

The University of Catania on the Way to “Racial Purity”

Ernesto De Cristofaro*

Abstract: At the time of the enactment of racial laws, at the University of Catania there are no Jewish teachers. However, the current Rector Orazio Condorelli, in his opening speech of the 1938-39 academic year, recalls that investigations are underway with reference to a single dubious position. But, in fact, another scholar from the university, although not a professor, is expelled. He is the director of the Astrophysical Observatory of Catania Azeglio Bemporad, esteemed scholar, who, as a Jew, is expelled according to the dictates of R.D.L. 1728/1938. In addition, the Rector announces that from the current year the teachings of "General demography and comparative demography of races" and "Biology of races" will be introduced. Their purpose is to strengthen the racial consciousness of the students of the University as well as citizens of a nation that on the racial hierarchy and the fight against crossbreeding and racial degeneration intends to build its future of political hegemony. These teachings will be held respectively by Gaetano Zingali, Professor of Statistics and already federal of the PNF in Catania at the end of the twenties and Dean of the Faculty of Law in 1932-33 and 1936-37 and by Bruno Monterosso, Professor of Zoology. Both will devote a manual to teaching. Available since 1939 that of Demography of races, since 1942 that of Biology of races, both published by the G.U.F. of Catania. After the war, Zingali will be subjected to a process of purging, Monterosso will continue for some years to teach Biology of races, Condorelli will be deputy at the Constituent Assembly.

Keywords: Racism, antisemitism, racial laws, university, science.

1. Anti-Semitism in Catania: politics, society, academy

According to the data of the census carried out in August 1938, the results of which appear in the newspapers in October, there are 202 citizens of Jewish origin living in Sicily out of about four and a half million: ninety-six in Palermo, seventy-five in Catania, twenty-one in Messina, seven in total between Agrigento, Syracuse, Enna. The «scarcity of recipients» (M. Genco, 2000, 33) of the racial laws that are passed in those same months, is, however, compensated by a zealous application which witnesses a willingness to adhere to the directives of the regime that confirms the firm alignment of local hierarchies, and society in general, to national policy. The composition of the ruling class in Catania during the years of the regime supports the idea of a strongly harmonious relationship between center and periphery. In the early 1920s, the Minister of Public Works of the first Mussolini Government (1922-24), the lawyer and professor of Roman Law Gabriello Carnazza comes from Catania (L. Agnello, 1977, 443-447). In the following decade, other notables of the city are placed at the highest levels of the party and the State: Vincenzo Zangara, federal secretary of the Fascist Party in Catania between 1933 and 1937 and professor in charge of Public Law between 1933 and 1935 in the local university (from 1937 to 1940 he holds the chair of Italian and comparative Constitutional Law in the University “Sapienza” of Rome), is national vice-secretary of the Party from 1937 to 1940 (A. Barbera, 2013, 2082-2083); Filippo Anfuso, career diplomat, becomes head of cabinet of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Galeazzo Ciano in 1937 and is, later, ambassador in Berlin of the Italian Social Republic (S. Setta, 1988, 125-128). At the height of the time of the racial measures (and until the end of 1939), the federal secretary of the Fascist Party in Catania is Pietrangelo Mammano, a rich landowner, born in Centuripe, who stands out for his violent and prevaricating nature which is source of interferences in the public administration, frictions within the Party, intemperance and abuses against ordinary citizens (F. Pezzino, 1983, 15). But even if Catania's Fascism accepts the laws of 1938, showing its most brutal face, Emanuele Macaluso recalls that in Catania, for many years, even a refined writer such as Vitaliano Brancati - who, from the second half of the 1930s onwards, will not

* Ricercatore di *Storia del diritto medievale e moderno*, Dipartimento di Giurisprudenza, Università di Catania, Via Gallo 24, 95124 Catania, e-mail <edecristofaro@lex.unict.it>.

