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## Reformism and Evaluation in the Field of Social and Political Sciences. Consequences for the Academic Community, Projects, People

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# Reformism and Evaluation in the Field of Social and Political Sciences. Consequences for the Academic Community, Projects, People

Renato Fontana\*, Davide Borrelli\*\*, Erika Nemmo\*\*\*, Cristina Sofia\*\*\*\* and Elena Valentini\*\*\*\*\*

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*Abstract:* After the introduction of the most recent University evaluation reforms, this article aims at presenting the first findings of a research project on these reforms and the evaluation processes carried out so far in the field of social and political sciences. In particular, the research wishes to investigate the relational dynamics, the behaviors and the values of the academic profession with special attention to the scientific activity, but without putting aside the implications for the teaching, management and the “third mission” activities. Inserted in the line of studies on higher education and evaluation well consolidated in Italy, the research is characterized by the added value of connecting the critical-theoretical level to the empirical one.

*Keywords:* evaluation, University reform, social and political sciences, scientific production, research and didactics quality

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### **The theoretical framework: the Italian scientific debate about the new evaluation systems**

The University reform has stimulated in Italy a lively debate on the theme of evaluation in the field of social and political sciences. Today, in the Italian context (and not only: see, for example, Barats, Bouchard & Haakenstaad, 2018; Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Gläser, 2016; Musselin, 2017; McNay, 2016; Sayer, 2015) this theme has a renewed relevance as to its impact on organizational structures and on the life of those who create and spread knowledge inside them. The reflection has engaged numerous scientific communities not only in the socio-political field, as certified by the abundant literature on the topic in recent years, but also in research ambits that do not deal directly with evaluation systems.

Generally speaking, this reform of academic governance is deemed and presented as a way to harmonize Italian scientific research with the alleged international best practices, but actually results in the homologation of research practices, education activity and dynamics of knowledge to the current Anglo-Saxon organizational model of science, by imposing both a global standard of “quality” and a standardized approach to manage and measure it, without taking into account the “context-boundedness” of these values, priorities and cultural habits (Connell, 2007).

In order to analyze the prevalent positions on the impact of the evaluation measures in the field of social and political sciences, where there is a literature of a certain vastness, we have chosen to focus on the contributions capable of tackling the operative aspects of the evaluation processes (for example, the ways of calculating the various indexes), placing them in relationship with the impact they have on the work and relational practices of teachers and researchers.

Our academic community expresses itself in extremely critical terms about the ongoing changes, often moving from the common premise that research, as a subject of evaluation, presents specific peculiarities (Baccini, 2010; Colarusso & Santonastaso, 2015; Rossi, 2015), particularly in the field of social and political sciences.

This is not a criticism of evaluation itself, but of the concrete ways in which it is carried out, connected to the identification of elements of a certain complexity: differences between the various disciplinary ambits as to the ways of achieving evaluative objectives, their timing and nature; a strong interdisciplinary vocation especially in emerging scientific sectors; a specificity of the typologies of the scientific outputs obtained; ways of recognizing academic prestige and authoritativeness (Colarusso & Santonastaso, 2015; Galimberti, 2012; Moretti 2009; Reale, 2008; Reale & Pennisi, 2013).

It is possible to highlight two thematic nuclei through which we can not only sum up the various processes, but also capture the critical attitudes towards the ongoing reforms: a) a critical reading of the goals of the evaluation system with reference to the ideological aspects at the basis of the technical choices and the evaluative model; b) a critical reading of the operative aspects of the evaluation system with reference to their ability to contribute to the improvement of the quality of scientific output.

They are not alternative thematic nuclei, but perspectives considered sometimes with continuity and in mutual connection in order to tackle the theme from a different point of view. In the first case, we analyze the explicit and/or implicit objectives of the reforms; in the second case, once reached a consensus on the purposes that make the development of an evaluation system necessary, we criticize the distortions coming from the implementation processes and their controversial impacts.

### ***The criticism to the university reform and the organizational model***

In the first thematic nucleus converge positions with a wide view of the reform and the evaluation system. They are positions which face the analysis of the evaluation system looking at its roots in the university reform and in the more general vision of the organizational model of which the evaluation is an expression. For their particular nature, these contributions are therefore transversal to the various disciplines and not focused exclusively on the social and political sciences. What renders these contributions particularly interesting in our research is that many of the authors consider the analysis from a distinctly sociological point of view, looking at the social effects of the institutionalization processes, at the re-institutionalization of the reform and the changes in terms of social relationships.

The declared objective of the university reform is to improve the operative capabilities and the impact of research also thanks to autonomy, a principle constitutionally guaranteed, but which has found application only in the last decades and with different timing at financial, statutory and didactic levels. The results of the reform and the ways in which the evaluation system has been carried out have brought various authors (Borrelli, 2015; Colarusso & Santonastaso, 2015; Pinto, 2014; Reale & Pennisi 2013; Rebora, 2013; Rossi, 2015) to claim that in reality the level of autonomy of the universities instead of increasing has been compressed in favor of the State which uses evaluation as a means to govern the university world<sup>1</sup>: from the “Controller State” we move on to the “Evaluation State”.

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<sup>1</sup> This position is also present in the international debate, for example by Gauchet (2009) or by Neave (2012).

Evidence of this more nominal than substantial autonomy is given by some scholars (Calvano, 2015; Rossi, 2015) that talk about the creation of a system where in the decisional headquarters it is possible to find who defines the criteria and the evaluation parameters, who carries out the evaluation itself and who decides the resource distribution. It is here that we can see the development of opinions that aim to show how behind the explicit goals of the reform (placed inside regulations and in the indications of the evaluation structures), one can find implicit objectives about the nature of university itself and the organizational culture of which individuals are carriers.

