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The Higher Council of Public Education and the Governance of the University System in the Republican Age

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The study conference, The Higher Council of Education and the Government of the University System in the Republican Age, was held at the Pantaleoni Educational Centre in Macerata on the 30th and 31st of May 2024. The event was organised by the Inter-University Centre for the History of Italian Universities (CISUI). The event was organised by the Centre for Studies and Documentation on the History of the University of Macerata, with the collaboration of the Centre for Documentation and Research on the History of School Books and Children's Literature and the Museum of the School Paolo e Ornella Ricca of the University of Macerata.

The event was attended by a number of notable scholars and researchers, and institutional representatives. The purpose of the event was to analyse the fundamental role that the Higher Council of Public Education played in the evolution of the Italian education system in the post-war period.

The conference also explored the management of the university system in an Italy striving to define its identity on the international stage. A diverse range of individuals was in attendance at the event, including historians, education experts, and professors. The objective was to highlight the pivotal influence that the Higher Council for Education exerted on the evolution of the Italian educational system in the post-war era, as well as its crucial role in the administration of the university system within a nation that was endeavouring to establish its distinct identity on the global stage. The opening greetings were expressed by the Rector John McCourt, the Director of the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Lorella Giannandrea, and the President of CISUI, Gian Paolo Brizzi. The necessity of historical knowledge in an era of rapid and constant change has been emphasised, as has the importance of maintaining active comparison between scholars from different universities. Brizzi also expressed great satisfaction in the value of the University of Macerata, as one of the first universities to have associated itself to CISUI. He then went on to discuss the genesis of the project that led to the organisation of the conference in Macerata, which was started in 2019 and resumed in 2022. He also suggested that this meeting

could represent the first segment of the whole research project. If we were to consider the role played by the Superior Council, we might find that it is involved in the definition of the main lines of development of the system and its more concrete management of self-government mechanisms, from the relationship centre periphery to the balances between universities and the dialectic between groups and trends which permeate the teaching staff. It is worth considering that historians have so far primarily focused their attention on the early years of fascism, and that the activity of the Supreme Council in subsequent years has not been explored and reconstructed to the same extent. It is precisely to address this gap that the scientific project supporting this conference has been developed, with the aim of providing a starting point for a new and more in-depth historiographical reflection on a subject as complex as it is significant.

Moderated by Guido Melis (Sapienza University of Rome), the first session (afternoon of 30th May) welcomed presentations by Andrea Giorgi (University of Trento), Leonardo Mineo (University of Turin), Mauro Moretti (University for Foreigners in Siena), Francesco Bonini (LUMSA University of Rome) and Giovanni Focardi (University of Padua).

Guido Melis, a well-known historian of public administration, introduced the theme in a contribution entitled *The Higher Council for Education, Continuity and Changes of an Institution*. This traces the evolution of the Council's identity, starting from its establishment on 30th November 1847 and leading up to the legislative reform of 30th December n. 1477, which reorganised the advisory bodies of the Ministry of Education and established the new organisational entity.

The discussion was then taken up by Andrea Giorgi and Leonardo Mineo, with a joint presentation entitled *Sources and Archives*. Through their combined contribution the two scholars conducted a thorough historical investigation on issues related to the Higher Council of Public Education. This investigation analysed the files held at the Central State Archives, with research extending back to 1966. Giorgi focused on institutional dynamics and reform policies that have influenced university geography, examining the evolution of academic structures and the expansion of degree courses. Meanwhile, Mineo has committed his efforts to the analysis of the demands of the student movement, highlighting the recognition of student body rights and their active role in academic administration decisions.

The next speaker, Mauro Moretti, addressed *The Reconstruction 1945-1955*. He recalled how, on July 12th, 1945, the president of the Superior Council, Guido De Ruggiero, felt the need to initiate a detailed examination

of the then current university system. He then presented specific proposals for the long-awaited university reforms to the minister. The council accepted the proposed plan and resolved to distribute the work among its various members without delay. The action plan gave rise to a number of issues, which Moretti addressed in his presentation. A key element of his reflection was the debate that took place on 22 May 1953. The establishment of new faculties and courses was the primary concern.

At the end of his speech, Moretti passed the word to Francesco Bonini, Rector of LUMSA, who offered an original contribution entitled *Reform Projects 1959-1967* linking his analysis to Moretti's discussion. In his incisive examination, he underlined the profound impulse for reform that characterised the Italian university in those years, accentuating the pivotal function of the Higher Council in harmonising the necessity for self-governance with the pressing concerns of the period. In the course of his address, the speaker touched upon several central themes, including the importance of equipping higher non-degree technical professionals with the expertise necessary to thrive in scientific disciplines. Additionally, he emphasised the significance of establishing universities in regions that previously lacked such institutions and the growing involvement of students in academic governance. In addition, Bonini analysed parliamentary debates and preliminary events that marked the failure of the draft law proposed by Minister Luigi Gui, whose troubled process dominated much of the 1960s. This reconstruction has made it possible to highlight the complexity of the reform process and the centrality of the Higher Council in directing changes in the Italian university system.