fail to address his most corrosive sarcasm to the regime - plays like many others a part in the Fascist chorus, until disappointment, anger and disenchantment come to pass (E. Macaluso, 1983, VIII). This brief overview describes the transversal capacity of attraction of the regime and the involvement, in the city of Catania, of figures and subjects coming from the ranks of the landowners, from the academic world, from the intellectual middle class. The picture would not change much if we move a few kilometers further south. From the village of Chiaramonte Gulfi, located in the province of Ragusa, comes, in fact, one of the leading figures of fascist racism: Telesio Interlandi, founder in 1924 and until 1943 director of the newspaper "Il Tevere" and since 1938 director of "La difesa della razza" (M. Canali, 2004, 519-521). But, in general, also the Sicilian press, historically attested on more moderate positions than those that animate the publications ascribable to figures such as Interlandi, - the "Giornale di Sicilia" and "L'Ora" in Palermo, the "Popolo di Sicilia" in Catania, "La Gazzetta" in Messina - quickly becomes «the field of shooting on which racists practice» (M. Genco, 2000, 41). In the "Giornale di Sicilia", for example, the anti-Jewish campaign already starts at the beginning of 1938, while, within the framework of the same propaganda, "Il Popolo di Sicilia" affirms that the Jews were responsible for numerous economically motivated crimes committed in Catania - fraud, extortion, falsification of goods, fraudulent bankruptcies (P. Nicolosi, 1988, 108). The position of the top management of the University of Catania at the time of the laws against the Jews of the autumn of 1938 is a little less direct than that of the militant racist Giuseppe Maggiore who, as Rector of Palermo, is pleased to communicate that of the ninety-nine Jewish teachers expelled from the roles of the Italian University, five had been in service in the sicilian capital (Genco M., 2000, 88). The words of the Rector Orazio Condorelli have a different stamp, but betray a state of mind no less adhesive to the racial politics just inaugurated. In giving his opening speech for the 1938-39 academic year, the Rector Condorelli - born in 1897 and full professor of Philosophy of Law since 1933 - takes care to «note with great satisfaction that, except for the results of the investigations that are underway in relation to a doubtful case, no elimination is expected in the teaching and assistant staff of this University, albeit very Italian, as a result of the recent measures taken by Italy in defense of its race» (O. Condorelli, 1940, 16). This passage from Condorelli's speech has already been reported in the historiography by authoritative scholars (S. Gentile., 2010, 13; R. Calimani, 2015, 747), but it is still possible to spend some more time on it. First of all, it must be said that only for a fortuitous combination of time the University of Catania is in 1938 "very Italian". At least three eminent Jewish scholars have taught and conducted research there until a few years earlier. From 1911 to the early 1920s, Maurizio Ascoli, author of important studies on the treatment of tuberculosis, who later moves to Palermo and is expelled from there in 1938, has taught there in the Faculty of Medicine. Angelo Segrè is Professor of Economic History at the Higher Institute of Economics and Commerce (the future Faculty of Economics and Commerce) from 1929 to 1935. Finally, Tullio Ascarelli, a distinguished scholar of commercial law, has taught in Catania from 1929 to 1932, in the same Faculty of Law from which the Rector Condorelli came (P. Nicolosi, 1988, 114-115). But in the academic biography of Orazio Condorelli enters fully a figure of Jewish teacher, who plays a decisive role in it. He is Alessandro Levi, a Venetian professor of Philosophy of Law, who holds the chair from 1921 to 1924 (A. Cavaglione, 2005, 747-749) and under whose guidance Condorelli takes the first steps of his academic career (V. Frosini, 1982, 756-758). Between 1921 and 1924 Condorelli publishes his first five scientific works, one of which, moreover, is devoted to the thought of the Jewish philosopher of law Hans Kelsen (O. Condorelli, 1923, 307-315). These works enable him to achieve the "libera docenza" (the first step of academic teaching qualification) in Philosophy of Law on February 9, 1925 - even though the whole procedure begins on November 20th, 1922. Alessandro Levi is a member of the jury that gives Condorelli the "libera docenza" (together with professors Pietro Delogu, Biondo Biondi, Michele Barillari and, until 8 December 1924, Giuseppe Maggiore, later replaced by Eugenio Di Carlo) and - by unanimous designation of the other members, starting from 8 December 1924 - also the speaker¹. Therefore, the drawing up of the judgment with which the "libera docenza" of

¹ Archivio storico dell'Università degli Studi di Catania (from now on ASUCT), fascicoli del personale docente, f. Condorelli Orazio, Minutes of the work of the Commission for the "libera docenza" in Philosophy of Law.