One of the un-declared goals is to transform the evaluation into a governing technology (Pinto, 2014) in which the State connotes its role according to neoliberal principles of the New Public Management (Bruno, Clément & Lavalle, 2010; Del Rey, 2013; Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall & Serpieri, 2016; Hood, Scott, James, Jones & Travers, 1999; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). This process does not mean that the State confers powers to markets, but that it tends to justify its decisions and policies according to market logics. In other words, it unifies the control function with that of economic valorization. From the birth and the strengthening of this *Evaluative State* descend the cultural impacts on the scientific community, which in the opinion of some scholars, is victim of a process of knowledge de-individualization (Pinto, 2014) and normalization with the aim of creating “submissive bodies” functional to work organization and social control (Rossi, 2015). Hence, the issue is not to improve the evaluation system, to solve poorly thought technical aspects or errors inside the process of change because, in reality, the evaluation system perfectly corresponds to the cultural and organizational intents hidden behind the declared goals. This perspective appears not only in Italian literature, but also abroad<sup>2</sup> (Dardot & Laval, 2009).

### ***The criticism of measurement methods and techniques***

In the second thematic nucleus are inserted a whole series of opinions about the various elements of the ongoing evaluation mechanism. If the ac-

<sup>2</sup> In the international literature, on the other hand, there are different research contributions, including qualitative ones, on these issues. Large-scale evaluation exercises and the related debate on evaluation procedures have taken place abroad a few decades in advance of the Italian context. In addition to the studies already mentioned (McNay, 1997, carried out on behalf of the HEFCE-Higher Education Funding Council for England on the impact assessment of the Research Assessment Exercise, the UK evaluation exercise of 1992; and Gläser, 2016 on the effects on scientific production processes at individual and systemic level), we refer to other studies on the consequences of evaluation systems carried out in other European countries: Barbara M. Kehm (2013) on the German system, Thierry Chevaillier (2013) on the French system, Vidal Ferreira (2013) on Spain and Sylvia Manning (2012) for the United States. A specific phase of the research, which here is not presented, has been dedicated to the international literature on these themes.

cepted and shared goal is to create evaluation mechanisms capable of improving the quality of scientific output, what are criticized are the technical and methodological choices. Indeed, in the attempt of measuring and “framing” social reality, these end up destroying its potential (Rossi, 2015; Pinto, 2014). The peculiarities of the Humanities and the Social Sciences gain importance in this framework because as in other disciplinary ambits, they base the progress of knowledge on particular mechanisms that cannot be simply standardized and approved.

In order to provide an example, we can make reference to the delicate debate on the modalities of quantitative and qualitative evaluation of scientific output: the ambits of comparison are those of peer review and bibliometric indicators. On one hand, the social and political sciences consider peer reviews as the only possible evaluation tools (Galimberti, 2012); on the other hand, however, evaluation practices have highlighted critical aspects such as the high level of subjectivity of the evaluators, the lack of transparency as to the qualifications of the experts, the heavy cost in terms of time, the development of peer reviewer favoritism, and the credibility of the process itself in its various steps.

Despite these critical aspects, according to various authors (Baccini, 2010; Baldissera, 2009; Banfi & De Nicolao, 2013; Galimberti, 2012; Moretti, 2009; Rossi 2012), an exit strategy cannot be found in the bibliometric systems which have emerged – not without criticism<sup>3</sup> – in the so-called hard sciences for contingent reasons like the unavailability of such indexes for the humanities and because there is a widespread conviction that “in the long term the use of bibliometric indicators can bring to adaptive behaviors such as the attempt to publish on journals considered excellent and for which it is necessary to write about mainstream themes leaving out more original, but also “riskier” ones, as to their immediate impact, or the fact that we move towards types of publications which are considered more “advantageous” in terms of recognition (article versus monograph)” (Galimberti, 2012, p. 10).

If in the first thematic nucleus attention is placed on the aims of the evaluation system, in this second framework the results of the system are incriminated and taking up Paolo Rossi’s thesis (2015), this brings to a purge from the system of its weakest members according to quantitative principles and to an increase of negative behaviors: scientific conformism due to the necessity to remain in the mainstream to obtain editorial space and citation acknowledgement; competition to the detriment of collaboration; oligopolistic and/or oligarchic control over the “strong” publishing houses;

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the mathematician Alessandro Figà Talamanca is strongly critical towards the impact factor (Talamanca, 2000).

opportunism in the cases of co-authorship to the detriment of the weaker scholars.

The analysis carried out so far on the publications confirms the knowledge aims of our research. Indeed, the various authors bring in support of their opinions mainly the negative results of the quantitative evaluations and accompany them with logical considerations about the consequences of certain operative mechanisms. What is lacking, however, is the dimension that aims at grasping the impact on labor and relational practices because it is still not supported by sufficient empirical material<sup>4</sup>.

### **Method choices: normative texts, scientific products, biographic interviews**

This paper aims at presenting the first results of an ongoing research project about university reforms and the evaluation processes carried out so far in the field of social and political sciences (Area 14)<sup>5</sup> at the Department of Communication and Social Research of the Sapienza University<sup>6</sup>.

Through various means of investigation, the research examines the evaluation processes carried out so far, with specific reference to VQR (Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca/Evaluation of Research Quality)<sup>7</sup> and ASN (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale/National Scientific Qualification)<sup>8</sup>, and their repercussions on the professional community in the ambit of the social and political field.

The main research question is the following: Are the university professors living the ongoing transformations as a cultural change or are the concerns mainly prescriptive and bureaucratic? This objective is articulated in specific research questions for each phase and research line.

Inserted in the line of studies on higher education and on evaluation well consolidated in Italy, our research is characterized by the added value it possesses for connecting the critical-theoretical level with the one of concrete

<sup>4</sup> We have already presented the results of the analysis of these contribution, which here are summarized and enriched, in Sofia, Valentini & Cassella, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The Italian National University Council (CUN), an elected body representing the Italian University System, has identified fourteen disciplinary areas. One of them is the Area 14 that is the social and political sciences area.

