New Forms of Evaluation in Higher Education. Views, Practices and Relations Between Academics

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[Review of the book: Università e nuove forme di valutazione. Strategie individuali, produzione scientifica, effetti istituzionali, edited by Simona Colarusso and Orazio Giancola, Sapienza Università Editrice, Roma, 2020. ISBN: 978-88-9377-154-2]

In recent years, various studies in different scientific fields have stimulated a lively debate on evaluation, in Italy. In their book, Simona Colarusso and Orazio Giancola provide a valuable and comprehensive view on a multifaceted topic thanks to the use of sociological theoretical frameworks and methodological tools. The whole book takes on an holistic approach, starting from the introduction, describing the most significant changes during the evolution of the Italian university system - analyzed then in depth in the first chapter - up to the conclusions, where an overall view of the education sector is given. The authors underline how the school and the higher education systems are progressively converging towards a common configuration. Although higher education has particular goals and characteristics, its specific nature emerging throughout the volume, the main convergence concerns the transition from a system of government to one of governance.

This transition is one of the themes of the first chapter, which both describes how evaluation has been incorporated within the framework of New Public Management, and discusses the principle of accountability. In line with other Italian scholars (eg. Vaira, 2013; Moscati, 2017), the authors consider evaluation in terms of policy, and underline the triangulation "autono-

my-accountability-evaluation" which has characterized the main changes of higher education in recent years.

Before examining the role of New Public Management, the authors analyze the endogenous and exogenous factors behind the present transformation involving the university system as a whole. As in the rest of the book, the analysis is based on data culture (Morcellini et. al., 2017), which is very different from the preoccupation or 'fetishism' with numbers we see later. In fact, how Italian university system has undergone reform (or not) over time is investigated, by analyzing the data, inevitably within the European context.

Enrollment data are discussed, including less obvious aspects, such as the educational choices of immigrants, indicating the sensitivity of the authors in analyzing education policies and general trends of educational systems, also in terms of participation, social inclusion, equity, and inequalities. Such an approach is repeated when examining the changes that have occurred over the last 15 years due to the economic crisis, the related budget cuts to higher education, and adverse public opinion regarding the University as a whole.

The authors use the metaphor of the "*gambero*" (Viesti, 2018), the Italian for 'shrimp', a term used to figuratively describe a backward movement, in this case, the setbacks involving funding, teachers, and falling enrollments as taxes increase. The same metaphor could be applied to the retrograde march universities are taking in terms of availability: from their democratization and opening up in 1969, today they risk becoming 'classist' by excluding students in a weaker socio-economic and cultural position.

As commented, the authors focus on New Public Management and how neoliberal logic intertwines with European legislation - "international mainstreaming derived from supranational bodies" (p. 14), and a process of *depoliticization.* They describe the technocratic transformation of university governance with agenda-setting being defined by technical agencies, such as ANVUR (Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca/ National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research system). Here, too, the authors offer a useful historical reconstruction and retrace the scientific debate that accompanied the evolution of ANVUR, discussion swinging from one critical and ideological position to another, with regards to evaluation and related themes.

The final part of the chapter lays the foundation for the empirical analysis, by focusing on three aspects: first, how employment procedures for teaching staff have evolved, particularly concerning the number of positions in the field of sociology; second, a review of the critical issues on policies of evaluation, such as the quality/quantity debate, and the "primacy of numbers" (De Leonardis, 2013), even referred to as a "fetishism" with numbers

(De Nicolao, 2013); and, third, the analysis of the effects of the evaluation policies on co-authorship strategies.

In the context of education, the second chapter explores datafication, one of the three processes which support platforms, the two others being commodification and selection (van Dijck et. al., 2019). Colarusso and Giancola offer a useful contribution to the studies on educational platformization (Piromalli & Viteritti, 2019), and discuss big and small data, highlighting both their positive and negative aspects. The position of the authors - data are never neutral - is clear, by showing that "the result of this process of databasization of education [...] represents a radical break with the past as it incorporates and produces ethical, technical, and political effects" (p. 45).

Big data represent a "political phenomenon" for different reasons and in different forms. Data on a variety of phenomena proliferate, and they are increasingly used as a powerful tool to "represent, visualize, evaluate and construct sociality, causing a radical transformation in the production of knowledge and its role in contemporary societies" (Idem); they are presented as "natural facts" (we need only think of the presumed objectivity given to evaluation by quantitative data).

Examples of big data in the field of education and higher education are the OECD surveys - PISA or PIAAC, which collect data (at national and sub-national level) to describe trends or the states of affairs, such as "Education at glance" (OECD, 2020), international rankings systems, and large citation datasets from Scopus or ISI-Web of Science. They have become tools to compare several countries and define evaluation policies. Indeed, Colarusso and Giancola define OECD as "one of the most influential players in global education policy" in another paper (Colarusso & Giancola, 2019, p. 119).

Small data constitute data from administrative sources, which offer opportunities for detailed analysis, an example being presented in the third chapter. After the first two theoretical chapters, the results of an articulated project are presented in this next chapter and in the following two. The research effectively combines the individual part (analyzing the quantitative data of scientific production and the outcomes of the interviews) with the collective (studying co-authorship).