Condorelli has been conferred is owed directly to Levi and, on the other hand, he is at the University of Catania at that time the dean of the teaching within which the scientific life of the future Rector would be carried out from then on. The historical archive of the University of Catania does not show any traces of subsequent contacts or collaboration between disciple and teacher, which probably could have been there. Certainly, during the tragic parenthesis of the racial laws, Condorelli would not have had any interest in looking for his first mentor. In any case, at the end of the war, Levi is reinstated in his teaching and is elected to the "Accademia dei Lincei". In his inaugural speech, Condorelli mentions that "investigations" are underway into the position of a person whose identity and role are not better described. This is Professor Cesare Grassetti, originally from Milan and at that time "professore straordinario" of Institutions of private law at the Catania legal faculty. Grassetti is suspended from service with effect from 16 October 1938² and from the payment of his salary by a telegram, signed by the Minister Bottai and addressed to the Rector Condorelli, the following December 14th³. In October, he receives a communication from the Rector in which he is informed that, where interested, he could produce to the Ministry of National Education all the documents proving that he and/or the closest members of his family (parents, children, sisters, brothers) belong to the category of families who had relatives fallen in Libyan, first world, Ethiopian or Spanish war; that they have had volunteers in the same wars; that they have had fighters in these wars decorated with merit; that they have had mutilated, disabled, wounded having fought for the fascist cause; that they have had party members in the years from 1919 to 1922 and in the second half of 1924. The letter, which bears the heading "Professors of the Jewish race", anticipates the provisions that will be contained in Article 14 of R.d.l. 1728 of 17 November 1938, according to which some categories of Jewish citizens could have asked for the disapplication of racial measures against them if they had particular merit. However, that rule could only have applied to the restrictions of a patrimonial nature (ownership of houses and buildings, ownership or management of undertakings) or to the possibility of exercising the office of guardian or administrator of minors or incapacitated persons not belonging to the Jewish race or of serving in the army provided for by Article 10 and to participation in insurance companies provided for by letter h of Article 13 of the same decree. If Grassetti had ever turned out to be Jewish, in essence, he would have had to leave his post at the University, as happened to each of his colleagues for whom this condition was met. On the contrary, in a long letter addressed to the Ministry of National Education on 12 May 1939, Grassetti describes his family situation, affirms that he and his father belong to the Catholic religion and complains that the suspicion that is on his account is motivated solely by the unavailability of the baptism certificate of his paternal grandfather⁴. Once the investigations have been completed, the suspension is lifted on November 9, 1939 and Grassetti resumes his teaching⁵. Curiously, in 1935, only two years before taking up the position of Rector and three years before the racial laws, Condorelli had asked to move from the teaching of Philosophy of Law to that, technically more relevant, of Institutions of private law, a chair at that time without a titular teacher⁶.

2. The Bemporad «case»

Azeglio Bemporad, in 1938 director of the astrophysical observatory, is one of the scholars who, although he does not come under strictly formal terms into the roles of the teaching or assistant staff of the University of Catania, is struck by the anti-Semitic measures. So, he cannot be considered the primary object of the Rector's opening speech, but his story recalls the story of all those people

² ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Grassetti Cesare, Ministerial letter of suspension from service.

³ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Grassetti Cesare, telegram from the Minister of National Education to the Rector of the University of Catania.

⁴ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Grassetti Cesare, letter from Cesare Grassetti to the Ministry of National Education.

⁵ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Grassetti Cesare, telegram from the Ministry of National Education to the University of Catania.

