Università degli Studi Roma Tre, dove insegna Principi e fondamenti del servizio sociale, Metodologie e pratiche innovative di servizio sociale e Digital Social Work. È co-fondatore del Laboratorio sulle Disuguaglianze dell'Università di Siena e membro della Rete nazionale del Welfare Responsabile dalla sua fondazione. Già membro del direttivo della Società Italiana di Servizio Sociale (SocISS), partecipa a numerosi network di ricerca nazionali e internazionali nell'ambito del social work. Dal 2021 è consulente di Banca Mondiale (Nazioni Unite) per il Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali per l'attuazione e l'implementazione delle misure di contrasto alle povertà. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano disabilità e diritti umani, abilismo istituzionale, lavoro sociale, disuguaglianze e politiche di welfare, con particolare attenzione ai processi di partecipazione e co-produzione. È autore di volumi e saggi sul servizio sociale in prospettiva critica e sui processi di riforma e innovazione delle politiche sociali.

Silvia Tarassi is a research fellow at Università degli Studi Milano Bicocca in the three-year EU project CLiViE (Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe) (www.clivieproject.eu). She is lecturer at the University of Bergamo, where she teaches Cultural Planning. She also teaches Music Industry Overview at the SAE Institute, in the Master's program in Events and Communication for Culture. She is advisor in cultural policy and planning, a member of the FNSV Music Commission of the Italian Ministry of Culture, and a Creative Europe expert. She is the co-author of "Festival Diffusi. A New Organizational Format for Cultural Policies" (FrancoAngeli, 2024).

Ilenya Camozzi is a full professor of the Sociology of Culture in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milano-Bicocca. She teaches Cultures, Difference and Conflicts to undergraduate students and New Slavery and Gender-Based Exploitation to postgraduate students. Her primary research interests lie in the fields of intercultural relations, everyday forms of multiculturalism, migrants' political activism and young people with migrant background. Her further research interests lie in the fields of youth studies and youth cultures, particularly transitions to adulthood, as well as the concepts of cosmopolitanism and mobility/migration as cultural frameworks in the study of contemporary youth. She is currently the Principal Investigator of UNIMIB's local unit in the three-year EU project CLiViE (Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe) (www.clivieproject.eu). Among her recent publications are: *Tra Europa e Italia: gli orientamenti alla mobilità spaziale dei giovani* (with Satta C. Cuzzocrea V., 2025, in "Polis"); *'Moving the Apocalypse a Little Further Away': Young Italian Activists Between Future Crises and Everyday Utopias' in Young* (with Musmeci M., 2025).

Kemal Ahson is the PI and research coordinator for the EU Horizon funded Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project based at the University of Helsinki. His research interests include examining arts-based (critical) pedagogies and imagination, cultural heritage, identity and inclusion, and the public engagement and participation in science and technology. Methodologically, he is interested in arts-based practices (ABPs) and emotional cartography. He is the managing consultant of Lifeworld Ltd and a trustee of a London-based arts charity (Bridging Arts). His PhD, from University College London (UCL), examined innovation in biotechnology.

Patrice Corriveau holds a PhD in sociology and has been a professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa since 2006. Working at the intersection of sociology, law, and history, his research examines how behaviors come to be defined as criminal or marginal, contributing to debates on criminalization and informing social and criminal justice policies and practices. He is the author of several books, including works translated into other languages. He currently serves as Vice-Provost (International) at the University of Ottawa. He is also President of the Association internationale des sociologues de langue française (AISLF). In addition, he is co-director of the Historical Sociology of Suicide in Quebec research project.

Isabelle Perreault est historienne et professeure titulaire au département de criminologie à l'Université d'Ottawa. Elle travaille sur 1) une sociologie histoire du suicide au Québec de 1763 à nos jours et 2) une autopsie sociale et politique des corps non réclamés au Québec. Elle est chercheure affiliée au Centre d'histoire des régulations sociales (CHRS) de l'UQAM et dirige un axe de recherche au Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur la citoyenneté et les minorités (CIRCEM) de l'Université d'Ottawa. Ses intérêts de recherche portent sur l'étude des biopolitiques et nécropolitiques canadiennes à partir des traces retrouvées en archive, traces qui émanent du contact entre les individus de groupes minorisés par leurs histoires et leurs conditions de vie et les institutions médicales et/ou judiciaires.

Jean-François Cauchie est professeur titulaire au département de criminologie, sociologue et criminologue. Ses travaux s'inscrivent dans trois axes de recherche. Tout d'abord, les enjeux entourant l'évolution du droit criminel et les conditions d'émergence, de sélection et de stabilisation des idées innovatrices en matière de châtiment légal. Ensuite, les enjeux épistémologiques, éthiques et méthodologiques autour de la création d'une banque de données numérique nous informant de la prise en charge, sur un temps long (1763-2021), du geste suicidaire au Québec. Et enfin les enjeux autour de deux objets de recherche aux contours difficilement saisissables : 1) le moi posthume tel qu'il ressort dans des lettres d'adieu et, plus largement, 2) le suicide comme objet transdisciplinaire.

Edmondo Grassi è ricercatore in Sociologia Generale presso l'Università San Raffaele Roma. I suoi interessi di ricerca si concentrano sugli Science and Technology Studies (STS), l'impatto sociale dell'intelligenza artificiale, l'immaginario, la teoria sociologica e il pensiero della complessità. È direttore scientifico della European Fairy Tale Route per il Consiglio d'Europa, coordina il GT12 "Récits, fiction, culture et société" dell'AISLF ed è attivo in diverse sezioni dell'AIS. Collabora con numerose riviste scientifiche (tra cui Humanities & Social Sciences Communications-Nature-). Nel 2024 ha ricevuto il Premio AIS Giovani come miglior giovane ricercatore per l'articolo *Affective Intersections: Exploring the Ontogenesis of Human-Algorithm Relationships*. Ha pubblicato numerosi articoli e due monografie: *Per una sociologia algomorfica* (FrancoAngeli, 2024) ed *Etica e intelligenza artificiale. Questioni aperte* (Aracne, 2020).