The first session of the conference concluded with an incisive interpretative contribution from Giovanni Focardi, entitled *Prosopography of the Members of the Higher Council of Public Education*. In his presentation Focardi delved into the concept of prosopography, understood as a collective analysis of a group belonging to the elite, focusing specifically on the members of the Council. His research centred on the composition of the Higher Council of Public Education during the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting how its members were mostly individuals who were culturally and politically aligned with the ministers of the time. The analysis also shed light on the diversity of political affiliations within the Council, reconstructing the cultural and political reference areas of its members. A significant aspect emerging from the research was the almost complete absence of women in the Council, with the sole exception of Maria Emilia Lucifredi Peterlongo. This finding underscores a major gap in gender representation during that era and

offers a point of reflection on the role of women in academic and political institutions of the period.

The first session concluded successfully, making way for a visit to the Paolo and Ornella Ricca School Museum of the University of Macerata, guided by its director, Fabio Targhetta, and deputy director, Marta Brunelli.

The second day of conference (31st May) was moderated by Anna Ascenzi (University of Macerata). Contributions were made by Simona Salustri (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia), Luigiaurelio Pomante (University of Macerata), and Andrea Mariuzzo (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia). In the second part of the morning, chaired by Annamaria Monti (University of Milan), additional contributions were provided by Marianna Gaetani (Polytechnic University of Turin), Stefano Morosini (University of Bergamo), and Alessandro Brecchia (University of Pisa).

The seminar was officially opened with a presentation by Simona Salustri entitled *University Policies between Center and Periphery: Felice Battaglia's Work within the Higher Council of Public Education*. Through her meticulous research, she shed light on the figure of Felice Battaglia, a distinguished jurist, a scholar of great erudition, and a philosopher of international renown. Notably, Felice Battaglia played a key role in the major changes in the history of Italian universities and, from 1954 to 1962, actively participated in multiple sessions, serving as both a member and president of the Higher Council of Public Education. The scholar focused her attention on certain aspects of the debate within the Subcommittee for Higher Education, in which Battaglia was involved starting on February 18th, 1948. Specifically, she analysed two partially conflicting issues: firstly, the General Directorate of Higher Education, which was primarily based on administrative criteria; secondly, the Ministry's research office, which focused mainly on technical aspects. Battaglia emphasised a series of crucial issues that needed to be addressed preliminarily by the faculty, such as academic autonomy, scientific and professional qualifications, and the problem of overcrowding, topics that would resurface in later years. He played a key role during a pivotal phase of evolution and reorganisation of the Italian university system, addressing complex issues relating to the need for renewal and democratisation of the entire education system, as well as the urgency of fostering greater integration of working students. Battaglia proposed a reorganisation of universities that would make them more functional. This reorganisation would be based on departments, and it would promote greater collaboration between institutions. The aim of this proposal was to overcome the domination of individual faculties. It intended to create a network

that would connect chairs and ensure more effective selection of assistant professors on a nationwide scale. He was, therefore, an active participant in the decision-making process for the new territorial distribution plan for universities. While he did not believe such a plan to be absolutely essential, he nevertheless considered it of great importance to enhance the smaller universities so that they would not simply become mere degree-granting centres, but could instead play an active and significant role in the academic landscape. Salustri's contribution was concluded with a reference to 1968, a period that marked the end of the Battaglia era, who was one of the leading figures in the central seasons of the Higher Council and beyond.

The word then passed to Luigiaurelio Pomante, whose contribution operated on a different level of analysis: *The Work of the Ermini Commission and the Opinions of the Higher Council of Public Education (CSPI) and the National Council for Economics and Labor (CNEL)*. Pomante, politically and institutionally, contextualised the period, highlighting the growing need within the political class to initiate a reform of the national education system. This need led to the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry into the State and Needs of Public Education in Italy. The final report of this commission, which was to be submitted to the Minister of Public Education, was designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the development of the education system. The presidency of the Commission was entrusted to Professor Giuseppe Ermini, who was presented with a detailed picture of the country's educational and university realities. Subsequently, numerous initiatives were proposed concerning teacher training, the modernisation of school and university facilities and curricula, as well as school infrastructure development. The Commission's proposals were submitted to the Board of Governors and the CNEL, which, after a first favorable general assessment, raised numerous criticisms. As pointed out by Pomante, it was the Minister Gui, who had to take into consideration both the proposals of the Ermini's Commission and the observations of the Superior Council and the CNEL, in order to arrive at the final formulation of his bill, n. 2314. If the measure had been approved, it would have led to a radical transformation of the Italian university system. However, the attempt ultimately proved unsuccessful. The substantial exchange between the Higher Council and the Ermini's Commission enabled the exploration of numerous themes and strands from a new perspective.