⁶ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Condorelli Orazio, letter from the Rector to the Minister of National Education.

working in any role at the University and expelled as a result of the racial legislation (P. Nastasi, 1994, 103-155). His story, which has been briefly mentioned in historiography on previous occasions (R. Finzi, 2003², 100; A. Ventura, 2013, 82), has been the subject of greater attention only in recent years. Azeglio Bemporad was born in Siena in 1875 and graduated in Mathematics at the "Normale" in Pisa in 1898 with honors. In 1899 he is an assistant at the Observatory of Turin and from 1900 to 1904 he followed a three-year specialization course at the University of Berlin. Returning to Italy in 1904, he is appointed assistant at the Observatory of Catania, the only Italian station that takes part in the European project, promoted by the Academy of France, for the realization of a photographic "Carte du ciel". Bemporad devotes himself intensely to this activity. In 1912 he becomes Director of the Specola di Capodimonte. Despite his formal membership of the Fascist Party, here Bemporad enters into strong friction, for professional reasons, with his colleague Salvatore Aurino, who is also secretary of the Fascist Party in Naples. For these reasons, in 1928 he is not confirmed as "libero docente" in theoretical astronomy, a qualification that he had achieved in Catania and between 1929 and 1930 he is subjected to supervision and filed as an anti-fascist in the central political register. He returns to Catania in 1933 and is entrusted with the teaching of Geodesy and Astronomy, which he combines with the work of composing the astrographic catalogue at the Observatory. Between 1933 and 1934 various contrasting pronouncements accumulate with reference to his loyalty to the regime by different bodies of the Fascist Party. Bemporad goes from being an "ex-antifascist" to being obliged to return his card and badge in 1935. He is removed from the teachings entrusted to him and, finally, in December 1938 is also relieved by the management of the Observatory because of racial laws. The application for 'discriminazione' (differentiation) which he submits to the General Directorate for Demography and Race is rejected on the grounds of 'political demerits'. The same decision is taken towards the members of his family. In 1943 his wife dies and in the same year his house is destroyed by bombing. Between August and September 1944, Bemporad learns of the revocation of the measures that had led to his expulsion and manifests to the Rector Mario Petrocelli (full Professor of ecclesiastical law who takes over from Condorelli in 1943 arrested by allied troops of occupation and interned in the prison camp of Padula) his willingness to resume his research and teaching activities. He dies on February 11, 1945, before this wish could be realized (A. Mangano, 2015, 16-24).

3. Academic teaching and racist propaganda

Although in 1938 the University of Catania does not have much work to do to "reclaim" its staff from the presence of "not very Italian" employees, it must be noted as one of the first in activating new teachings inspired by the doctrines and policies recently undertaken. It is, once again, Condorelli who reminds the professors of the University that the institution, at the degree courses in Political Science and Law, of the teaching of General demography and comparative demography of races «[...] as well as being a useful complement to the culture of young people destined to form the ruling class of an imperial nation that has the responsibility of governing populations of different races, will be worth to strengthen the racial conscience, that must be always vigilant in a great race like the Italian one, that must, for itself and for the world, fulfill its historical mission necessarily connected to its own genius, whose peculiarities has therefore the duty to preserve from bastardization» (O. Condorelli, 1940, 8). The contemporary institution of the teaching of Biology of races in the Faculties of Medicine and Surgery and of Humanities and Philosophy obeys the same requirements. These new teaching paths follow, with zealous timeliness, an indication contained in the Declaration on race of the Grand Council of Fascism dated October 6, 1938, which notes the establishment by the Minister of National Education of chairs of studies on the race in major universities (M. Sarfatti, 2017², 65, 201) and, in more prosaically administrative terms, followed by a circular of the same Minister Bottai, dated 22 October 1938 and addressed to the Rectors and Directors of the Higher Institutes, which emphasizes that the main task of the University is to contribute to the formation of a firm and deep racial conscience (S. Gentile, 2010, 18-19). The University of Catania, together with the universities of Bologna, Turin, Bari, Urbino, Florence and the Catholic University of Milan, is one of the sites that most readily transfer these indications in as many training courses as possible. Gaetano Zingali