The third chapter presents the results of a case study on Sapienza University of Rome, analyzing the changes in the scientific production of sociologists from 2008 to 2018 through the data available in U-GOV and IRIS (institutional repository of information on publications). A decrease in monographs has been accompanied by an overall increase in publications, co-authorship and papers written in English. These trends show that over time sociologists have changed the practices of scientific production, adopting behaviors already widespread in the hard sciences, especially abroad. The rules and policies would appear to have stimulated a process of adapta-

tion to the evaluation methods of the VQR (Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca/Evaluation of Research Quality) and the ASN (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale/National Scientific Habilitation) with evidently influencing behavior in terms of scientific production.

Colarusso and Giancola provide an in-depth analysis of academic collaboration processes by studying co-authorships through Social Network Analysis. The publications of the sociologists of Sapienza in the pre and post VQR period (2011-2014) and pre and post ASN (the first two rounds of evaluation) were analyzed to observe the makeup and structure of co-authorship, and understand the dynamics of the academic field, according to Bourdieu theory (1984). The results, presented in the fourth chapter, show that in both periods the networks are "characterized by a high number of nodes/actors with few links and a limited number of nodes/actors that are hyper-connected with many links" (p. 96).

Most of the co-authorships take place within the same clusters, probably due to people of a particular cluster belonging to the same Department or sharing research topics. There is less collaboration between groups, and those that do exist, are often between same-type groups. In short, there are few instances of hyper-connected super hubs (who collaborate and write more together) having a strong symbolic and social capital, and therefore a very strong relational network, linked "to scientific and intellectual prestige or the individual ability to weave networks" (p. 108).

The analysis also focuses on ego-networks, where the authors analyze the very different identikits of three nodes that show the different links with others within the network, and describe their role and position.

Ultimately, "the network structures, both complex (extended networks) and individual (ego-centered networks), show the coexistence of endogenous and stratified dynamics appearing over time because of exogenous pressures (evaluation, up-grade mechanisms, and funding based on competition or the open market) that condition both the "field" and the "actors" who act in it." (p. 112). Different collaboration strategies also exist, due to "opportunism" and "spontaneous collaboration" based on the creation of more community networks, "but no less asymmetrical, (nonetheless), in terms of power relations between nodes and actors." (p. 110).

In the fifth chapter, views and practices of researchers on evaluation are reconstructed by analyzing 21 interviews to RTD-Fixed-term researchers and RTI-Permanent researchers conducted in the period 2013-2014 (immediately after the first VQR period and the first two rounds of ASN) and in 2016-2017 (during the first round of evaluation).

Based on different criteria related to the four thematic areas of the interview outline, the authors identify 3 researcher types: "the traditionalists", "the adaptable researchers", "the entrepreneurs". The three typologies - it

would be stimulating to explore these further - are characterized by different views and practices regarding research evaluation, which are described in detail by the authors. It is worth pointing out the aspects regarding collaboration and relational networks, and how they relate to the outcomes of the previous chapters.

"The traditionalists" generally have small networks and sometimes a strong link with the full professor of reference in their sector. Conversely, "the entrepreneurs" consider collaboration as central to their academic activity and try to build very wide networks with different subjects, belonging to different disciplinary sectors, as well. "The adaptable researchers" also work at building up networks of collaboration, though their networks are more limited and circumscribed, generally including researchers belonging to the same disciplinary sector.

The results summarized in the book help the academic community as a whole, and the sociological community in particular, to reflect on their workings, thanks to the combination of different and complementary approaches and methodological tools used by the authors. Another valuable element is how changes in the practices of academics on both an individual and collective level are described, capturing their how they have both been affected.

Moreover, the themes and the approaches discussed are described with reference to their historical and/or theoretical evolution, terminology being usefully explained. This helps both neophytes and informed scholars alike to have a clear and systematic vision, in line with the comprehensive approach mentioned at the beginning.

Another element of crossover value lies in the balanced and critical analysis given. When discussing controversial issues (such as, the debate between quantity and quality, or different positions on the evaluation), they present opposing, favorable, and neutral opinions, as well as opportunities and limitations. But they do take a stand. For example, they clearly highlight how the Italian evaluation system has merged the state-evaluator model with neoliberal logic - a combination which risks limiting the autonomy of the universities.

Furthermore, Colarusso and Giancola denounce how the evaluation system might become "a superstructure of institutional and individual action" (p. 159) - it runs the risk of creating further inequality and social exclusion. At the same time, specific proposals emerge from the analysis of data and literature, for example those concerning possible ways of how to veer away from the "obsession with the number or quantity of articles published" (p. 153). The volume finishes with some enterprising reflections on the results and effects these described changes have brought about. We believe sociologists should continue to reflect on these pressing issues, which indicate,

in our opinion, the "moral responsibility" of all sociologists (Bovone, 2010): when studying issues concerning the evaluation of education, they should do so with reference to Weberian "ethics of responsibility".

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