

# The Italian University System in the Aftermath of National Unification. Background, Reforms Trends and New Goals

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this contribution is to analyse the situation of the Italian University System in the aftermath of the national unification process. The establishment of the Kingdom of Italy and the implementation of the Casati Law throughout the peninsula gave rise to numerous inquiries concerning the new direction and reforms trends of the university system. In this regard, it is deemed pertinent to delve into the historical backdrop that served as the foundation of this system, from the Boncompagni Law and the creation of the Ministry of Public Education to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lastly, the final section is devoted to a reflection on the goals of university education. The need for renewal that emerged at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in reality, has been a perpetual companion to the subsequent history of the university and higher education as a whole. This transformation has also marked the final transformation of universities into active institutions in terms of social and territorial impact.

**EET/TEE KEYWORDS:** History of University and Higher Education; Reforms trends; Goals; Italy; XIX-XX Centuries.

## *Introduction*

In the Italian peninsula in the aftermath of the completion of the unification process and thus with the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the need to reform the country’s entire education system emerged ever more powerfully. In fact, alongside the needs of a more strictly material nature – such

as the construction of roads and railways or the renewal of the economic and bureaucratic apparatus – the main ‘enemy’ that our country immediately had to face was the problem of illiteracy and that of a general access to culture and knowledge that was still very limited<sup>1</sup>.

At the time, however, in order to initiate the so-called *nationalization* process and thus to «make the Italians», it was first necessary to unite the people ideologically and to proceed with a concrete process of spreading the official language and common memories, it was then necessary to continue the establishment of a centralised and uniform school system, and with the dissemination of values and ideals in which they could jointly recognise themselves.

In the European scenario at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, our country was perhaps one of the most composite realities, due to the political fragmentation that had characterised it in the previous phase, so the task entrusted to the ruling classes was certainly neither simple nor concise. A real policy of *nationalization* began in this period, which was mainly based on the diffusion of patriotism, of typically bourgeois values – such as commitment, work and responsibility –, on the commemoration of the so-called «fathers of the fatherland» and on a widespread cultural and educational intervention. In particular, it was essential to bring out the social and political, as well as cultural, value of schooling, especially among the working classes, who were convinced of its lack of usefulness. Due to limited social mobility, they in fact thought that they could not change their destiny and, therefore, that for their future

<sup>1</sup> For a more complete reference to the history of national unification and struggle against illiteracy, see for example: D. Bertoni Jovine, *Storia della scuola popolare in Italia*, Turin, Einaudi, 1953; E. De Fort, *Storia della scuola elementare in Italia. Dall'unità all'età giolittiana*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1979; S. Soldani, *L'educazione delle donne. Scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1989; S. Soldani, G. Turi (edd.), *Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1993; E. De Fort, *Scuola e analfabetismo nell'Italia del '900*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1995; E. Becchi, D. Julia (edd.), *Storia dell'infanzia. Dal Settecento a oggi*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1996; L. Pazzaglia (ed.), *Cattolici, educazione e trasformazioni socio-culturali in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1999; L. Pazzaglia, R. Sani (edd.), *Scuola e società nell'Italia unita. Dalla Legge Casati al Centro-sinistra*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2001; C.M. Cipolla, *Istruzione e sviluppo. Il declino dell'analfabetismo nel mondo occidentale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002; E. Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2006; R. Romanelli, *Ottocento. Lezioni di storia contemporanea*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011; G. Chiosso, *Alfabeti d'Italia. La lotta contro l'ignoranza nell'Italia unita*, Turin, SEI, 2011; G. Sabbatucci, V. Vidotto, *Storia contemporanea. L'Ottocento*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2018; G. Chiosso, *L'educazione degli italiani. Laicità, progresso e nazione nel primo Novecento*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019; A. Marrone, «Il progresso dell'istruzione ha bisogno di libertà». I cattolici e la questione scolastica in Italia tra Otto e Novecento, Rome, Studium, 2019; S. Santamaita, *Storia della scuola. Dalla scuola al sistema formativo*, Milan-Turin, Pearson, 2021; M.C. Morandini (ed.), *Vita scolastica e pratiche pedagogiche nell'Europa moderna*, Milan, Mondadori Università; G. Ricuperati, *Storia della scuola in Italia. Dall'Unità a oggi*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2022<sup>3</sup>; C. Ghizzoni, I. Mattioni, *Storia dell'educazione. Cultura, infanzia, scuola tra Otto e Novecento*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2023.

occupations learning to read, write and do arithmetic was essentially superfluous. Education was, therefore, to be recognised as an indispensable factor for the economic, social and above all civil development of the “newborn” Kingdom of Italy. For this reason, politics progressively proceeded to raise compulsory schooling and to prepare regulations and actions aimed at limiting child labour – and thus exploitation –<sup>2</sup>.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the illiterate was seen as an «unhappy» social element, unfit to live in a society that was moving towards modernity, which was transforming itself especially from a social and productive point of view. Certainly, in this sense, a prominent role was played by primary school, in addition to various other initiatives that publicly or privately tried to encourage the spread of education also in the adult world and not only among the young generations. For this reason, primary education has received a great deal of attention at a historiographical and historical-educational level, since it actually represented one of the most capillary and most ‘exploited’ instruments of politics at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and then especially of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the contrary, secondary and university education have long been the subject of limited analysis, often related only to the legislative sphere. However, this does not allow us to restore the completeness and liveliness of the academic life and culture that emerged in those years that were so crucial to the history of our country. As Polenghi well explained, in fact,