One of these was reconstructed by Andrea Mariuzzo in his presentation entitled *Academic Degrees and Research Training Paths: The Discussions in the High-*

er Council from Gonella to Gui. In this he tackled an important issue: the debates on the nature and value of research training degrees issued by Italian universities. These discussions took place during the first two decades of the Republic, spanning from Guido Gonella's attempted reform to Luigi Gui's failed one. With his research, Professor Mariuzzo sought to reconstruct the role and functions of the Higher Council during a period of intense debates about the need to adapt the school and university systems to new challenges posed by a rapidly changing socioeconomic context.

Marianna Gaetani also gave a very original speech entitled *The Building Problem (1956-1968)*, in which, she examines with rigor the role of the Higher Council of Public Education in university infrastructure matters. She highlighted the somewhat elusive role of the Higher Council until 1968, and the complexity of the situation universities faced, characterised by both post-war reconstruction and overcrowding. This issue was not only an operational challenge but also a theoretical and political question, with conflicting views on defining an effective intervention strategy. The Higher Council emphasised that the difficulty in solving the problem stemmed not only from a lack of funding but also from an excessively slow bureaucracy in handling administrative procedures. In certain circumstances, the allocation of available funds was prevented by the unavailability of the requisite regulatory documentation within the stipulated timeframe.

Professor Morosini, with his perceptive contribution entitled *Debates and Deliberations on the Establishment of New Faculties and Degree Courses in Relation to Technical-Industrial Development*, built on this reflection to examine four key historical moments: 1945, 1947, 1960, and 1968. Through the presentation of significant documents, he illustrated how these periods reflect a strategic vision centered on the technical industrial development undertaken by Italy starting in the 1950s. Each period addressed specific needs discussed within the Higher Council of Public Education, such as the emergence of new technical-scientific competencies, the transfer of the Faculty of Engineering from the University of Pisa to Florence, the establishment of the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literature at Bocconi University, and the development of new strategic competencies related to engineering. The closure of the Faculty of Languages at Bocconi University in 1960 is a noteworthy occurrence, particularly given its establishment in 1947. This closure was due to a student occupation supported by the teaching staff. On the other hand, in the field of translation and interpretation, the IULM University Institute in Milan was established, while around linguistic studies,

the University of Bergamo stood out. Professor Morosini's highly detailed research highlights the key points of the debate recorded in the minutes of the Higher Council of Public Education, which took place in the context of general emergency. Morosini concluded his presentation by addressing the issue of the restoration and use of historical buildings, referencing the Conservation Recovery Project started in the 2000s. This project allowed for the revitalisation of historical sites, repurposing them for the university.

The seminar ended with an intervention by Alessandro Breccia, entitled *The Higher Council of Public Education in the face of the Emergencies of the Long Sixty-Eight*. Breccia has analysed the contribution of two councils and two eminent jurists, Francesco Santoro Passarelli and Leopoldo Elia, in-depth three closely interrelated issues, starting from 1996, a year that marks a generational turning point for the Italian university. This change was caused by the change at the top of the universities, with the withdrawal of figures like Santoro Passarelli. He was the representative of the legacy of the phase immediately following the Liberation, and he concluded his experience of academic government that year.

Prof. Breccia continued by deepening the role of the president and vice president, appointed by ministers, highlighting some prominent figures of Italian politics, including Luigi Gui, Fiorentino Sullo, Giuseppe Ferrari Aggradi, Riccardo Misasi, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro and Franco Maria Malfatti. They have all held important ministerial posts in the institutional landscape of the country.

Following two days of rigorous academic inquiry, characterised by a distinctive multidisciplinary approach, the evolution of the university system in republican Italy has been reconstructed. Each intervention has given rise to original research perspectives on the identity of the Higher Council for Education, which is recognised as a central institution and apparatus in the life of university institutions in a country that wishes to reconcile modernisation.

The Italian education system, which has always tried to combine the public interest with the autonomy of educational and university institutions, is fair and autonomous despite its continuous evolution over time. The dialectic between centralisation and decentralisation, between strong state control and the push towards autonomous and meritocratic management of universities, remains an open issue that continues to influence the debate on higher education in Italy.