has been in charge of teaching General demography and comparative demography of races since the 1938-39 academic year. Professor of Statistics since 1925 and Professor of Public Finance at the Faculty of Law since 1935, Zingali is a fascist of proven faith: member of the Fascist Provincial Directory of Syracuse from 1922 to 1924, federal secretary of the Fascist Party in Catania from 1927 to 1929, Member of Parliament from 1929 to 1939 and member of the Superior Council of Statistics from 1929 to 1943. Between 1932 and 1937 he is the Dean of the Faculty of Law of Catania, in which he holds many lectureships (Economic Policy, Tax Law, and Financial Law). He devotes himself to teaching General demography and comparative demography of the race between 1938 and 1943, the year in which he is suspended from the role of teacher until 1947 (E. De Cristofaro, 2013, 2091-2092). His course of lessons of the academic year 1938-39 is published in 1939 by the Group of University Fascists of Catania and the Rector Condorelli sends a copy of it to Sabato Visco, Director of the Institute of Physiology of the University of Rome and head of the Office "Studies and propaganda on the race" at the Ministry of Popular Culture. Visco replies to Condorelli on June 30th 1940, thanking him warmly for the volume and informing him that the book would be exhibited at the First National Exhibition on the Race. The book has a first part dedicated to the policies of the regime in favour of the quantitative and qualitative strengthening of the nation (support for motherhood and childhood, fight against contraceptive practices, tax on celibacy, hypothesis of taxation of infectious marriages) and a second part that concerns the risks of crossbreeding, contamination and degradation of racial positive characteristics for excessive mixing with foreign elements. Attention is paid not only generically to the «races biologically dissimilar from ours» (G. Zingali, 1939, 234) that are possible vehicles of genetic pollution, but primarily to the "Jewish race", which among all appears the most dangerous. From a numerical point of view, Zingali recalls that, according to the 1931 census, there were no more than 48,000 Jews resident in Italy. But it continues by crediting a false belief (M. Sarfatti, 2017², 143-188) which tended to inflate this number to make the impending sense of danger more palpable: «[...] one is generally willing to admit that the Jews were going up to Italy, at the time when the government measures against them began, to no less than 100,000» (G. Zingali, 1939, 237). There are many reasons of character and morality why Jews represent a foreign body in the body of the nation: first of all, they try to undermine and overwhelm all the peoples who host them by virtue of a particular mentality that puts them against everything that surrounds them; moreover, the fact of not having a territory and a country leads them to spread the ranks of an internationalist organization that brings them closer to the international networks of freemasonry and communism in their disruptive action and in the common contempt for national values; finally, they represent a people eager for earnings and particularly trained, from a millenary tradition, to all forms of open and hidden activities, licit and illicit «that serve to make their own fortune on the ruin of others» (G. Zingali, 1939, 238). To do this, they climb the ladder of power in the most subtle ways and without any scruples use manipulation, blackmail and choking. In short, «the Jews constitute - within each State and particularly within the unitary and totalitarian States - an element of disintegration of homogeneity and national strength; and they represent, within each nation, the advanced patrol of atheistic, masonic, communist internationalism and destroyer of the elements of civilization, conservation and well-being of peoples» (G. Zingali, 1939, 242). For such political reasons, which are associated with the strictly biological ones, Fascism defends the Italians from the Jewish race which constitutes for them «the number one public danger» (G. Zingali, 1939, 243). Equally peremptory, although apparently presented within a more objective and scientific framework, are the conclusions of Bruno Monterosso, Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy since 1930 and appointed from 1938-39 to teach Biology of races at the University of his hometown, where he continues his career (F. Barbagli, 2012, 1515-153) and where he is among the first lecturers to deliver a lecture inspired by the new theme generated by national policies entitled "The races as they arise and as they set", on December 12th, 1938⁷. The case of Monterosso as a zoologist dealing with "human races" is not, on the other hand, isolated since on the national scene,

⁷ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Monterosso Bruno, invitation card to the proluision of the zoology course of Prof. Bruno Monterosso signed by the Rector Orazio Condorelli.