Equally important is knowledge of the actual situation of the university at the time, in order to avoid endorsing historical judgements that arise from inaccurate interpretations, in which problems belonging to different decades are superimposed and confused in unambiguous interpretations. In this sense, the methodological necessity of not separating the history of ideas from the history of institutions should be recalled<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, the liberal ruling class of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was certainly often subject to criticism, but historiographic analysis in this sense cannot be limited to political clashes. With regard to the academic world, therefore, in the first instance, it is rather necessary to understand what the motivations were for supporting the university approach already proposed by the Casati Law of

<sup>2</sup> On the process of nationalization of our country, with particular reference to school, it is useful to recall the works of: M. Bacigalupi, P. Fossati, *Da plebe a popolo. L'educazione popolare nei libri di scuola dall'Unità d'Italia alla Repubblica*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1986; M.C. Morandini, *Scuola e nazione. Maestri e istruzione popolare nella costruzione dello Stato unitario (1848-1861)*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 2003; A. Ascenzi, *Tra educazione etico-civile e costruzione dell'identità nazionale. L'insegnamento della storia nelle scuole italiane dell'Ottocento*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 2004; A. Quondam, G. Rizzo (edd.), *L'identità nazionale. Miti e paradigmi storiografici ottocenteschi*, Rome, Bulzoni, 2005; A. Ascenzi, *Education and the metamorphoses of citizenship in contemporary Italy*, Macerata, eum, 2006; Chiosso, *L'educazione degli italiani. Laicità, progresso e nazione nel primo Novecento*, cit.

<sup>3</sup> S. Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1993, p. 8. The English translation is mine.

1859 and then proceed along the historiographic axis to understand how the science-politics binomial was gradually strengthened, not only with the aim of *modernising* knowledge but also the various professions.

### 1. *From the Boncompagni Law to the Casati Law*

In order to be able to trace the reasons why the Italian academic approach followed, at least in the first post-unification phase, what had been proposed in the Kingdom of Sardinia, it is necessary to retrace some fundamental previous stages. It is useful, in particular, to go back and reflect on the transformations undergone by the school system in the aftermath of the creation of the Ministry of Public Education.

Within the broader framework outlined by the general climate of uncertainty and mobilisation that had swept through Italy during 1848 and had given new impetus to the national question, in fact, in the Kingdom of Sardinia Minister Carlo Boncompagni, on 4 October, promulgated the law on public education, which mainly placed all schools of all levels under government control<sup>4</sup>. It read, in fact, in Title I, *Dell'amministrazione della pubblica istruzione* [*Of the administration of public education*], in Article 1:

Public Education is under the direction of the Minister Secretary of State in charge of this department: it is his duty to promote the progress of knowledge, the dissemination of education and the preservation of sound doctrines, and to provide in every part of the administration of the Institutes and Establishments belonging to teaching and public education<sup>5</sup>.

In the next article, the universities were immediately mentioned, stating that the minister «following the opinion of the University Councils» would make the necessary provisions «for students' requests for dispensations for admission to courses and examinations»; his provisions, moreover, could never be contrary to the opinion of the University Council without first consulting the Higher Council<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See Pazzaglia, Sani, *Scuola e società nell'Italia unita*, cit.; Santamaita, *Storia della scuola. Dalla scuola al sistema formativo*, cit.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix I, in <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.sale-sian.online/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/La-legge-Boncompagni-del-4-ottobre-1848-e-la-liber-ta-della-scuolaLETTTO.pdf> (last access: 12.02.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Note on the Board of Governors, it is mentioned in Title II, *Del Consiglio superiore di pubblica istruzione* [*Of the Higher Council of Education*]. On the Higher Council of Education, see also: G. Ciampi, *Il governo della scuola nello Stato postunitario. Il Consiglio superiore della pubblica istruzione dalle origini all'ultimo governo Depretis (1847-1887)*, Milan, Edizioni di Comunità, 1983; G. Ciampi, C. Santangeli (edd.), *Fonti per la storia della scuola. II. Il consiglio*

Article 3 then specified that all the universities of the kingdom and the establishments attached to them also depended on the Ministry of Education, while Article 5 gave a definition of «university schools» (for men), i.e. those that «by providing literary and scientific instruction, qualify those who attend them to receive the highest academic degrees in one of the faculties, or to exercise the professions that depend on them, whether these schools are established in the capital of a university or in other places in the university's district».

Then, in Title III, the law referred to the University Councils, set up in each university, which had the task of drawing up «the special regulations necessary for the execution of laws and general regulations», as well as that of promoting the most useful measures for the progress of education to the Higher Council of Education and, to the Minister, «those leading to the exact fulfilment of the laws and regulations of each university». They were also, in agreement with the professors, to draw up course programmes and transmit them to the Higher Council. The Councils were also to be responsible for the administration of the universities' property, for «deliberations concerning the legal reasons» for which the universities were responsible – subject to the Minister's authorisation – and for awarding diplomas. Furthermore, they were to deal with admissions to courses and examinations, and decide whether to admit «repeaters» to subsequent years (Article 19). Also noteworthy is the fact that the rector was chosen from among the councillors (Article 22). The proper observation of the laws by the university councils was supervised by censors, appointed for each university directly by the king.