<sup>6</sup> The project, entitled “Reformism and evaluation in the field of social and political sciences. Consequences for the academic community, projects, people”, has been developed by a research team coordinated by the scientific responsible Renato Fontana and composed by Davide Borrelli, Cristina Sofia, Elena Valentini, Milena Cassella and Erika Nemmo.

<sup>7</sup> The VQR (Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca/Evaluation of Research Quality) is the Italian research assessment exercise that ANVUR (the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research system) has carried out on behalf of the MIUR (Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research) for the following periods: 2004-2010 and 2011-2014.

<sup>8</sup> The ASN (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale/National Scientific Qualification) is the new process to recruit Italian university professors, based on scientific qualification criteria.

practice, integrating various investigation paths that combine publication typologies, the analysis of the individual/group relationships in the academic environment and the study in depth of the perception of change for what concerns the values and the practices linked to didactic and scientific activities.

A preliminary background research was carried out to identify the main regulation changes on the theme evaluation over the last decades by considering the most important measures (laws and decrees) related to the evaluation of didactics, research and individual careers (recruitment) and then analyzing them. Furthermore, the research tried to single out the most interesting aspects in order to analyze the institutional context, that is the declared goals, the subjects evaluated and the main expected evaluation activities, tools and/or fulfilments.

Moreover, through the reconnaissance of the most important measures concerning the evaluation of didactics, research and individual careers, we selected 34 of them: 15 about the evaluation of didactic activities, 5 about the evaluation of research, and 14 about the evaluation of individual careers (recruitment). The latter are analyzed by using specific forms which, as anticipated and in coherence with the aims of the analysis previously clarified, consider the following research questions: what are the declared objectives? Which are the subjects evaluated? Which are the main activities, the tools and/or the fulfilment of the evaluation processes requested?

Moving from the national scenario (the data on the distribution of publication typologies in the ambit of each scientific-disciplinary area which emerged from the first use of the VQR, published in the ANVUR report on the situation of the university system and of research in 2016), we selected three Universities according to their size and geographic location: Sapienza University of Rome, University of Genoa, University of Salerno. The exploratory analysis of the features of the scientific products, which will be taken from the IRIS (Institutional Research Information System)<sup>9</sup> catalogues will allow us to understand how the scientific output of university teachers has changed since the introduction of the new regulatory framework and verify if there are differences in the three cases.

The specific research question of this phase is the following: how and to what extent formal and/or substantial changes have been introduced in the works of university scholars? Has the production of the scholars been modified by the Evaluation processes, with respect to the type and number of publications? Indeed, the hypothesis is that the requests to meet the evaluation standards introduced have modified not only the characteristics of

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<sup>9</sup> The IRIS (Institutional Research Information System) is an IT platform that makes it easy to collect and manage data on research activities and outputs within an organization.



the scientific production, but also the quantitative and qualitative level of the scientific output itself.

The following phase of the research, the qualitative one, made use of the technique of the biographic interview to 14 privileged witnesses, that is to the professors of the Area 14, who could provide useful indications about the dynamics activated after the introduction of the new regulations thanks to their role inside the structures they belong to (Directors, Rector delegates, Research delegates, evaluation process managers). Professors from other areas were also interviewed for their experience about the theme evaluation. This is an added value to our analysis.

In particular, we contacted a theoretical philosopher who had already been President of the evaluation structure of his own university; a CNR (National Research Council) researcher who deals with research evaluation; an experimental pedagogist with experience in docimology; an Historian of political doctrines, Department Director; a management engineer who was member of the ANVUR scientific board and has contributed to the building of the current evaluation framework; sociologists who study evaluation (full professors - one of them is also Research and international relations pro-rector – and assistant professors) and a fixed-term research assistant.

To make these interviews we traced an outline divided in two thematic areas: the first one about the relationship between the interviewees and the evaluation experience in terms of individual biography and the second one to know their point of view as evaluation experts of the reforms introduced. The research questions – which have oriented the themes explored – are the following: How has the access criteria to the university career and the evaluation modalities in the following career steps been modified? How have the relationships master-pupil, the priorities in professional daily life (didactic, scientific and management activities), and the criteria and evaluation processes changed during the academic career? How has this conditioned scientific production, research themes, types of publication, the relationship dimension and the other didactic, management/institutional activities?

The second part of the interview outline investigated the point of view of the privileged witnesses about the objectives of the evaluation system and about the effects on structures, people and scientific output (their opinion about practices and behaviors in the choice of research themes, publication typologies, other didactic and management activities, the relationship with colleagues and with external contexts). The research questions are the following: What are the effects of evaluation processes on people, scientific production and structures? Which are the strengths and the weaknesses of

the new evaluation system? Where does the specificity of the social and political science disciplinary area lie?

### The institutional and regulatory framework

The most noticeable change in recent years is represented by the foundation of the ANVUR which has acted through inspirational documents, evaluation and accreditation decrees, from the one on the valorization of efficiency thanks to a rewarding mechanism in the distribution of public funds, based on a system of accreditation<sup>10</sup>, till the most recent Ministerial Decree n. 987, 2016, Decree on Self-Evaluation and Initial and Periodic Accreditation of Universities and Courses of Studies (Decreto Autovalutazione, Accreditamento iniziale e periodico delle sedi e dei corsi di studio). Indeed, these and other measures have regulated evaluation at different levels: as Barbati efficaciously summarizes (2012), they concern both the evaluation of individual scientific output in the ambit of the National Scientific Admission Board (in particular, art. 16 of the L. 240/2010, D.P.R. 14 September 2011<sup>11</sup>, n. 212 and the D.M. n. 76/2012<sup>12</sup>), and the one about the recruitment of fixed-term teaching staff and researchers (regulated by articles 18 and 24 of the L. 240/2010). In addition, the D.lgs. 49/2012<sup>13</sup> (art. 9) establishes that individual research activity is a criterion for the *ex post* evaluation of the recruitment policies and the D.P.R. 232/2011<sup>14</sup> (articles 2 and 3) confirms that it is so also when deciding the economic treatment of academic staff. Finally, scientific research is evaluated also through the VQR (2004-2010 and 2011-2014).

