Introduction. Found in translation? The persistence of the university as institution

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INTRODUCTION

The scope and nature of the university institution is the object of a wide academic and political debate (Derrida, 2001; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Schofer and Meyer, 2005; Brint, 2005; Ramirez, 2006; Frank and Gabler, 2006). Issues like the commercialization of knowledge, technology transfer, the rise of the corporate university, the standardization of curricula and degree programmes raise a wide research interest in different disciplinary domains. Pressures to change existing regulations are increasing due to the changing role of the university in society as well as to the evolution of academic science production (Nedeva and Boden, 2006).

As Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and Frank and Gabler (2006) illustrate, the main characteristics of the university as an institution are persistence and expansion. The university is a centuries-old institution whose role in the production and diffusion of knowledge has not been (and possibly is not) at stake. For this reason, university education is still expanding worldwide as are the number and size of universities. However, despite persistence and expansion, the scope and nature of the university has not been stable over time (see Rüegg, 1996). Different ideas co-exist about what the university is and what it should be.

In this introduction, we propose our view of the current role of the university in society and, moving from that, we look at the roots of university persistence, analysed in our times of significant challenges on the basis of the empirical elements included in the contributions of this volume.

In so doing, we wish to bring the issue of persistence back into the organizational theory debate. Persistence is what makes institutions happen, and the ongoing attraction and embeddedness of social transformations and new praxis is at the heart of institutional persistence. We will argue that

institutions' persistence is due to their ability to attract diversity rather than simply to impose shared rules of conduct or to propose common organizational models. The case of the university is paradigmatic in this sense. Universities exist on a worldwide scale; however, identifying common patterns in terms of their organization, mission and evolution is hard work. Therefore, we argue that we found institutions where the ongoing translation of existing practices occurs and the rise of certain institutions happens when there is a successful combination of organizational and social diversity with institutional homogeneity. In this sense, the study of the university as institution is quite illuminating and certainly deserves further analysis. This introductory chapter seeks to clarify this issue and is a small and initial step in that direction.

CHALLENGES OF TODAY'S UNIVERSITY

Universities have performed a varied role in economies and society during their long history (Rüegg, 1996). Generalizing from this long history, one could affirm that the university performs three main functions: a) research and teaching, b) elite selection and education, c) support for the local development of culture and society.

Research and teaching constitutes the essential social role of knowledge production and diffusion. In performing this role, universities are undergoing a series of changes which all relate to a greater managerialization of these activities. So we witness the mushrooming of assessment exercises, the increasing involvement of students and stakeholders in the evaluation of teaching, and the rise of competing institutions especially in the teaching domain. Challenges also reflect the debate on the new modes of production and diffusion of knowledge outlined by Gibbons et al. (1994), which views this production and diffusion as dispersed across a network of varied actors ranging from universities to business firms (see the emergence of corporate universities devoted mainly to professional training). Interestingly, this debate has largely shaped the education policy developed at the EU level in the Bologna accord and the following Prague and Berlin communiqué and the Lisbon agreement.

Second, the role of the university in elite selection and education is at the core of the importance of university institutions over time. For instance, if we take the political establishment as an example of a ruling elite, by looking at the records of Prime Ministers in many European countries, it is difficult to find any who have no university background in well reputed universities. Equally, it is not rare to find that many leading politicians have backgrounds as university professors.¹ This does not always correspond to

a significant scientific record, but it signals the legitimating power that university affiliations still own in the political realm. The situation does not differ substantially if one moves from the political to the business domain. The increasing support to alumni associations by leading business schools is moving in the same direction and is seeking to reproduce a similar kind of effect for business leaders who have an MBA background.

Third, by also looking at its recent history, it can be stated that the university is the only place where social transformation may effectively move across into society. The university has always been the place where social transformations were nurtured in very different countries, from Europe and the USA in the 1960s, to Iran in the late 1970s and China in the late 1980s and, increasingly, nowadays. Moreover, in the popular culture, the representation of university colleges has been increasingly connected to changing rules and generational challenges.² In this sense, the social imagery of the university is that of a place where new rules are produced and existing rules are challenged.