In Title IV, *Dei Consigli delle Facoltà* [*Of Faculty Councils*], Article 28 ordered that a council was to be established in each university and for each faculty, consisting of the dean, three serving professors elected by their colleagues, and two other members elected by a free vote of the college. The function of these councils was then specified in Article 30. In particular, they were to receive, analyse and transmit to the University Council the reports from the professors on the progress of their schools; they were to propose to the University Council the regulations useful for the promotion of studies in the Faculties; they were to produce 'notes' on the students who had distinguished themselves most in the various Faculties on the basis of what the professors had indicated; finally, they were to propose to the University Council the appointment of «repeaters» for the following year and decide on the admission of candidates «to aggregation»<sup>7</sup>.

*superiore della pubblica istruzione 1847-1928*, Rome, Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage, Central Office for Archival Heritage, 1994 and also the recent contributions presented at the conference promoted by CISUI and *Centro di documentazione e ricerca per la storia del libro scolastico e della letteratura per l'infanzia* of the University of Macerata, *Il Consiglio Superiore della Pubblica Istruzione e il governo del sistema universitario in età repubblicana* (Macerata, 30-31 May 2024). The Proceedings are currently being published.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix I, in <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnipbcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.sale-

With regard to the ordering of the Faculties, however, Boncompagni made a significant change. In fact, he decided to split the Faculty of Science and Letters, creating the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy and the Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences. Greater exploration and in-depth study of the hard sciences, caused at the time not only by scientific progress but also by concrete production and territorial needs, now required more focused and analytical courses of study. This, of course, without disregarding the still central role reserved for the humanities<sup>8</sup>. Probably at its inception, this process of separation between what today are called *hard science* and *soft science* did not respond to epistemological reflections, but rather to the concrete and specific needs of that particular historical moment.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the organisation of the university began to change, both due to new scientific requirements and through an increasingly pyramid-like structure, with Minister at the top and the Higher Council, Rectors, University Councils and Faculty Councils following.

The Universities of the Kingdom of Sardinia, i.e. at the time those of Turin, Genoa, Cagliari and Sassari, from 1848 onwards therefore came under the Ministry of Education, which exercised direct supervision over them by means of inspectors.

The law therefore appeared strongly centralising, but from Boncompagni's perspective it had liberal inspiration. The intention was above all to break with the traditional ecclesiastical hegemony, in order to finally initiate a process of secularisation that would also directly involve the entire sphere of education<sup>9</sup>. Minister Boncompagni – who was also very close to Cavour's political line – supported the religious and political freedom of education, and believed that thanks to this process of centralisation, this principle could in a certain sense finally be respected<sup>10</sup>. Certainly, this reflection was not without its contradictions, especially since the Minister himself supported the State's power to watch over the abilities, doctrine and morality of those who would like to teach, but inevitably risked resulting in undue personal and non-professional judgement.

At the time, there was still no clear reference to the principle of freedom of teaching and education in the legislative text, *primarily* in the Albertin Statute.

sian.online/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/La-legge-Boncompagni-del-4-ottobre-1848-e-la-liberta-della-scuolaLETTO.pdf> (last access: 12.02.2025).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> For a reference to the politics of Count Cavour, see for example: A. Omodeo, *L'opera politica del conte di Cavour*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1940; B. Ferrari, *La politica scolastica del Cavour. Dalle esperienze prequarantottesche alle responsabilità di governo*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 1982; C. Cavour, *Stato e Chiesa*, ed. by P. Alatri, Florence, Ponte alle Grazie, 1995; and the recent work of G. Amato (ed.), *C'era una volta Cavour. La potenza della grande politica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2023.



They could be considered implicit in the framework of the definition of civil liberties, but they had not yet been specifically defined.

It is also worth remembering that the Boncompagni Law was enacted without being debated in Parliament, due to the full powers the government enjoyed during the First War of Independence. Certainly, it can be considered a sort of compromise, but probably because of this it was the subject of a lively public debate.

The first proposals for amendments to the Boncompagni Law were made by Minister Farini in 1852 and Minister Cibrario in 1854, who also took up the discussion on the issue of freedom of teaching. This complex issue was also central to Minister Giovanni Lanza's subsequent proposal, put forward in 1855 and discussed in an animated manner also during 1857. In particular, Lanza claimed political and cultural independence, as well as freedom of thought and speech for teachers, but still referred to a 'regulated' freedom.

In Lanza's vision, higher education certainly played a very important role in the Italian Risorgimento process, yet, in full line with Cavour's policy, he hoped for a state intervention that was indeed centralising but gradual, corresponding to the modernisation needs of the time and equally cautious given the general climate of instability that was sweeping across Europe<sup>11</sup>.

Following the Second War of Independence and then with the annexation of Lombardy to the Kingdom of Sardinia, the need to reform the school system again became imperative. The task was entrusted to Count Gabrio Casati, who was appointed Minister of Education.