<sup>10</sup> Legislative Decree, n. 19, 2012, Valorization of the efficiency of Universities and consequent introduction of rewarding mechanisms in the distribution of public resources on the basis of criteria defined *ex ante* through the provision of a system of periodic accreditation of Universities and the enhancement of the figure of researchers for an indefinite period not confirmed in the first year of activity, according to Article 5, paragraph 1, letter a) of Law December 30, 2010, n. 240.

<sup>11</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic n. 222, 2011, Regulation on the conferral of national scientific qualification for access to the role of university professors, in accordance with article 16 of Law n. 240 of 30 December 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Ministerial Decree n. 76, 2012, Regulation containing criteria and parameters for the assessment of candidates for the purposes of granting national scientific qualifications for access to the first and second range of university professors, as well as the methods for ascertaining the qualification of Commissioners, pursuant to Article 16, paragraph 3, letters a), b) and c) of Law n. 240 of 30 December 2010, and Articles 4 and 6, paragraphs 4 and 5, of Presidential Decree n. 222 of 14 September 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Legislative Decree n. 49, 2012, Discipline for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of financial statement and university recruitment policies, in implementation of the delegation provided for in Article 5, paragraph 1, of Law n. 240 of 30 December 2010 and for the achievement of the objectives provided for in paragraph 1, letters b) and c), in accordance with the regulatory principles and directive criteria established in paragraph 4, letters b), c), d), e) and f) and in paragraph 5.

<sup>14</sup> Presidential Decree n. 232, 2011, Regulation of the economic treatment of University professors and researchers, pursuant to art.8, paragraphs 1 and 3 of Law n. 240 of 30/12/2010.

The above-mentioned evaluation measures cited as examples are part of a wider process of hyper-regulation which in recent years has touched also other aspects of the academic system and has had important consequences at different levels.

As anticipated, our research has focused on the institutional and regulatory framework on evaluation to understand its effects on the scientific community and on single individuals with reference to the social and political sciences. Indeed, Laws and Reforms are real communicative acts in their pragmatic and especially perlocutionary meaning<sup>15</sup>, with the inevitable effect (it is an ongoing process) of changing people's behaviors. However, this does not happen as a direct and deterministic consequence of the regulations: a law is not enough to bring change in culture, values and practices. Regulatory measures do in any case outline a new context and by interacting with socio-cultural changes and with dynamics which inexorably move from below as an answer to the requested fulfilments, they contribute to the re-designing of the university system and its logics of action.

Here we look at some of the trends which emerge from the analysis of the regulatory aspects of the evaluation about didactics, postponing to another occasion<sup>16</sup> the analysis of the measures concerning research and recruitment. Law n. 537, 1993, Public Finance corrective interventions (Interventi correttivi di finanza pubblica).

As anticipated in the description of the methodology adopted, of the 34 measures selected, 15 are about the evaluation of didactics<sup>17</sup>, starting from the two laws which established the University Evaluation Bodies (Law n. 537,1993, Public Finance corrective interventions (Interventi correttivi di finanza pubblica) and Law n. 370, 1999, Provisions relating to Universities and scientific research and technology (Disposizioni in materia di università e di ricerca scientifica e tecnologica), and assigning them the task to adopt systems «of internal evaluation of the running of the administration, of the didactic activities and of research, of the actions in favor of the right to study, verifying, also through the comparative analysis of costs and returns, the correct use of public resources, the productivity of research and didactics and the impartiality and proper running of the administrative process».

<sup>15</sup> The implicit reference is to the well-known levels of action of linguistic acts described by John Langshaw Austin (Austin, 1962; original work 1987).

<sup>16</sup> This analysis is presented in an article which is under referral.

<sup>17</sup> We did not consider the measures about the creation, the tasks and the functioning of the CNVSU, Evaluation bodies and ANVUR. The two Laws about the creation of the Evaluation Bodies have been considered because identified as the regulatory source in which for the first time the word "evaluation" appears. The CNVSU (National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) was one of the two boards for the evaluation of university education and research (with the CIVR-Guidance Committee for the Evaluation of Research) till 2006. In 2006 the ANVUR was set and replaced them.

These measures have been followed by others which have introduced the requirements, defined at first as minimum and then as necessary, for the activation of courses of study, to then reach decrees which have redesigned the Self-evaluation system of initial and periodical accreditation of the headquarters and the courses of study (AVA), modified in 2016 by the Ministerial Decree n. 987, 2016, Decree on Self-Evaluation and Initial and Periodic Accreditation of Universities and Courses of Studies (Decreto Autovalutazione, Accreditamento iniziale e periodico delle sedi e dei corsi di studio), following which the ANVUR published the new guidelines for the periodical accreditation of university headquarters and courses of study.

The picture is completed by two measures on the accreditation of Doctorate courses.

From the analysis we see the appearance of keywords, especially in the principles or objectives, which can be connected to the New Public Management perspective (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000); words like efficaciousness, efficiency, quality, competition among universities, “incentives correlated to the achievement of results”, in line with the scientific debate on university reforms which has already highlighted this aspect. In some cases the keywords are explicit in the title of the measure, as occurs in the Law n. 537, 1993, Public Finance corrective interventions (Interventi correttivi di finanza pubblica) and in the Legislative Decree, 27 January 2012, n. 19, Valorization of the efficiency of Universities and consequent introduction of rewarding mechanisms in the distribution of public resources (Valorizzazione dell’efficienza delle università e conseguente introduzione di meccanismi premiali nella distribuzione di risorse pubbliche). These two measures stress another significant aspect: some regulations were not created directly for University, but concern more in general Public Administration (as the L. 537, 1993) and were signed not only by the Minister of Education, University and Research, but also by the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Economy and of Finance and/or the Minister for Public Administration and Simplification (as the Legislative Decree n. 19, 2012).