If what we have briefly summarized above holds and even though we acknowledge that this may not apply to some university contexts, we propose to use the concept of *genius loci* to grasp the essence of this collective frame about the university. The genius was a god staying with a person, sharing happiness and pain and disappearing when the person died. The expression *genius loci* was first used by the Romans to state a link between these supernatural entities (the lares) and a given place rather than a person. This link explains the peculiar power and beauty a place owns. Later, this concept was adopted in architecture. In this area, the expression *genius loci* was used to describe the social and cultural aspects (Schulz, 1979) – such as language, folklore, architecture and history – of a given place, thus identifying its nature and character. It has also been used to describe the necessity to adapt the architectural forms of a building or architectural artefact to the context in which it is erected.

Rather than emphasizing this process of adaptation, we would like to stress the ability of universities to be able to propose, intersect and translate for their own benefit new trends and currents in various realms from the sciences and arts. So, what is nowadays considered one of the problems of the university, that is fragmentation and internal differentiation, is instead what we think has allowed its persistence over time. The house of diversity is what allows to be found in the institutions those features, skills and capabilities which allow the possibility of intercepting new and emerging trends in various realms of society and the economy. Making, or attempting to make, universities as homogeneous as possible and assuming that there is a homogeneous model which could serve as a benchmark, would mean the end of this institution. What is comforting for the destiny

of the university is that this homogeneity exists only in the minds of those who want to reform it or who call for its reform, and thus the institution seems to have a chance to survive.

In the case of the university, the *genius loci* stands in the peculiar role of the university in making ideas, people and disciplines meet and cross-fertilize. That diversity and difficulty of acting as a unified body, which nowadays is seen and constructed as a problem to be solved through professionalization of research teaching and administration activities, is instead what we think has allowed its persistence. In this sense, this peculiarity is at the heart of the university's social legitimacy given by its ability to be central in these encounters. If we want to take this argument to the extreme, the university has never had a set of clear characteristics which can be replicated isomorphically across the world and has nothing to offer if not the feature of being a space (and a physical one) where the encounter of different interests, agendas, social backgrounds and the like can happen. If we think of a university such as Oxford which is still said to prepare the future British establishment, one of the features of that organization which cannot be replicated or created easily in other contexts is its ability to be central in making these encounters happen. While some people find college dinners boring and useless (and some indeed are, see Marías, 1989) these instead represent the way through which serendipitous encounters happen and planned fundraising attempts materialize into consistent cheques. In our view, what follows (for example knowledge creation, education, policy advice) is instrumental and not central to the persistence of the institution which is instead characterized by this being a *genius loci*.

Nevertheless, the university is nowadays less and less the place where this encounter occurs. Radio and TV studios, conference centres and talk shows are increasingly places where intellectual, political and economic games take place. Their ways of organizing time and communication are therefore shaping the knowledge form and substance, as Bourdieu (1999) has already remarked. Piero Citati, a leading Italian *maitre à penser*, has very recently argued against the former Italian Minister of Education (who started the recent wave of university reform in the late 1990s), saying that: 'The prestige of our universities decreases. If there are no deep changes, in fifteen years the Italian leading elite will consist of sons and daughters of wealthy people studying in the US and UK and of Rumanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Poles, Chinese and Koreans emigrated from countries where education is better than ours' (Citati, 2007). Citati clearly refers to the loss of legitimacy of the Italian university in selecting the elites.

In particular, the university as *genius loci* is losing what seemed to constitute a key feature within economies and societies, that is providing support to economic and cultural development. And, although a sentence attributed to

former US President Bill Clinton ('to boost a territory's economy it is necessary to build an airport and a university'), still permeates political agendas at the local administration level, universities seem no longer to be the central hubs in social and economic networks or, at least, the number of universities which are able to play this role is diminishing. We are thus witnessing a process of continuous concentration (with, for instance, only a very limited number of universities which can play that role at the European level and only two or three which can play it across the full range of disciplines which would characterize the university as *universitas studiorum*).