The first major law that is usually referred to in the history of Italian education is in fact Law No. 3725 of 13 November 1859, on the *Ordinamento generale della pubblica istruzione* [*The General Order of Public Education*], which was named after Casati himself<sup>12</sup>. The law represented a real watershed in the history of Italian education. In fact, it was extended to the entire national territory after 1861 and provided for decisive innovations, such as the State's avocation of the entire education system or the principle of free and compulsory primary schooling, which was placed in the hands of the municipalities<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> For a specific reference to the Farini and Cibrario projects and the Lanza law, please refer especially to: A. Colombo, *Giovanni Lanza e la libertà d'insegnamento*, «Risorgimento italiano», vol. 1-2, 1924; A. Talamanca, *Libertà della scuola libertà nella scuola*, Padova, CEDAM, 1974; and Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica (1848-1876)*, cit., pp. 25-31.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://archive.org/details/LeggeCasatiNumero3725>> (last access: 11.02.2025). On Minister Casati and the law he enacted, see: Pazzaglia, Sani (edd.), *Scuola e società nell'Italia unita. Dalla Legge Casati al Centro-sinistra*, cit.; Morandini, *Scuola e nazione. Maestri e istruzione popolare nella costruzione dello Stato unitario (1848-1861)*, cit.; A.M. Orecchia, *Gabrio Casati. Patrizio milanese, patriota italiano*, Milan, Guerini, 2007; A. Gaudio, *La legge Casati. Una ricognizione storiografica*, «Annali di Storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche», n. 26, 2019, pp. 63-71.

<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.regio:1861-11-28;347@originale>> (last access: 11.02.2025).

In addition, it imposed a precise training course on teachers, stipulated that access to the various grades of education was to be by means of a sequence of examinations and, in principle, that classes of students were to be formed that were evenly distributed in terms of age.

Despite an explicit broadening of the basis for access to primary literacy, the Casati Law was still an expression of an elitist approach. It had been elaborated following the matrix of the Prussian model, which provided for strong hierarchisation and centralisation, and when it was extended to the rest of Italy, this provoked quite a few criticisms. The main accusation was that of wanting to *Piedmontise* the entire national school system. Certainly, however, despite bureaucratic slowness and still rather meagre funding, thanks to this law, the Italian school system was able to take on a more defined and efficient profile from that moment on.

Obviously, the Casati Law also included the university. In Title II, *Dell'istruzione superiore* [Of higher education], with reference to Article 47, the task of higher education was immediately specified, namely «to direct young people, already equipped with the necessary general knowledge, in both public and private careers in which the preparation of accurate special studies is required, and to maintain and increase scientific and literary culture in the various parts of the State».

The university, which had among other things the task of training the future national ruling class, following the principle of 'centralisation', was thus placed under the direct control of the state. In fact, Article 50 states that expenses «shall be borne by the state», while the property and assets of the various institutions «shall be maintained by way of endowment, nor shall they be diverted from the purpose for which they were intended». Moreover, lecturers had to be appointed by the government and universities were not allowed to establish or modify courses without the permission of the Ministry of Education; this greatly strengthened government control and led to a progressive loss of autonomy of the academic world. The intention was to create a more uniform university education system, thus limiting the local power of individual institutions.

Article 39 then specified that higher education was to comprise five faculties, namely Theology, Law, Medicine, Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences and, finally, Philosophy and Humanities. Each university was then to create structured and well-articulated study paths, through an educational offer characterised by specific teachings for each faculty. However, even if the didactic organisation was up to the faculties, the final go-ahead would still have to come from the Higher Council<sup>14</sup>.

Within the framework outlined by the Casati Law, the role of the Minister

<sup>14</sup> <<https://archive.org/details/LeggeCasatiNumero3725>> (last access: 11.02.2025).



of Education therefore continued to be crucial, just as the authority of the Higher Council and the three general inspectors (for higher studies, for classical secondary studies and for technical, normal and primary studies), already mentioned in Article 2, remained essential.

In this sense, Moretti also refers to a «representation of executive power» attributed to the rectors, who were considered in a certain sense to be local administrative authorities. They were responsible for controlling and supervising the observance of laws and regulations, they had to make decisions on appeals, they also had to exercise a disciplinary task and supervise the activity and behaviour of teachers and lecturers, and they always had to act in a coordinated manner at central and local level<sup>15</sup>.

Under the authority of the rector, however, the structure of the universities appeared rather weak. Each faculty was headed by a government-appointed dean who remained in office for three years – renewable –, and the academic body consisted of ordinary professors and aggregate doctors, who were, however, considered a rather marginal figure<sup>16</sup>. Ordinary professors, appointed directly by the State, were the only ones with a permanent position and were responsible for teaching the main disciplines contained in the university curriculum. Then there were the «extraordinary» professors, who had a less stable position, the lecturers in charge, who lacked professional stability and were dependent on the official academic body, the assistants, who collaborated with the professors and supported them in teaching and research activities, and finally, the free professors, who were scholars 'outside' the university, who carried out teaching activities without having a fixed professorship<sup>17</sup>.

In the light of a still rather limited collective action and relationships mostly tied to a hierarchical order, the university did not yet appear at the time as a cohesive and strongly incisive whole in its territory.