In addition, we underline that also the objectives follow the logic of economic management, confirming the connection to the New Public Management perspective (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000): indeed, the measures make reference to “corrective measures of public finance”, “correct management of public resources”, “rewarding mechanisms in the distribution of public resources”, “economic-financial sustainability”, “incentives correlated to the achievement of the results [...], in the ambit of the resources available in the universities’ financing fund”. The measures clarify over and over again that the implementation of the regulation “must not determine a new or greater burden on public finances”.

### **The scientific output of the teachers belonging to Area 14. A first description of the analysis unit**

The research on the theme evaluation and university reformism will consider *via* an exploratory investigation the teachers belonging to Area 14 who work at three universities: Genoa, Rome, and Salerno.

According to ministerial data, in the three structures there were 181 teachers on the 6th of February 2017: 29 belong to the University of Genoa, 111 to the Sapienza of Rome and 41 to the University of Salerno. They correspond to 11% of the teaching population of Area 14 at national level. Not being able to make up a representative sample of the population, the three territorial contexts have been selected on the basis of criteria such as the size of the university, the geographic position and the use of the IRIS catalogue for the registration of research production<sup>18</sup>.

The distribution of the scientific disciplinary sectors per University reveals a considerable gap between the three local realities, even though, for each of them, we can notice the same already mentioned prevalence of some scientific disciplinary sectors (for example, General sociology – SPS/07 –, by far higher in all three contexts).

Table 1, which indicates the distribution of Area 14 teachers of the Universities considered per Departments, highlights a set of issues:

- a. An under-representation of the sector SPS/05 (completely absent at the Sapienza of Rome and in Salerno) and of the sectors SPS/13 and SPS/14, not present in Genoa and Salerno;
- b. The absence of the sectors SPS/06, SPS/11 and SPS/12 at the University of Salerno;
- c. A patchy distribution of the teachers in the departments of each University (cells in white), with the exclusion of a limited number of cases in which we can notice the opposite trend; for example, a strong aggregation of Area 14 teachers in one Department, as in the case of the Department of Communication and Social Research of the Sapienza in Rome and of the Department of Political, Social and Communication Sciences of the University of Salerno.

On the basis of what observed through the MIUR data, it is possible to obtain a summarized picture of the local realities considered that presents some of the current trends of the social and political sciences:

<sup>18</sup> This last criterion has been adopted in a merely instrumental way in order to be able to gain access to a database of the research production with a standard grill for the registration of the information which is inserted, however, autonomously by the teachers.

1. The scarce aggregation ability of the Area 14 teachers to become part of institutional bodies capable of giving them internal visibility inside the Universities, but also external recognition (there are few exceptions).
2. The fragmentation of Area 14 into sub-categories of scientific interest for what concerns the analysis here carried out and only for the cases here selected, does not seem to have the strength to represent itself systematically (one's own University, Universities in general, Italy).
3. The annulment of some differences: the patchy distribution of the teachers inside the Departments is the same in the North, the Center and the South and this occurs in universities of different dimensions.

From these results<sup>19</sup> it is possible to make some deductions valid not only in the ambit of the disciplines classified in Area 14, but also in a wider national context. The fragmentation of the disciplinary sectors reveals a generalized condition of fragility of the socio-political area determined especially by the poor numerical consistency of the teachers of some sectors in different territorial ambits. This fragility is however common to other macro areas which, according to MIUR's forecasts for 2019, will suffer a consistent downsizing, with particular reference to the Humanities (Tab. 2). According to the estimates till 31.12.2019 the consistency of the Area 14 teaching staff will go down by 14%, the Area Sciences of the Ancient World, Philological and Literary Sciences and Historical-Artistic Sciences will decrease by 16% and the Area of Historical, Philosophical, Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences will fall by 15% ([www.miur.it](http://www.miur.it)).

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<sup>19</sup> We have already presented the results of the analysis, which here are summarized and enriched, in Sofia, Valentini & Cassella, 2018.

Table 1. Distribution of Area 14 teachers hired at the Universities of Genoa, Rome Sapienza and Salerno per Departments.

	<b>SPS</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>09</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Tot</b>
<b>Genoa</b>	Dep. Ancient World, Philosophy and History	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
	Dep. Science of Education	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	2	0	0	2	0	0	<b>13</b>
	Dep. Science for Architecture	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
	Dep. Political Science	0	2	1	4	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	<b>13</b>
<b>Rome Sapienza</b>	<b>SPS</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>09</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Tot</b>
	Dep. Communication and Social Research	0	0	0	2	0	0	20	27	1	1	4	1	0	0	<b>56</b>
	Dep. Philosophy	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>3</b>
	Dep. Italian Institute of Oriental Languages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	<b>2</b>
	Dep. Psychology of development processes and Socialization	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
	Dep. Documentary, Linguistic-Philological and Geographic Sciences	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
	Dep. Political Science	2	5	2	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	<b>17</b>
	Dep. Social and Economic Sciences	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	5	8	3	3	0	1	0	<b>31</b>
	Dep. Statistic Sciences	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>3</b>
Dep. History of Art and Performing Arts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>	
<b>Salerno</b>	<b>SPS</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>09</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Tot</b>
	Dep. Medicine, Surgery and Dentistry "Scuola Medica Salernitana"	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
	Dep. Cultural Heritage Sciences	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
	Dep. Economic and Statistic Sciences	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
	Dep. Political, Social and Communication Sciences	3	4	1	4	0	0	9	5	3	1	0	0	0	0	<b>30</b>
	Dep. Human, Philosophic and Pedagogical Sciences	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>5</b>

Data Base: 181 cases.

Table 2. Balance as at 31.12.2015 and estimate as at 31.12.2019 of the teachers in charge of the MIUR for macro-area (absolute value).