Relations among firms and universities are getting more and more difficult. There are non-systematic examples of these difficulties that we collected in discussions with our colleagues in several European countries. For instance, in many cases, firms are not prepared (or willing) to put resources into institutions following complicated logics of action. Small and medium-enterprises (SMEs) are not always able to gain support from universities in basic and/or applied research. Where SMEs are the fabric of the business system (as is the case in Italy), the difficult relation between universities and SMEs results in a lack of private resources for research. Due to public finance constraints, these countries are experiencing a dangerous reduction of research funds, primarily affecting underdeveloped areas such as the Italian Mezzogiorno.

As a kind of reaction, universities themselves are interested in incubating and developing new firms rather than supporting existing ones. Bureaucracy does not help the understanding of reciprocal needs. Universities-firms relations are often based on personal ties and there is no central co-ordination of possible actions, and thus the same firms are contacted by the same university several times but through different people representing different disciplines and departments.

What then are the challenges that today's university faces? First, assessment exercises and rankings for research and teaching create cross-border competition between single universities and also amongst national or continental university systems. The intent of homogenizing educational systems behind the Bologna process is also aimed at boosting comparability of single institutions and educational systems. The increasing mobility of students (for example through the Erasmus programmes) and researchers (for example through the Marie Curie Actions) will generate flows of intellectual capital from the less appealing to the most attractive systems and institutions. The brain-drain may turn into a large-scale problem for some countries and, at a local level, for single universities.

Of course this might be an opportunity for highly legitimated institutions and for fast movers in the field. The emergence of education hubs in Europe for specific disciplinary domains is already under way in some areas

and merits careful investigation. For instance the Madrid area is becoming the European hub for executive management education, hosting at least three campuses of top level European business schools. This process is going to jeopardize the survival of many universities with poor teaching and research performance and social legitimacy.

The centrality of the university in (re)producing elites and the survival of *genius loci* are also challenged by the emergence of new institutions in the field. The role of the university is challenged by other organizations entering the educational domain such as consulting firms and, more interestingly, university-like organizations, such as private business schools and corporate universities. Business schools are reproducing university strengths in terms of educational purpose and *genius loci* while their private market nature allows them to adapt to competition quickly. In an institutional adaptation vein, many universities have developed their own business schools internally. At the same time, the Bologna process is pushing business schools towards developing undergraduate education. A possible outcome of these dynamics could be the convergence of universities and business schools towards a more competitive educational field. As for the diffusion of corporate universities, it reveals the interest of firms in the internalization of tailor-made executive education (Antonacopoulou, 2002). Even though there are often partnerships among companies and universities/business schools, corporate universities are increasingly perceived by firms as an effective alternative to the educational offer of universities.

These are some of the challenges putting university systems in the current transition stage. Of course, other challenges belong to the tensions in the world economy resulting from the new role played by China and India and the economic restructuring undertaken in largely industrialized countries. In particular, the increasing number of graduates in scientific fields coming from these countries and the admission of Chinese and Indian students in EU and US universities are going to deeply affect the brain-drain phenomenon. In the next section, we will try to describe how the university may persist after the deep transformations that states, policy makers, students and firms are calling for.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY AS INSTITUTION

The role of the university in society has changed several times since the thirteenth century and the university has very little in common with the old *universitas studiorum* in Bologna and Padua. However, the existence of the

university has remained taken for granted and has spread (and is still spreading today) as an institutional model in several countries (Frank and Gabler, 2006).

The institution is currently under pressure and, as many of the contributions in this book suggest, there are various calls for its reform, especially in Europe, in order to make it more in tune with current demands from society and the economy. The way in which the university is coping with these challenges may prove useful to understand how it has persisted historically as an institution despite the deep transformations occurring at the societal level during its lifetime.