It is evident that when the legislation was promulgated, Casati could not have anticipated that it would subsequently serve as the foundation for national public education policy, particularly given the fact that the measure was drafted during a period characterised by considerable opposition and perplexity. The principles of the law can certainly be linked to those of a moderately conservative liberalism, typical of the Italian ruling class of the time, con-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Moretti, *Sul governo delle università nell'Italia contemporanea*, «Annali di storia delle università italiane», n. 14, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the composition of the teaching staff of universities in the post-Unitarian period, see especially M. Moretti, I. Porciani, *Il reclutamento accademico in Italia. Uno sguardo retrospettivo*, «Annali di storia delle università italiane», 1997, pp. 11-39 and M. Moretti, *I cadetti della scienza. Sul reclutamento dei docenti non ufficiali nell'università postunitaria*, in I. Porciani (ed.), *Università e scienza nazionale*, Naples, Jovene, 2001, pp. 151-203.

<sup>17</sup> U.M. Miozzi, *Lo sviluppo storico dell'università italiana*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1993, p. 14.

cerned with preserving the humanistic cultural tradition and at the same time willing to embrace modern scientific, productive, cultural and civil needs<sup>18</sup>.

For Casati, therefore, the state could use the university as a tool through which to try to raise the cultural base of its citizens. In this sense, it had to focus on the implementation of free access to higher studies, which would contribute to the personal and professional growth of the community<sup>19</sup>.

The ruling class that derived from this type of education was definitely of a fully bourgeois origin, and this contributed to giving the school designed by Casati an essentially elitist character. This approach proved resilient and was further reinforced by subsequent measures, most notably the Gentile Law.

## 2. A complex transition to the 20<sup>th</sup> century

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the debate on education and schooling issues was animated on several fronts: the democrats supported the principle of public education and thus the avocation of education to the state; the Catholics, on the other hand, upheld the principle that education could not be the exclusive task of the state, but of the family, and claimed their own secular function in education; the liberals, finally, took an intermediate position, supporting the public school system, but leaving families the option of private solutions as well<sup>20</sup>.

At the time of the extension of the Casati Law throughout the country, the distribution of universities and thus the Italian academic population was still very limited and uneven across the peninsula. To be sure, the law had well condensed numerous elements from the previous Lanza Law and Austrian legislation, but this did not shield it from criticism and subsequent attempts to amend it. Practically all the holders of the Ministry of Education attempted, to a greater or lesser extent, to make changes between 1859 and 1881. A process

<sup>18</sup> With particular reference to the history of the Italian university in the liberal period, see especially: B. Palma, *L'università tra accentramento e autonomia*, Urbino, Università degli Studi di Urbino, 1983; A. Saccomanno, *Autonomia universitaria e costituzione. I. L'autonomia universitaria nello Stato liberale*, Turin, Giappichelli, 1989; I. Porciani (ed.), *L'università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano*, Naples, Jovene, 1994; F. Colao, *La libertà di insegnamento e l'autonomia nell'università liberale. Norme e progetti per l'istruzione superiore in Italia (1848-1923)*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1995; G. Fioravanti, M. Moretti, I. Porciani (edd.), *Fonti per la storia della scuola. V. L'istruzione universitaria*, Rome, Central State Archives, Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. Central Office for Archival Assets, 2000; I. Porciani (ed.), *L'università italiana. Repertorio di atti e provvedimenti ufficiali 1859-1914*, Florence, Olschki, 2001; G.P. Brizzi, P. Del Negro, A. Romano (edd.), *Storia delle Università in Italia*, Messina, Sicania, Vol. I, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Miozzi, *Lo sviluppo storico dell'università italiana*, cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

that only ended with a more precise definition of the competences and role of the Higher Council of Education, which in fact became the real steering instrument of the policy implemented in this area

At this stage, one of the most significant attempts to modernise the Casati law had been proposed by Carlo Matteucci, during his brief ministerial term that extended between 31 March and 6 December 1862. Matteucci's proposal was based on the prospect of greater freedom for the universities, albeit limited to the area of internal management, i.e. in the definition of curricula and in the recruitment of lecturers, which in his opinion should be more based on scientific competence. He also hoped for a greater connection between the disciplines included in the curricula and the real needs of the country, in order to support the entire modernisation process, and a substantial distinction of the universities according to their function and incisiveness<sup>21</sup>.

With Royal Decree No. 719 of 31 July 1862, the government essentially took note of these differences and, taking up a denomination previously used in the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Papal States, distinguished between primary and secondary universities. The first category included the universities of Turin, Pavia, Pisa, Bologna, Naples and Palermo, which were later joined by those of Padua and Rome, while secondary universities included those of Genoa, Parma, Modena, Siena, Cagliari, Sassari, Catania and Messina. The Universities of Macerata – which received a small government subsidy – and the free Universities of Camerino, Urbino, Perugia and Ferrara were added to this list.

The distribution of faculties is also interesting in this respect. All the universities had Faculties of Medicine and Law. The Faculty of Literature and Philosophy was only present in the universities of Turin, Padua, Pavia, Bologna, Pisa, Rome, Naples and Palermo, while the Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences was present in Turin, Pavia, Pisa, Bologna, Naples, Palermo, Genoa, Parma, Modena, Cagliari, Catania, Messina, Padua, Rome, Urbino, Perugia and Ferrara<sup>22</sup>.