	Macro-areas	31/12/15	Estimate at 31/12/19	a.v.	Var. %
Area 1	Mathematics and informatics	2.832	2.573	-259	-9,1
Area 2	Physics	1.945	1.699	-246	-12,6
Area 3	Chemistry	2.611	2.364	-247	-9,5
Area 4	Earth sciences	940	837	-103	-11,0
Area 5	Biology	4.273	3.784	-489	-11,4
Area 6	Medicine	8.538	6.967	-1.571	-18,4
Area 7	Agricultural and veterinary sciences	2.743	2.550	-193	-7,0
Area 8	Civil engineering and architecture	3.091	2.728	-363	-11,7
Area 9	Industrial and information engineering	4.714	4.378	-336	-7,1
Area 10	Antiquities, philology, literary studies, art history	4.448	3.717	-731	-16,4
Area 11	History, philosophy, pedagogy and psychology	4.103	3.485	-618	-15,1
Area 12	Law studies	4.330	3.969	-361	-8,3
Area 13	Economics and statistics	4.309	3.977	-332	-7,7
Area 14	Political and social sciences	1.494	1.283	-211	-14,1

It would be therefore unrealistic to imagine possibilities of growth considering the systemic dynamics which are reaching also the political sphere and which indicate a generalized trend of university down-sizing. Despite this, the evidence contributes to widen the reflection on the topic reviving the attention of the people who work inside University and participate to the debate over university evaluation and transformation.

### **The constructions of meaning built by the subjects engaged: the biographic interviews**

The analysis of the interviews has allowed us to identify some issues<sup>20</sup> through which we have the widespread perception that teachers' activities

<sup>20</sup> The theme issues here presented are only a portion of the overall framework. Other results are published in Borrelli, Fontana, Sofia, Valentini, 2018 and in Sofia, Valentini, Cassella, 2018.



have deeply changed after the introduction of the new university and research evaluation system developed by the ANVUR.

Table 3. Interview theme issues and semantic content.

Theme	Description
Vertical relational dynamics	The evaluation system has changed the relationship master-pupil and the ways of reproducing the cultural system and the values of the disciplinary sectors
Horizontal relational dynamics	The evaluation system has conditioned the relational dynamics among colleagues and the perception of the collaborative dimension
The role of research role and its quality	The impact of the new evaluation system on research processes and on the quantitative/qualitative aspects of publications
The role of didactics and its quality	The new evaluation system has conditioned the ways in which didactics is valorized and the way in which it is connected to research
Research training and career advancement processes	The evaluation system has changed the ways of getting access to an academic career also as a consequence of the change of the vertical relational dynamics

We here illustrate some of the main aspects of the interviews made, organized following the themes outlined in Table 3.

### ***The transformation of vertical relational dynamics***

The transformation of vertical relational dynamics, that is of the relationship master-pupil and of the consequences of this relationship, is cause and effect of the changes concerning other aspects of academic life; *in primis*, the access to a university career. With reference to this theme, there is a comparison between the previous model and the current one. They are both characterized by different modalities of *relationship personalization*: a traditional relationship “master-pupil” model (also defined “baronial”: see Clark, 1977), inside which the relationship with the master (and also with colleagues, as we shall see later on) plays a core role in individual career choices and in the life of the organization itself and a bureaucratic model, characterized by a formal relationship with the body called to make the evaluation (in our case, the ANVUR).

In the first case, the relationships inside the organization were characterized by a continuous and close collaboration between the senior master and the young graduates with the ambition of undertaking an academic career;

this mechanism deeply influenced the three main aspects of work: didactics, research and the management of bureaucratic issues. Inside the team, the master's activity was based on an "*ethical logic of responsibility*" that an interviewee, recalling a distinction made by Weber, in contrast defines as "*ethics of principles*":

«The baron placed in first place, above and over everything, the university institution, but not conceived abstractly; the university institution considered concretely (people, resources, rules/restrictions, goals). [...] What is valid is Weber's distinction: who acts following an ethical logic of intentions does not worry about the consequences of his/her actions, but exclusively about the fact that such actions should be the perfect consequence of fundamental and unamendable principles; on the contrary, who acts following an ethical logic of responsibility is exactly oriented towards the consequences of his/her actions; he/she acts with in sight an objective; he/she acts to transform the world; we could add to transform the world "to one's advantage", specifying [...] that in the case we are talking about, we never talk about personal advantages but about institutional ones» (Sociologist who studies evaluation).

The same interviewee, referring to his senior master, clarifies the fundamental function of scientific guide:

«he suggested the fields of interest, the research themes (with extreme attention to the scientific and social relevance and originality). It regularly required the production of scientific work [...] which [...] would be carefully and thoroughly scrutinized» (Sociologist who studies evaluation).

The transformation of the evaluation mechanisms has obviously had considerable weight inside the master-pupil relationship since the place itself in which the evaluation takes place and decisions are made, has changed. The evaluation of a research paper, once in the hands of a small number of people, that is the «school» the author belonged to and inside which he/she established direct relationships based on trust, is today performed by an external organization (the ANVUR) that acts according to an «*office logic*», or a «*fulfilment one*» (Sociologist who studies evaluation processes), and with a system of rules defined beforehand.

### ***The transformation of horizontal relationships***

The relationships with colleagues, which used to be characterized by an intense collaboration, both for the activities performed and for the continuous confrontation with reference to the work carried out, is characterized by a more utilitarian dimension. One of the causes of a competition - which

risks being less healthy than in the past - is linked to the scarcity of resources, as we discuss later.

In addition to this emerging utilitarian dimension, it seems possible to observe how the logic and the parameters of evaluation tend to condition the dynamics of mutual acknowledgement deeply influencing the way of “considering” the other and consequently the very basis of the relationship itself. Today we assist to an insane checking of the scientific production of the colleagues and:

«of who is in the room in front of you, to see if he or she published something more than me, to check which magazine he managed to get to. In other words, it seems that a median way of thinking has entered in the practices of daily life; you are above or you are below. And it is more and more difficult to think free from these elements» (Philosopher, already vice-president of the University Evaluation Body).