The emergence of the challenges illustrated above has been accompanied by the spread into the university domain of managerial practices which are new to this institutional context, which has traditionally been self-managed, regulated and governed. We are witnessing an interesting professionalization of roles which invests all the areas of the university's activities. It is not uncommon nowadays to have universities with Vice-chancellors who have a business rather than an academic background even in traditional and old universities such as the University of Oxford. Managerialization and professionalization are also creating the distinction of research vs. teaching which would be considered as aberrant nonsense from the point of view of the traditional *universitas studiorum*. These are instead constructed as the optimal response to the varied demands which come from various forms of assessment exercises and from the new figure of 'student-as-customer' which populates business schools and increasingly colonizes other degrees and programmes.³ Even one of the clearest forms of academic independence in one of the most emblematic ivory tower universities (Oxford) represented by the selection of undergraduates through a process which sees the university don as central is challenged in the name of professionalization.

All of these changes can be seen as forms of shifting power from Academia to a vast range of professional bodies (administrators, recruiters, assessors and so forth) and practices (accounting and accountability as amongst the most pervasive ones). In part this is right. However, they can also be seen as a more subtle response that the university is providing in order to persist as an institution. They mainly concern three areas as described below.

First, they concern the standardization of the structure of educational offer, which, especially in Europe, goes under the label of the Bologna declaration (EFMD, 2006). Looking at standardization in detail, it can be seen that the Bologna declaration is still a process towards standardization rather than a well established outcome (see Nicolas Mottis' contribution in this volume). The way the content of the accord has been translated in the

different countries is not yet homogeneous. If then one looks at the case of PhD programmes, variance seems even greater, with programmes adopting the American model of courses followed by a thesis preparation and others where the doctorate is based on a close interaction between supervisor and candidate.

Second, these changes concern issues of governance which have forcefully entered the university domain, questioning current models of self-regulation and calling for the inclusion of members of the wider stakeholder community in the governance of the university. The majority of European countries are thus calling for new governance rules to be established, favouring access of external members, and new rules of appointment of Chancellors. This is not painless, as testified by the struggle over the new governance structure for the University of Oxford, which was highly contested and encountered the resistance of the Oxonian academic community and colleges.

Third, the innovations concern more sophisticated methodologies of assessment which operate either internally or at the system level to evaluate research, teaching and managerial performances. However, metrics of the actual social impact of the university on economic competitiveness and quality of life are difficult to devise and, not surprisingly then, still lacking. In spite of this, in some European countries the quest for efficiency and effectiveness of public funding for research and the university is paving the way towards hypotheses of university privatization. The features and genesis of these calls are interesting. In most of the cases, the debate is guided by stereotypical views of how 'foreign' university systems work. And thus, for example, in Italy the banner of privatization is used as the panacea for solving the structural under-performance of the system. The label of privatization though seems to be a visionary label with poor application feasibility. Yet, it is sometimes accompanied by mythical references to the US and UK universities as homogeneous entities which are all private, self-funded through high student fees, and linked to the world of business. A closer look would show that in the US most of the universities are still public, state funding is considerable, private universities have huge endowments and students' fees are often covered by effective systems of scholarships which reduce inequality. In the UK, all the universities are public. At Oxford, where the presence of the colleges (which have charity status) makes the institution slightly more independent from public funding, this difference is sustained by large endowments accumulated in a long history. And still this does not allow the colleges to provide their service economically within a system of capped fees which only some blind liberists intend to increase. Behind the rhetoric of privatization there is a lack of knowledge about the nature of the public good of education which

cannot be provided on economic grounds if it does not have the support of the state. The debate seems to ignore the fact that the game of effectiveness and efficiency of the system is not played through a market meant as an arena where private institutions meet and compete but through public systems of accountability. These systems of accountability (such as the RAE in the UK or some other kind of supplementary ranking system such as the ranking and fight for prestige in the US) link public and private funding to results in a context where, more in the USA than in the UK, only a few universities compete at a very high level in a culture of donations and endowment which is virtually absent in any other European country.

In this theoretical and practical space and debate, governance rules and administrative practices appear to be homogeneous and unitary bodies of procedures while they are not. Consistent with the arguments on the travel of ideas (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996), in the application domain rules and practices appear as multifaceted boxes with very light contents. With the words of a key figure of a British university: 'we are all in favour of efficiency, aren't we? But if you tell me that in the name of efficiency we have to abolish the tutorial system and reform the admission procedure which allow a pondered selection of the future elite of this country, well, that is not the kind of efficiency I like' (in conversation with one of the authors).