The difference obviously also concerned legal recognition, especially since the free universities were financially dependent mainly on the local authorities – which, by virtue of this reason, also exercised control over them from an administrative point of view –, teaching organisation, the remuneration of the teaching staff and, first and foremost, the different number of students enrolled.

<sup>21</sup> On Matteucci's proposal, see especially the parts devoted to it in: M. Di Domizio, *L'università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, Milan, AVE, 1952; G. Talamo, *La scuola. Dalla legge Casati alla inchiesta del 1864*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1960; Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica*, cit.; Fioravanti, Moretti, Porciani (edd.), *Fonti per la storia della scuola. V. L'istruzione universitaria*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica*, cit., p. 192.

It is no coincidence, then, that in the aftermath of national unification, one of the problems that had emerged around the academic debate was precisely that of the territorial distribution of universities. The problem was complex because it obviously responded to scientific, cultural but also political motivations. The orientation that prevailed was essentially that of reasoning with a view to the eventual suppression of faculties rather than universities, which continued to be regarded as indispensable centres of intellectual life<sup>23</sup>.

With the construction of the national university system, a rather complex period for the debate on academic issues had begun at the same time. The scenario was essentially divided between those who were in favour of the equalisation of all universities operating throughout the country, including those defined as free, and those who argued that the task of the scientific and cultural education of the new generations should only be entrusted to the large universities.

Recent historiography on higher education has well highlighted the difference between these two 'sides', and has also succeeded in bringing out a renewed and important interest in the so-called minor universities. This was made possible mainly by relating the university question to the broader process of national construction, with specific reference to the definition of the relationship between nation and city, centre and periphery. In particular, at a local level, these reflections have been connected to the role and strategic function exercised by universities in reference to the formation of the ruling classes and professional management, in the context of the socio-economic development of the individual territorial contexts of reference<sup>24</sup>.

Graduation certainly represented a means of mobility and social affirmation, however, the problem was rooted in earlier school grades. Lack of resources and a general mistrust of schooling still resulted in too limited access to primary school and an even more limited continuation of studies in secondary school.

In this first post-unification phase, in principle, the *Destra storica* had tried to tackle the main problems highlighted by the unification process, however, the impetus of the Risorgimento uprisings and ideals was no longer sufficient

<sup>23</sup> This line of thought found explicit reference in Ruggero Bonghi's report on the draft budget, presented in March 1870 by Finance Minister Quintino Sella.

<sup>24</sup> About «minor universities» see: M. Da Passano (ed.), *Le Università minori in Italia nel XIX secolo*, Sassari, Centro interdisciplinare per la storia dell'Università di Sassari, 1993; L. Sitran Rea (ed.), *La storia delle università italiane. Archivi, fonti, indirizzi di ricerca. Atti del convegno. Padova, 27-29 ottobre 1994*, Trieste, Edizioni Lint, 1996; M. Moretti, *Piccole, povere e 'libere': le università municipali nell'Italia liberale*, in *Le Università minori in Europa (secoli XV-XIX). Convegno internazionale di studi, Alghero 30 ottobre-2 novembre 1996*, ed. by G.P. Brizzi and J. Verger, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1998, pp. 533-562; and the recent L. Pomante, *Per una storia delle università minori nell'Italia contemporanea. Il caso dello Studium Generale Maceratense tra Otto e Novecento*, Macerata, eum, 2013, p. 19.

and only a limited *élite* began to be supported. In the next phase, the advent of the *Sinistra storica* to political power, however, was a process that was essentially in continuity, albeit taking into account the ideological differences, which in this case were based on progressive liberal ideas.

The generation of intellectuals that had animated the Italian Risorgimento now seemed incapable of involving young people 'emotionally' and this forced a major slowdown in the 'daily' construction of the state. This was also happening in the ranks of university professors. In this sense, the university appeared 'to be stuck' between a substantial inability to re-propose the ancient Risorgimento ideals with the same vigour, and the positivist drive, strongly linked to the value of science but lacking a deep spiritual value<sup>25</sup>.

In this sense, the national university landscape still appeared rather disjointed. The effects of the resistance to homologation to the Casati Law were evident, especially in the case of the Neapolitan and Tuscan universities.

In the 1870s, the main solution that worked to reform the university system was the reorganisation of curricula through specific regulations, while during the 1880s the introduction of elective practices was noteworthy, with reference to half of the members of the Higher Council and the members of competition commissions, while reserving the final power of appointment of rectors and commissioners to the minister. Interventions that certainly did not yet form part of an organic university reform project, but which contributed to animating the debate created around the university issue.

During this period, the 'clash' between those who supported state authority and those who supported university autonomy became increasingly heated. The subject of the confrontation concerned above all the interference of the central power in university teaching, considered by some to be legitimate and by others to be excessive.

Accompanying this theme were of course others, equally important: the actual validity of the Casati law, the new innovative thrusts, the relationship between politics and education, the role of the Higher Council, the administrative set-up of universities, the effectiveness of university education with regard to economic and territorial needs, etc.