Veronica Moretti è professoressa associata di Sociologia generale (SSD GSPS-05/A) presso il Dipartimento di Sociologia e Diritto dell'Economia dell'Università di Bologna, dove coordina il Corso di Laurea in Sociologia. È membro del Comitato di Bioetica dell'Ateneo, del board del Research Network Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty dell'European Sociological Association e della European Society for Health and Medical Sociology. Co-fondatrice e Vice-President di Graphic Medicine Italia, i suoi interessi scientifici includono la sociologia della salute e del rischio, l'intelligenza artificiale e l'uso dei fumetti nella ricerca sociale. Tra le pubblicazioni principali si segnalano l'editoria del volume *The Social Genres of Comics: Impact and Innovation of Comics in Social Sciences* (Springer, 2025), che esplora i generi sociali del fumetto nelle scienze sociali e il graphic novel *Il primo paziente* (Tunuè), nonché la curatela della collana *Graphic Anatomy* per BeccoGiallo, che coniuga anatomia, fumetto e narrative-based medicine.

Maria Alessandra Molè è assegnista di ricerca presso la Libera Università di Bolzano. Attualmente è impegnata nel progetto PRIN *Digital Technologies for Social Inclusion: The Experience of Service Users and Social Workers in Social and Health Care Settings*, dedicato all'analisi del ruolo delle tecnologie digitali nei processi di inclusione sociale e nelle pratiche operative dei servizi sociali e socio-sanitari. È docente a contratto per il corso Sociologia presso l'Università Roma Tre. La sua attività scientifica si concentra sui fenomeni della povertà urbana e sulle forme di interazione sociale nei contesti ordinari, professionali e istituzionali, con particolare attenzione alle trasformazioni introdotte dall'impiego degli strumenti digitali nei servizi sociali. L'approccio teorico-metodologico adottato si colloca nell'ambito dell'etnometodologia e dell'analisi della conversazione, attraverso cui indaga le pratiche situate, i processi comunicativi e le dinamiche organizzative che caratterizzano l'erogazione degli interventi sociali.

Francesco Sacchetti è professore associato di Sociologia generale (SSD GSPS-05/A) presso il Dipartimento DISCUI dell'Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo, dove svolge attività didattica e di ricerca nell'ambito della metodologia delle scienze sociali. I suoi interessi scientifici riguardano l'epistemologia della ricerca, la multimodalità, gli approcci qualitativi e in particolare l'etnografia. Si occupa inoltre di sociologia visuale, migrazioni, pluralismo culturale e trasformazioni dei contesti socio-istituzionali. Tra le principali pubblicazioni si segnalano il volume *I processi di categorizzazione* (Bonanno); *La cultura della morte nell'islam* (FrancoAngeli), e numerosi contributi su approcci qualitativi, etnografia e innovazione metodologica in riviste e volumi scientifici nazionali e internazionali. La sua attività scientifica coniuga riflessione epistemologica, rigore metodologico e attenzione ai contesti applicativi della ricerca empirica.

Erika Cellini è ricercatrice confermata in Sociologia generale presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e sociali dell'Università degli studi di Firenze. Ha conseguito il dottorato di ricerca in Metodologia delle Scienze Sociali presso l'Università di Roma La Sapienza. Si è quindi specializzata nelle tecniche della ricerca quantitativa e qualitativa, in particolare i suoi studi di tipo metodologico hanno riguardato la ricerca etnografica, l'osservazione partecipante e la ricerca visuale. Insegna Metodologia delle scienze sociali e Metodologia della ricerca qualitativa. La sua ricerca è principalmente incentrata sui temi delle migrazioni, dell'abitare e del genere. Ha pubblicato vari contributi, fra i quali il più recente: *In nome della vulnerabilità. La configurazione del welfare controintuitivo nel sistema italiano di accoglienza dei richiedenti asilo* (con Milani S., Bulli G, 2025, in "Politiche Sociali", vol. 3).

Niccolò Storai, vive e lavora a Prato dove svolge le attività di disegnatore di fumetti e di cartoni animati. Ha frequentato la Scuola Internazionale di Comics, direzione di Marco Bianchini, e si è diplomato presso L'Accademia di Arti Digitali Nemo. Ha pubblicato per diverse case editrici in Italia e all'estero, tra le quali: Tunué, Rizzoli Lizard, Mondadori, HeavyMetal (U.S.A.), VittorioPavesioFrance (Francia).

Geoffrey Pleyers è ricercatore FNRS e professore presso l'UCLouvain. Dal 28 giugno 2023 è presidente dell'Associazione Internazionale di Sociologia. Ha presieduto il Forum Mondiale di Sociologia nel 2021. Dottore in sociologia presso l'EHESS e l'Università di Liegi (2006), dirige i gruppi di ricerca «SMAG-Movimenti sociali nell'era globale» e «Gruppo di ricerca sull'America Latina» presso l'UCLouvain. Le sue ricerche vertono sui movimenti sociali, la sociologia globale, l'impegno dei giovani e l'ecologia. I suoi libri principali sono *Alter-Globalization. Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (Polity, 2011) e *Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI* (Icaria, 2019). È curatore di 18 libri o numeri speciali di riviste ed è autore di circa 150 articoli su riviste o opere scientifiche.