Therefore, we hold that the university as institution has always encountered these highly institutionalized boxes and has always been able to fill them with situated meaning and contents. Not a functional adherence to standard norms then, but their appropriation and translation into something which appears stable and conforming to norms while it is different and open to the 'other'. On the one hand, a distinctive feature of institutions is to attract these boxes (whether practices, fashions, and so on) and to be actors of their production and institutionalization. On the other, persistent institutions are able to embed variety and diversity by translating these practices. Internal agency and interest dynamics shape the translation process within the institutions granting variety to be reproduced, given that practices may internally take different shapes. This capacity of embedding new practices into the institutional mission and giving them situated meanings is what has sustained the university in the past decades. In other words, persistence is about the translation of variety rather than the reproduction of sameness. Stability due to closure to variety may prevent persistence when the pace of field transformations is high due to new regulations or the spread of practices and norms from other fields.⁴

In this respect the British RAE is a good example: academics hate it not because they do not like to be assessed (in fact it is still a self- and peer assessment) but because it has become too bureaucratic and it has now

done what it was supposed to do, that is to instil a culture of research and accountability within the university.

As translation stands at the core of persistence, two general consequences may be drawn, particularly relevant for the university reform process.

First, from an agency viewpoint, seeing these practices as crystallized entities would paradoxically crystallize the institution. This would imply the reproduction of sameness rather than the inventive and creative production of knowledge as diversity, undermining the traditional core of the university as the locus where the production of innovation and new knowledge find an appropriate terrain for growth.

Second, if the process of translation stops because these practices are viewed as complicated and with a concrete rationale conflicting with a supposedly stable nature of the institution, then the persistence of this institution will be undermined. In this sense, the uncritical closure of the emergence and spread of these practices is equally as damaging as their uncritical acceptance. An example taken from the debate surrounding the case of the Italian university reforms is somewhat useful to understand what we are arguing. One of the authors of this piece was invited to speak about the brain-drain in a meeting with representatives of the Italian Government, the Italian university and the Italian community of scholars living in the United Kingdom. The position of these three constituencies was pretty clear, also with clear reciprocal reactions. The spokesperson of the Italian university had to institutionally defend the system and was ferociously attacked by the audience (whether these arguments were defensible on empirical or political grounds counted very little). One of the speakers from the Italian community of researchers in the UK (not one of the authors of this piece!) strongly attacked the Italian system and received a strong critique from the institutional defenders. The only one who managed to attract the interest and respect of the entire audience was, probably because they were a professional politician, the representative of the Government, who listened, acknowledged the problem and promised a solution. Given the Italian situation and tradition, this solution will probably never arrive, or it will arrive with a content which will be malleable enough to leave things as they are. In any case, strong opposition or a-critical acceptance of reform processes have a limited life and prompt reactions.

In conclusion, our main argument is that at the root of university persistence we can find the ability to attract legitimated practices and rationales and translate them into tools to sustain the universities' role. Both uncritical acceptance and hypercritical refusal prevent translation. Without translation, the persistence of the university is at stake in the longer term, especially its peculiar characteristic of *genius loci*. These arguments deserve

to be scrutinized by thorough research. So, we encourage scholars to use the university as a meaningful example to bring the issue of persistence back into the debate on institutions.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE VOLUME: RATIONALE AND CONTENT

This volume aims to illustrate the different perspectives and elements characterizing the debate on the evolution of the university in Europe. We gathered contributions adopting different theoretical approaches, from institutionalism and organization theory to accounting and history, and dealing with different empirical contexts both geographically (France, Italy, UK, Scandinavia) and institutionally (PhD education, university, business schools). The *fil rouge* of the volume is the exploration of the aspects and impacts of the reform under way. For this reason, we have structured the volume in three sections: Issues, where the rationales of institutional reforms are discussed, Models, where practices and rules introduced in the university domain and their outcomes are described, and Cases, where examples of specific institutions and institutional contexts are illustrated.