With particular reference to the subject of autonomy, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the proposals put forward by Minister Baccelli appeared very interesting. Specific reference is made here to Draft Laws no. 241 of 17 November 1881, no. 26 of 25 November 1882, concerning *Modificazioni alle leggi vigenti per l'istruzione superiore del Regno* [Modifications to the Laws in Force for Higher Education in the Kingdom], and Draft Law no. 67 of 13 June 1895, *Sull'autonomia delle Università, Istituti e Scuole superiori del*

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Polenghi, *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica*, cit., p. 183; check also <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-universita\\_\(L'Unificazione\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-universita_(L'Unificazione)/>) (last access: 13.02.2025).

*Regno [On the Autonomy of the Universities, Institutes and Higher Schools of the Kingdom].*

In short terms, Baccelli's proposal envisaged full recognition of the universities' legal personality, a fixed endowment of state funding and, above all, the so-called «triple autonomy», i.e. administrative, didactic and disciplinary autonomy. Obviously under this new project the relationship between the central government and the universities would have changed significantly.

Within the framework of greater autonomy, it was envisaged that the rector would be elected by secret ballot by ordinary and emeritus professors, also applying a system of faculty rotation to prevent the larger faculties from taking control of the university. Each faculty would be responsible for drawing up its own teaching regulations and the deans would also be elected.

The recognition of the universities' legal personality and administrative autonomy then provided for the establishment of another academic body: the board of trustees. The board would consist of the rector, acting as chairman, the deans of the faculties and representatives of the provincial and municipal administrations, four for the larger universities and two for the smaller universities. The board would have had purely administrative functions and, together with the college of professors, would have been involved in the exercise of disciplinary action. The general regulations of the university, on the other hand, would have been drawn up by the college of professors<sup>26</sup>.

According to Baccelli's proposal, the ministry would have retained preventive control over the budgets, submitted by the various boards of directors, and the minister would have had the possibility of intervening in the decisions submitted. The educational autonomy of universities, on the other hand, would have been in a certain sense 'controlled' by the introduction of a system of state examinations, aimed at verifying the quality of educational and professional preparation. On the other hand, the introduction of the elective principle for access to academic posts and the division of tasks between academic bodies would have given greater autonomy to the universities<sup>27</sup>.

However, although the project received approval in the House, it failed to pass in the Senate. The reasons ranged from those of a more strictly administrative nature, such as the fears created around the possibility of stabilising state funding or the possibility for non-academic bodies to participate in the board of universities of trustees, to those of a more strictly scientific nature, linked in particular to the issue of freedom of teaching and science.

In the debate that developed around Baccelli's proposals, one of the most notable opponents was Silvio Spaventa. In detail, he believed that by upholding the principle of the autonomy of universities, the risk would be to make them independent social institutions in relation to the state. This was certainly

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Moretti, *Sul governo delle università nell'Italia contemporanea*, cit., pp. 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



not a desirable objective, especially given the unification process and the consequent 'strength' that the state and its organs had now acquired. Spaventa, on the other hand, was not against state funding of universities, but he also considered it an element that could not leave room for autonomy. Indeed, it could not be possible where there was no administrative autonomy of budgets<sup>28</sup>.

For its part, Baccelli's position supported the hypothesis that a modern state would need to meet its needs precisely through the university. Indeed, it was the place for the development of scientific, educational, technical and professional culture and, precisely because of its function, it was important for the state to place it under its direct control.

Following an investigation of the public education services, however, it was soon realised that the application of the general state accounting regulation to universities could not be reconciled with the real needs of the administration of academic institutions. It was necessary to wait for more adequate regulations before envisaging concrete administrative autonomy<sup>29</sup>.

In the wake of these reflections, an initial proposal was drafted in 1910 by Minister Credaro, who presented it to the Senate in February of the following year. Rather than autonomy, however, he spoke of a «decentralisation measure», which was to 'free' higher education from constraints unsuitable for its purposes and not in keeping with the 'dignity' of those who governed it. However, among the guiding principles of the project was still the need to proceed with the consolidation of state expenditure, especially since the universities continued to be state institutes and, precisely because of this motivation, the state should have taken an interest in the strengthening of studies and the consolidation of national culture<sup>30</sup>.

Even this project, however, failed to materialise and, in fact, it was not until Royal Decree No. 1216 of 20 July 1922 that the administrative decentralisation of universities and higher institutes was once again discussed<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> See S. Spaventa, *Discorsi parlamentari*, Rome, Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1913.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed bibliography, please refer to the useful repertory: I. Porciani (ed.), *L'università italiana. Repertorio di atti e provvedimenti ufficiali 1859-1914*, Florence, Olschki, 2001 and I. Porciani, M. Moretti, *L'università italiana. Bibliografia 1848-1914*, Florence, Olschki, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> See Di Domizio, *L'università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, cit., pp. 188-189.

<sup>31</sup> The decree was issued by virtue of Law No. 1080 of 13 August 1921, by which the government was given full powers to reform the administration.

### 3. *Reflections around the University's purpose*

In the aftermath of national unification and with the creation of a university system that had to correspond to broader needs, alongside administrative and didactic reflections, one of the most important and significant was certainly the redefinition of the aims and directions of the renewed academic approach.

The crux of the question mainly concerned whether university studies and activities could represent the focus of professional preparation, or whether they could correspond to real research workshops, mostly focusing on their scientific mission.