Another insane aspect is that the relationships are becoming “bad”. As an interviewee underlines,

«Yes, we are an overly conflictual community, overly full of prejudices [...]. I have seen, especially on the first VQR, the syndrome of the “pebble in the shoe”: [...] in the darkness of my room I can say everything I like, also everything I want to say bad about my colleagues, but that is not the real evaluation» (Sociologist, research and international relations pro-rector).

### ***The role of research and its quality***

The interviewees acknowledge a change in the role attributed to research with the introduction of evaluation systems; today it is based a lot on the maximization of scientific output with negative consequences on the analytical aspects of the works carried out to the detriment of their quality.

For what concerns the practices, the perception we had from all the interviews is that the academics’ overall workload has increased without an improvement in the quality of their scientific output. On the contrary, the time dedicated to research has gradually decreased to the advantage of more onerous didactic and management activities. For example, thirty years ago the university researcher had the “privilege” to be able to dedicate him/herself exclusively to research; today, under the evaluation system, it cannot be said that he/she does better researches in terms of quality; he/she simply performs more activities from the quantitative point of view, and they often have nothing to do with pure research itself:

«[The teacher’s activity has not necessarily changed] in the good sense that you do better things, you simply do more things [...]. I have the advantage that till I was a researcher, I delivered methodology

courses as if they were seminars, but nobody asked me to do anything. I couldn't even go to degree exam sessions unless I was invited [...]. Now it is almost the opposite, didactics are in the hands of the researcher [...]. If done well, didactics absorbs you [...]. I was lucky to be able to do research till I became an associate professor and I realize now that it is a privilege» (Sociologist who studies evaluation processes).

By privileging the logic of formal fulfilment of quality criteria, we feel the risk that evaluation could distort or even leave in the background the true sense of doing research. What in the past were means (the publications), today have become aims:

«one loses sight of the fundamental objective of the production of knowledge and publications become the aim instead of the means through which the aim should be reached» (Sociologist who studies evaluation processes).

We observe this process (reversal of the relationship between aims and means) in a specific field of the academic life that is object of evaluation: the internationalization, which increasingly risks becoming an assessment tool used mainly in bureaucratic terms. The rules that make internationalization “a parameter for the evaluation of qualifications and scientific publications of individuals or a rewarding criterion for the evaluation of scientific production” are in fact oriented towards a “concept of internationalization-presupposition” (Barbati, 2015, p. 639). A presupposition in the sense of “a condition that must accompany the choices of the different components of the university system [...] rather than the outcome of reforms to promote the quality and efficiency of higher education” (ibid.).

Other interviewees highlight troubling and unexpected consequences, together with opportunistic behavior<sup>21</sup>.

«I have noticed this compulsive tendency to publish everything [...]. This is, in my opinion, one of the most paradoxical aspects of this new system which, instead of pushing towards greater accuracy in production [...], has created this mechanism of publish or perish. [...]. At the same time I have noticed some very accurate individual strategies for maximizing one's research activity [...]. Let's say, using a literal expression, that one loses a bit of innocence in doing this type of activity. In the sense that the early years of my experience were years when you really tended to follow your impulses, your curiosity in research. Now there is a tendency to plan more, because the time available is less given the many things we are forced to do and that

<sup>21</sup> The topic of unexpected consequences of social action caused by opportunistic behavior has been studied by several scholars, starting from Merton (1936) and Crozier (1963).

were not previously part of the duties of professors» (Historian of political doctrines, Department Director).

On the contrary, according to one of the interviewees, these opportunistic effects are limited and could be counteracted.

«In general, all assessment systems induce strategic behavior aimed at maximizing their position with respect to the indicator and therefore also have a distorting potential. We need to be very clear about this. I have a vision as a social scientist and not as a technician. The evaluation is a social system that impacts on the social system, and therefore we must also study its counterintuitive effects that are not captured by those who have a purely technical or numerical view of the issue [...] There are opportunistic effects and they are overall very visible but rather marginal as overall impact and, above all, can be counter-balanced. [...] When one knows that there are opportunistic behaviors [...] he/she must sanctions them» (the ex-Anvur advisor).

Another negative effect is related to the concept of “performance” in the research, which can be connected to the New Public Management perspective we have been dealing with in the theoretical framework.

«I do not believe that this uncritical assumption of the concept of performance is good for research, because research does not work on the basis of performance. Research has failures; failure is a key element of research activity. If one thinks in terms of performance, every failure means a negative performance and that is not the case. Therefore, I believe that there are some aspects that should be re-thought, at least for research, in a critical way through an epistemological reflection» (Researcher of CNR who deals with research evaluation).

### ***The role of didactics and its quality***

According to the interviewees, not even didactics has drawn particular qualitative advantages from the process of academic reformism of these years. In comparison with research, didactics occupies a more and more marginal position in the evaluation procedure (with the exception of teaching experiences abroad). Before the current evaluation system came into force, working inside the academic world meant managing simultaneously all three the aspects considered – didactics, research and bureaucratic-administrative activities<sup>22</sup> – within an institutional context in which one was assessed according to internal logics. Many interviewees have stressed the central role of the teacher both in the construction of a “professional *ethos*”,

<sup>22</sup> Vaira (2003) highlights that the new tasks of teachers follow the logic defined by Stinchcombe (1983) of role accretion, which assigns additional responsibilities and tasks without diminishing those typical of academic work.

in which didactics has a core role, and in the acquisition of the ways of teaching. In the previous model, the pupils learnt directly from their master the teaching method, the way of staying in the classroom and of relating with the students.

Since the didactic engagements have increased, it is more and more difficult for a university professor to insert the results of his/her researches in the lessons he/she delivers. The risk is to deliver lessons that could be more efficacious from the communicative point of view, but without doubt less weighty and innovative from the scientific one.