In the Issues section, Nigel Thrift from the University of Warwick, meaningfully explores the tension of the current processes of reform of the university systems in Europe. Lars Engwall, of the University of Uppsala, illustrates the evolution of the relationship between the university and the media and how it affects the legitimacy of the university as social institution. Marie-Laure Djelic, from ESSEC – Paris, explores the evolution of PhD programmes in Europe and the possibilities of a European PhD to tackle the problem of brain-drain. Anthony G. Hopwood, from the Saïd Business School – University of Oxford, describes the latest trends in business education and in business schools evolution and relates these to the broader changes in university reforms.

In the Models section, Nicolas Mottis, of ESSEC – Paris, critically analyses the state of the art of the Bologna process, outlining some unintended consequences of the standardization under way. Tina Hedmo and Linda Wedlin, of the University of Uppsala, describe the new trends in the governance of universities. Julie Callaert, Bart Van Looy, Dominique Foray and Koenraad Debackere, of the University of Leuven, and Gilles Van Wijk, of ESSEC – Paris, attempt to illustrate how research assessment may have an impact on the university institutional model.

The Cases section is divided into two parts. The first contains cases on the application and unintended consequences of the new models of governance and performance measurement. Suzanne Ryan and James Guthrie of the

University of Sydney, and Ruth Neumann, Macquarie Graduate School of Management, Macquarie University, and Ian Creagh and Richard Verrall, of the City University of London, illustrate two cases of changes in governance structure. Tom Keenoy, of the University of Leicester, and Michael I. Reed, of the University of Cardiff, critically analyse the introduction of performance management in the UK, and Eliana Minelli, Gianfranco Rebora and Matteo Turri, Università Carlo Cattaneo, discuss the assessment exercise introduced experimentally in Italy.

The second part deals with the relation between universities and economic development. In particular, Stuart Macdonald and Pat Anderson of the Sheffield Management School and Dimitris Assimakopoulos of the Grenoble Ecole de Management study the diffusion of innovation in SMEs with the help of educational programmes and testify to the change in the knowledge creation arena with a move from universities to the private sector. Paolo Emilio Signorini, of the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, offers the point of view of a non-academic and policy maker by illustrating some features of the connection between regional development and the role of the university system.

We hope these contributions will be twofold. On the one hand we hope that policy makers, reformers and administrators will reflect on the kind of recipes that they propose or are provided with by all kinds of consultants and too liberalist thinkers, normally economists. These are normally too simple, too abstract and often refer to absent idealized models which exist only in the minds of those who have never really understood what the university has been and is. On the other hand, we hope that those who react to the call for change become aware that change, diversity, adaptation and translation is what the university has always been doing. Stopping this would mean the ultimate loss of the legitimacy of the institution as has already happened in some national contexts. The solution, as is always the case, must be *in between*, that is in that liminal space which the university has happily inhabited in its long persistence as an institution.

NOTES

1. As a mere example, in the last Italian Government, out of 24 Ministers, ten (including the Prime Minister, Romano Prodi) play (or have played) an academic role in the university system.
2. We refer to movies such as 'Dead Poets Society'.
3. As Willmott rightly notes, the British Research Assessment Exercise (the 'infamous' but effective RAE) creates a fictitious market where the provider of financial resources (the state) acts as a monopolist and is able to fix the price for the services provided by

academics, with a perverse game which leaves them to decide who is good and who bad (see Willmott, 2003). The consolation is that it could be worse and the assessment could have been left to non-academics with dubious consequences.

4. If one thinks of long-lasting institutions and organizations (say religion and religious Orders) they appear to be the same across time while actually they are highly flexible and manage to combine heterogeneous rationales with the apparent homogeneous institutional role they play or are supposed to play (see Quattrone, 2004). Yet, if we think of one of the oldest banks still in operation (the Monte dei Paschi di Siena in Italy) its persistence as organization is due to its ability to translate various calls (civic, political economical, religious and pagan) in a series of governance rules which extend beyond the boundaries of the bank to expand across the city of Siena and the whole region of Tuscany.

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