Several proposals for a solution to this question have been developed since the early post-unification period. In 1866, for example, Minister Berti had put forward the idea of a distinction between professional and more properly scientific courses. However, this idea was not followed up. Later, in 1881 during a question in the Senate by Minister Baccelli, Pantaleoni expounded a thesis that the professional purpose was to be considered different from the purely scientific one. In this sense, he then proposed that the professional purpose should be left to the universities and that, instead, the concrete progress of science should be attributed to the higher institutes.

A very similar proposal was then also made by Turbiglio in 1892, while in 1912 the University Congress supported the scientific purpose of universities, but on the other hand also advocated that each professor should teach two courses, one scientific, precisely, and the other professional.

All these solutions did not really lead to anything concrete because it was realised early on that it was impossible to separate these two aims. Although different from each other, one could not exist without the other, so it was impossible to think of a system of separate orders.

Scientific and professional endings have always been essentially complementary. It is evident that individuals who have been 'educated' in research, analysis and the exercise of critical thinking will undoubtedly possess the requisite tools to engage in professional practice. Furthermore, it is evident that the acquisitions and progress of science itself are the natural prerequisites for practical and professional activity<sup>32</sup>.

The fundamental task of university education, therefore, is to transmit a method. In this sense, the methodology is described as transversal, meaning that it is not linked to a single discipline. Rather, it is linked to the ability to apply a scientific method.

In this regard, what Guido Fusinato expressed in a session of the Chamber of Deputies on 4 December 1895, when presenting the report on the bill concerning the autonomy of the Kingdom's Universities and Higher Institutes,

<sup>32</sup> See Di Domizio, *L'università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, cit., pp. 191-193.

which bore the signature of Baccelli, is interesting and far-sighted<sup>33</sup>. To summarise, Fusinato explained how university teaching could not be reduced exclusively to the service of practice and the development of professionalism, because this implied reducing professionalism to mere empirical activities. Material knowledge and practical skills, in fact, are “superficial” elements that are often learned in the course of one’s professional practice and career. Rather, he referred to the need to acquire «professional leadership». It is only through the possession of a robust scientific background, a solid grasp of theories and principles, and the assimilation of a rigorous scientific method, that one can cultivate what might be termed a scientific mental *habitus*. Once internalised, this mental *habitus* would persist throughout one’s lifetime<sup>34</sup>.

Scientific study and preparation should, therefore, take place in a disinterested manner, or at least not for reasons exclusively related to professional preparation or material utility. Therefore, first of all, the student should understand what science is and then understand the methodology with which scientific work is done. True professional preparation, in fact, lies in scientific maturity, in the ability to exercise one’s critical spirit in an agile and above all independent manner.

Again, taking up what Fusinato expressed, students were to be conveyed «feelings and ideas» that were to be considered capillary and active energies «of the soul and intellect». These elements would have constituted a true educational force, capable of penetrating the social and not just the professional setting, fortifying the spiritual value, so to speak, of the idea of science that was identified at this point with that of the University<sup>35</sup>.

These reflections on the purpose of university education that emerged forcefully in the aftermath of national unification have, in fact, spanned the entire history of higher education and still animate the debate around the university question today.

In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was realised that the university could no longer represent something «monolithic». It necessarily had to encounter national and local needs and assume, as far as possible, a real territorial identity. This necessarily implied participation of state and local authorities in the decision-making and organisational processes related to academia.

During this period, the need to prevent universities from becoming mere institutes designed to award diplomas, grant access to public competitions or transmit an entirely empirical education also emerged. This reflection was rooted in issues that were not only political, cultural and social, but also peda-

<sup>33</sup> <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1895/12/05/286/sg/pdf>> (last access: 13.02.2025). Guido Fusinato was undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, then Minister of Education during the Giolitti government, from May to August 1906.

<sup>34</sup> See Di Domizio, *L'università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, cit., pp. 191-192.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Miozzi, *Lo sviluppo storico dell'università italiana*, cit., p. 196.

gological. The definition of university regulations, curricula and teaching methodologies, in fact, even today cannot ignore a reflection of an educational nature. It does not only concern its formal and explicit approach, but more the contents and the true educational validity of the role of universities<sup>36</sup>.

In this sense, a central role is also acquired by the recent relaunch of studies on the history of the university and higher education, which can be seen as a useful tool for understanding the transformation of universities and their mission, with a view to the future strengthening of its areas of competence and intervention. It is noteworthy that, in the contemporary context, in addition to the conventional dimensions concerning teaching and research, significant emphasis is being placed on the university's Third Mission, with a particular focus on public engagement. This aspect, in practical terms, quantifies the impact and effectiveness of the university's presence in the territories and communities of reference.

<sup>36</sup> On reflection on the mission and functions of the university, see the recent L. Pomante, *Between History and Historiography. Research on Contemporary Italian University*, Macerata, eum, 2014; E. Bogacz-Wojtanowska, P. Jedynak, S. Wrona, A. Pluszyńska, *Universities, Stakeholders and Social Mission: Building Cooperation Through Action Research*, Routledge, 2022, <<https://research-ebsco-com.ianus.unimc.it/linkprocessor/plink?id=a8c00f53-7146-323d-847d-da2ceee919fe>> (last access: 12.02.2025) and J. Ortega y Gasset, *Missione dell'università*, ed. by A. Savignano, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2023.