the zoologists Edoardo Zavattari and his assistant Marcello Ricci of the University of Rome are among the ten signatories of the so-called "Manifesto of the race" (or "Manifesto of racist scientists") appeared on the "Giornale d'Italia" on July 14th, 1938 and Alessandro Ghigi, Professor of Zoology in Bologna, sits, with thirteen illustrious colleagues of various disciplinary backgrounds, in the Higher Council of Demography and Race established on September 5th 1938 (P. Greco, 2016, 85-95). Towards the end of 1938, Monterosso also appears among the signatories of an appeal from the Zoology and Anatomy Section of the Italian Society for the Advancement of Science (Sips) so that, given the new requirements dictated by the political agenda, competitions could soon be held to strengthen the teaching of Biology of races in universities (G. Israel, 2010, 286). From a numerical point of view, the Monterosso survey does not validate Zingali's alarmism about the increase in the number of Jews in Italy, which according to his estimate represent about 0.12% of the population. Even on the somatic level, Monterosso concedes that it is not always easy to distinguish between "Aryans" and Jews and that the characters of both are often interchangeable. Although, in effect, some peculiarities of the external appearance can contribute to visually isolate the "Jewish race": stocky nose, falling lips, small stature, poorly developed limbs (B. Monterosso, 1942, 156-157). Monterosso also admits that among the Jews there have been appreciable wits - Spinoza, Freud, Einstein - although more often than not they have been more demolishers than system builders. But, more generally, Jews have worked tirelessly for the disintegration and corruption of the moral and cultural heritage of humanity. They have shown solidarity only with their co-religionists, with whom they have always conspired to gain positions of leadership and responsibility for the vital nerve centres of politics, administration and the economy (B. Monterosso, 1942, 161-163). But, above all, they are directed into everything they do by an insatiable greed: « [...] money represents everything for the Jew because it constitutes the most mobile, most easily concealed and convertible property» (B. Monterosso, 1942, 163). Finally, the Jews are bearers of a pride of race for which they alone are men, «all others are beasts» (B. Monterosso, 1942, 448). From this it follows that fascist racism is a racism of enhancement of the quality of life and a practical means of defense (B. Monterosso, 1942, 455). In conclusion, it can be observed that within a treatment that extends over four hundred pages, the Jews are the only ethno-anthropological unit to which Monterosso dedicates a widespread analysis of a socio-moral character, as well as historical and bio-somatic. Even towards Africans, the object of racist sentiments in Italy and as well recipients of a strict racial legislation, the judgment of Monterosso is much more nuanced. The African races are «all in decay» (B. Monterosso, 1942, 172), they are not able to assimilate the superior civilization of the whites, of which they have assimilated only the defects, «aggravating them in their primitive and wild nature» (B. Monterosso, 1942, 174). No hope can be placed in their ransom, but neither must anything be feared from such retrograde and weak peoples.

4. Final statements

Despite such a proud and explicitly racist intellectual militancy, the fate of Catania's post-war scientists, like that of their most renowned colleagues, is, for the most part, mild and benevolent, if not illustrious and gratifying. This confirms the impression, already expressed in the historiography, on the capacity of public institutions, and of academic ones in particular, «to absorb, even if to different degrees and at different levels [...], men who had participated in the racist and anti-Semitic policies of Fascism» (T. Dell'Era, 2010, 236). Orazio Condorelli, after a few months of internment in the camp of Padula, resumes the teaching of Philosophy of Law. In 1946 he is elected deputy of the "Blocco delle libertà" at the Constituent Assembly. Subsequently, he serves in the Monarchical Party for which he sits in the city council of Catania in the legislatures of 1952 and 1956. From 1953 to 1958 he is also a senator of the Republic (V. Frosini, 1982, 757). Bruno Monterosso continues to teach Biology of races until the mid-fifties. Between 1956 and 1959 he is the Dean of the Faculty of Science of the University of Catania and, having completed his teaching, he is awarded the title of Professor Emeritus. When he dies, in January 1965, the Rector of Catania receives, among others, a message of condolence from the Rector "*facente funzioni*" of the University of Pavia Giorgio Renato

Levi⁸. In all likelihood, Levi, who dies in April of the same year, is not aware of Monterosso's racist past. As a professor of chemistry at the University of Pavia, he had been forced to flee Italy, finding shelter in Brazil and teaching there from 1938 to 1946 (L. Cerruti, 2005, 763-766). Gaetano Zingali, initially, suffers the heavier consequences caused by the procedures of purge and until 1947 is deprived of personal freedom. Subsequently, he is reinstated in the teaching and from 1958 to 1963 he serves as lay member of the Superior Council of the Magistracy (E. De Cristofaro, 2013, 2091-92).

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⁸ ASUCT, fascicoli del personale docente, f. Monterosso Bruno, note of condolence from the temporary acting Rector (“facente funzioni”) of the University of Pavia to the Rector of the University of Catania.