«When I delivered my first courses, which lasted 60-hours, they were actually the sedimentation of a research path that I presented didactically to my students. And I produced immediate results in the sense that the students became passionate about some fundamental topics, that became thesis and PhD projects, etc. Today my teaching is a much more standardized. I cannot afford to invent every year a completely new course that is the sedimentation of a research process, having two courses to do, plus the PhD course to teach. So I tend to have a much more institutionalized course, but if I have to compare the quality of the courses I was doing before and the quality of the courses I'm doing now. I've become more skillful in communication, but the scientific quality of those courses is incomparable. It is incomparable not for me, but for the students because in the past the didactics had an impact on the students and it was translated in research projects. Today it is very difficult for this to happen» (Philosopher, already vice-president of the University Evaluation Body).

### ***Research training processes and career advancement***

In addition to the change of regulations, access to the academic career has been conditioned by a different ratio between demand and offer, which sees today a far more reduced number of positions in comparison to the past:

«There were places that arrived in a regular way, so the commitment of researcher was repaid. You could see, in the composite framework of resource organization, where your box was placed, with some reliability. You were there, you saw what the process was, there was, in some way, a reasonable chance of making it... under certain conditions. That is, if you first guaranteed a high level of quality of the work, a certain productivity, etc., you were able to understand with a certain accuracy when your turn would arrive .... You knew that there was someone before you and that there was someone behind you ... and you might see your other colleagues at your side on other lines of movement ... in short, you were in a perspective. Today it is really much more complicated because the ratio between offer and demand is out of proportion; there is a high number of legitimate as-

pirants against a very low number of places» (Sociologist who studies evaluation processes).

According to many interviewees, the limited resources and the almost blocked turnover cause a system that is unable to guarantee the growth not only of the social sciences but, in more general terms, of the university as a whole.

In the organizational model created by the current evaluation system, the career advancement of academic staff is no longer connected to the system of personal relations all of them used to establish in the past with their masters and scientific teams. Nowadays the chances of career are measured and defined with reference to a bureaucratic system, a system based on a centralized evaluation, which is seen as aseptic, formalized and impersonal. This causes a widespread sensation of loneliness and disorientation. The training process of each researcher is no longer mediated by an intermediary, his/her “school”, but is managed individually and in a certain sense, in an “entrepreneurial” way in relation to the resources and the restrictions fixed by a apparently anonymous and objective expert, as is the evaluation agency.

Of this phenomenon characterized by the absence of intermediaries in academic relationships, we tend to grasp also an effect which is considered positively, that is the questioning of the previous career management system based on the self-reproduction of the single professors, towards whom the scientific community never really took a public and collective responsibility. From this point of view, the current evaluation system is seen as the system which gives the wrong answers to a real and no longer inescapable request of accountability. According to an interviewee:

«We must offer an alternative response to these mechanisms that I consider harmful [NR: he refers to the previous career management system], but one that meets a need, a need for clarity that allows young people to say: “Well I understand; he or she actually deserved; he/she is good; he/she deserves to make it”. And I believe that the best way to achieve this is not so much to weigh the products quantitatively, but rather to submit the choices made to a public decision» (Philosopher, already vice-president of the University Evaluation Body).

## Conclusions

Already seen in Anglo-Saxon countries, also Italy’s Higher Education system is undergoing a radical and controversial transformation, involving both its traditional organizational forms and formative/scientific missions. The emphasis devoted to the evaluation and performance-based research funding systems in the Italian current policies is overall consistent with the neoliberal paradigm of education, that turned out a full-fledged “assault on

universities” (Bailey & Fredman, 2011): to quote Henry Giroux, “Universities are being defunded, tuition fees are skyrocketing, faculty salaries are shrinking as workloads are increasing [...]. Corporate management schemes are being put in place [...] [that] is reinforcing an audit culture that mimics the organizational structures of a market economy” (2014, pp. 34-35).

Our article has given an account of this trend of change in the Italian university research environment; furthermore, it has outlined the main institutional and normative innovations that over the past few years have made this possible; finally, it has examined how some privileged witnesses in the academic world are facing and experiencing this epochal turning-point, and how they perceive its consequences on some decisive aspects of their academic work, above all with regard to the socio-political disciplines.

Despite moving from different experiences and standpoints and reaching rather different conclusions, all the interviewed scholars agree that there is a strong discontinuity in the evaluation processes, not only in the relational and organizational models, but also, more in general, in the academic world.

As we can see from the evidence we have collected, the response of the academics to the introduction of the evaluation mechanisms generally appears rather disoriented and negative, oscillating between the political-cultural denunciation of the purposes for which the mechanisms themselves are implemented and the precise criticism of some of their methodological aspects. In any case, there is also the recognition of some positive aspects in the current evaluation system, or of negative dynamics in the previous one, both in academics who are more nostalgic towards the past and in academics, such as the ex-Anvur advisor, who agree with the processes carried out by the Evaluation Agency. This confirms the Italian scientific debate about the new evaluation systems - described in the theoretical framework and other research carried out abroad. At the same times our study offers an original contribution to this debate through an approach that combines the analysis of observable behaviors, actions and practices - to which the survey of Iris catalogues will contribute - and the statements of the interviewees with a focus on a dimension that aims at grasping the impact on labor and relational practices and an axiological dimension (related to values, ethos, thoughts, ways of living the relationship with science and the production of knowledge). Indeed, the research shows that the evaluation deeply conditions the life of the academics, for it touches their deepest anthropological principles and it redefines their priorities<sup>23</sup>. The evaluation system is considered a factor capable of producing certain types of social relationships, forms of academic life (also regarding the quality of research and didactics) and

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<sup>23</sup> We have deepened this conclusive consideration, with reference to the ethopoietic role of evaluation in Borrelli, Fontana, Sofia & Valentini, 2018.



subjectivity, and not necessarily better ones. What is at stake is the form of existence of the *homo academicus*, that is the way in which the researcher is induced to behave with reference to others and him/herself.

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