# From the “Funk of Disappointment” to the F[I]unking of the Academy

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 02, 2008)


In his NY Times article on the "Funk of Disappointment," Ian Fisher alludes to a most important phenomenon ("brain drain") that, here in the United States, has, and will continue to have, a significant impact on the academic world. Below, I point to just one of the many issues that surround Italy's "brain drain."

A friend recently asked me why I had not reacted to the by now infamous (tongue set firmly in cheek) NY Times article by Ian Fisher [2]; my response was that if I had responded to Fischer’s piece I would have also FELT compelled to respond to Zucconi’s piece that appeared a day or so later in la

Repubblica. Zucconi, for those of you who did not see his article, basically impugned that the US was in no better shape than Italy. Indeed, there is much to be said about what Zucconi retorts: to be sure, the US is going through some trying times with a war quasi out of control; deficits are surely out of control; the dollar could not be weaker, which, among many things, has helped sky rocket the price of oil; as well as other things he listed. Nevertheless, I would be at a loss to place on equal levels the woes of Italy with those of the United States, especially considering what was listed in Fisher’s NY Times article. Overall, Judith Harris’s blog here on i-Italy [3] has, for all practical purposes, hit the nail on the head. Her decades-long residence has clearly sharpened her sensitivity to the Italian “tenore di vita,” which has afforded her the keen insight to be able to engage in a level-headed comparison between these two different but intriguing countries.

In going tit for tat with what’s wrong not only in Italy but also in the US, what Zucconi did not mention was that—as Fisher underscored—“[m]any of the brightest, like the poorest a century ago, leave Italy.” This not-so-new but only recent, openly discussed phenomenon of “brain drain,” which Italy seems to have tried to half-heartedly counter at one point, is such an ironic mimicry of what occurred with “the poorest a century ago,” as Fisher so rightfully stated (For instance, a northern Italian university offered two of my former Ph.D. students a three-year contract, with no guarantee of a possibility of renewal, for them to return to Italy and, consequently, not vie for both long-term and tenure-track positions they eventually earned and currently hold here in the United States). But, it is not only this above-mentioned “brain drain” of the young professionals who are going abroad that threatens intellectual development on a national level; one must also, I would contend, look to the stunting of professional growth from within.

In fact, within academia in Italy, promotion seems to be, for all practical purposes, based much less on meritocracy and much more on “raccomandazione,” which does not translate cleanly into the English word, “recommendation”—the former referring more to “connections,” the latter referencing support for “professional prowess.” In the United States, as is usually the case, one readily enters academia at the assistant professorial level with clear expectations of promotion through the ranks within a certain time frame (usually six years), provided s/he responds to the requirements of the system. This is not the case in Italy, where one may readily remain at the entry level, albeit with some semblance of what we call tenure, with little hope of promotion in rank within a timely fashion. The difference in performance is that in the US one may steadily move forward to the associate professor level with a publication record of a half dozen articles and one authored book. In Italy, conversely, one remains at the entry-level rank while moving forward with a production record of most likely a dozen or so articles and one or two authored books; and the prospects of promotion remain tied to those inexplicable forces under the rubric of “raccomandazione.”

Now, dear reader, don’t get me wrong! Connections are also in vogue here in the US: “my teaching assistant,” “my child,” “my cousin,” etc. are phrases I have heard in the various administrative positions I have held over the past seventeen years. But, while there may be a goodly number of individuals who also engage in such activity in the US with some success, we do have a system of checks and balances that, to an Italian mind-set, would seem not only foreign (pun intended) but, I would suspect, inimical. I have in mind the basic hiring process that any federally funded college/university must follow. The filling in of grids, the tallying of the ethnic/racial/gender composition of the pool of applicants, the submission of such information to a higher power within the university—i.e., the affirmative action officer—are all part of an even greater procedure that attempts to keep the system honest, so to speak, as best it can. In Italy, there is the “concorso” (the competition), which is often on a national level. It consists of a written exam, an oral exam, if the committee approves of the written part, after which the committee decides on the so-called winner. With specific regard to the university, the “concorso” is in effect at a local level (Caveat lector: This is the situation as I write; a reform is now being implemented, which was passed by the Berlusconi government and should transform the “concorso” into a national competition), and the regulations differ according to the level in play, as follows: for the position of “ricercatore” (lit., researcher, equal

to our assistant professor level), one must pass written and oral exams; for the position of “associato” (equal to our associate professor level), there is first an evaluation of one’s credentials followed by a “lesson” conducted in front of the examining committee, for which the candidate has a twenty-four hour notice of the lesson’s subject matter s/he is to present; for the position of “ordinario” (equal to our full professor level) there is only an evaluation of one’s credentials. It is in within this process that the Italian concept and/or practice of the “raccomandazione” has much more valence than our own “recommendation,” trumping to some extent the desired impersonality of meritocracy.

Potentially there are two losers in all of this, the Italian university system and the job candidate. However, there are also two potential winners, the Italian job candidate and the non-Italian university system that accepts him/her.

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