

Introduction

Between History and Historiography. Research on Contemporary Italian University includes some research papers written originally in English and presented at international conferences and seminars about the history and historiography of higher education and European universities. Each of them is aimed to illustrate certain aspects and features of the Italian university system in the last two centuries. The first, entitled *The Peculiarities of the Italian University System. The Role of Small Provincial Universities from National Unification to Post-World War II Period*, traces the origins and evolution of the university organization from the Unification to the post-World War II period, with a particular attention to the real peculiarity of the Italian system: the so-called «minor universities», *i.e.* small provincial universities, which had a significant role in the establishment and development of the higher education system in Italy, and, in general, had an important role in the cultural and civil growth of populations and in the evolution of the economic and productive systems of the small towns and the more peripheral areas of the peninsula.

At the basis of the choice to investigate, in this volume, the role and the characteristics of these «minor universities» there is, among other things, the need to allow the foreign historians of higher education and universities to fully understand the particular organization and structure of the Italian university system, that, in some cases – in research and contributions by foreign specialists – is described in an imprecise and superficial way.

A similar concern is the basis of the second chapter of this volume, the result of a research carried out on the occasion of

an international study seminar. *The Rise of E-Learning in the Italian University System between the Creation of On-Line Universities and the Innovation of the Educational Processes in Traditional Universities (2003-2013)*, in fact, aims to highlight the recent and particularly complex and controversial history characterizing the introduction of e-learning and distance education in the Italian university system: a process that, in our country, has acquired absolutely unique forms and implications compared to the rest of Europe, with the result to become, in some ways, difficult to be understood by foreign scholars.

The third chapter of the book, *The University as a Historiographical Problem. Studies and Research on Italian Universities and Higher Education Systems in the Last Twenty Years*, offers a real overview of the most recent studies carried out in Italy on higher education and universities in the contemporary age. It is a paper that provides, for the first time in a systematic way, a reconstruction of the research lines and addresses of the sector research in our country, and that, from the point of view of international historiography, allows to make important comparative analysis.

The fourth and final chapter of the work, as the title suggests (*Preserving Memory. The Archives of the Italian Universities and the Organization of Historical Research in Higher Education Field*), focuses on the sources used in the history of higher education and Italian universities and, in particular, on the historical archives of Italian universities, attempting a systematic presentation of them, so that to arouse the interest of European and extra-European scholars and researchers, on the basis of the specialized literature published in the last decades.

This volume is originated from the stimuli received from colleagues and scholars from different European countries and the international discussions about the recent history of the complex – and sometimes very «complicated» (at least in the perception of foreign researchers) – Italian university system, and owes much to scholars such as Manuel Martínez Neira, of the University Carlos III in Madrid (Spain), Victor Karady, of the Central European University in Budapest (Hungary) and Ignacio Peiró Martín, of the University of Zaragoza (Spain); as

well as owes much to the intellectual dialogue and debate on the research topics that, in recent years, the writer had with Roberto Sani and Anna Ascenzi, of the University of Macerata, with Gian Paolo Brizzi, secretary of CISUI and professor at the University of Bologna, with Simonetta Polenghi, Catholic University of “Sacro Cuore” in Milano, and with Alberto Barausse, of the University of Molise. To all of them a warm and sincere thanks.