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Service or market logic? The restructuring of the tertiary education system in Italy

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on a combination of research methods, this paper focuses on the issue of choice in higher education, looking in particular at “guidance practices” and how they influence the reproduction/reduction of inequality. Two aspects of the logic behind guidance practices come to light from data analysis. First, we have identified certain guidance practices associated with public universities that have high symbolic capital. Such universities commonly organize summer schools for selected high-flying students who have been particularly successful during their secondary school years. Second, we observe guidance practices based on the logic of marketing, where students are treated mainly as customers. The main message in this case is centred on the supply of services (presented through fairs, open days, campus visits, etc). These activities are not driven by students’ needs but rather by the interests of the organizations that consider their prestige as the main parameter of success. In the field of guidance as a market, “public interests”, “commercial goals” and private “interests” are often intertwined. Market and service logic thus represent different strategies in the university field. On the one hand, they operate in a sphere of structural and symbolic differences (Private/Public universities, Northern/Southern universities). On the other hand, they produce effects that not only reinforce pre-existing structural hierarchies but also symbolic ones.

Key words

Higher educational market; Guidance; University reform; Tertiary education fairs; Service logic.

Introduction

The main objective of the article is to analyse the chief phases in the restructuring of Italy’s Higher Education System (HES). Particular emphasis will be placed on the “forced” diversification process that universities are subject to, and on the increasing competition between them, taking the form of a tertiary education market that has exacerbated the historical divide between southern and northern regions and their respective universities. One of the central elements in these processes is the increasing interest in “student orientation”, which is an extensive notion involving various and at times opposing practices and devices that respond to diverging interests and incorporate the notions of guidance, orientation, consultancy, information, communication and commercial marketing¹.

We shall in fact focus on guidance activities and processes because they have gradually but inexorably become a central element fostering the change in university “space” as a whole in Italy.

In this sense we will consider guidance processes, organizations, activities, events, departments, bureaus, associations, companies as “market devices” (Callon, 2007), because in our opinion, it is

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their actions, coupled with other social or technical *dispositif*, that make the “university market” what it is today for all social actors operating within it.

This article draws on our empirical research and the interpretation of data was conducted by using the concepts of field, market, habitus, disposition, *dispositif*, *agencement* that we borrow from different theoretical frames. Our understanding of Foucault’s notion of *dispositif* and Deleuze’s concept of *agencement* also follows on from the work of Michel Callon (2013, 421-433) and Deleuze (2003, 316-325).

The first element is the relation between the notion of field and the notion of market in the educational context. As is well known, Bourdieu used the notion of field to indicate the institutionalized social space that universities in France occupy. His purpose was to show the specific logic of the functioning of this social space, the rules of play and the specific outcomes at stake. This space is also one where internal and external conflicts occur, and where both academic and social reproduction take place. It is indeed characterized by the constant tension between autonomy and heteronomy in the field: the conflict of faculties and their relationship with both the space which power holds and with external markets (Bourdieu, 1984; Pitzalis, 2002).

The transformation of secondary and tertiary educational systems in the last thirty years has led many scholars to look more closely at the concepts of field and “educational market”, in particular at their respective potential in providing a deeper understanding of educational systems and their transformations (Rawolle, Lingard, 2008).

Since the enactment of the Education Reform Act (1988) in England, the subject of the educational market has moved to the forefront of public debate (Ball, 2003). From the outset, the notion of quasi-market has taken root (Glennerster, 1991; Le Grand, 1991; Whitty, 1997), and has focused on the specific notion of ‘market’ as it is applied to the education sector. In French studies, the use of the term emerged during the nineties, in apparent opposition to the notion of field (Musselin, 2005). M. de Saint Martin has endeavoured to conceptualize this conflict by stating that the notion of market is more suited to understanding the transformation of the field of university education in a globalized area of national and international competition (de Saint-Martin, 2008). In any case, the concept of quasi-market is considered to be more suited to the analysis of local contexts where the competition between schools is more developed and where school choice is undertaken by families (Broccolicchi & Van Zanten 1997; Felouzis & Perroton, 2007; Dubet, 2007; Merle 2011). We believe that both of these the two notions merit careful consideration. First of all, the notion of market has to be viewed with caution for its implicit meanings, both theoretical and ontological, as well as for its normative (and performative) use. Second, we consider that the notion of field is useful to gain an understanding of how market logic (as a specific *agencement* of discourses, actors and “devices,”) is changing the structure of the field itself and the rules governing the competition within it. In this sense, the field is not to be understood in realistic terms but as the system of relations within it (Pitzalis, 2010). We believe it is a notion that is particularly helpful to examine the genetic (historical) dimension of social processes and to question the dynamics of social and symbolic domination; the field encompasses the market because it includes market processes.

Nevertheless, we also need conceptual tools that enable us to better understand change and creativity.

The question is: which *dispositif* has made change possible?

As discursive and technical *dispositifs*, educational policies may be considered as the expression of the heteronomy of the field. In this perspective, change is determined by the strategic behaviours that actors employ to conserve or obtain advantages from a redistribution of resources, thereby

transforming the structure of the field. Nevertheless, we think that this interpretation is somewhat lacking in its ability to explain a complexity that incorporates different logic of actions and different actors. For example, the introduction of the logic of accountability in the “university field” demands an explanation of the new dispositions it produces, both in the sense of a conversion of actors’ habits (dispositions) and of the emergence of new order between them (dis-position), creating new symbolic and social hierarchies.

The notion of Market is perhaps difficult to apply to the Italian context due to the influence of ministerial dirigisme. Nevertheless, the logic of government and administration of university systems has changed radically and demands a constant new form of mobilisation of social actors through the action of various *dispositifs* (Pitzalis, 2016). The combined action of different actors and devices (Callon, 2007) generates a market effect, one example of which is the agencies that today produce ratings and rankings.

The production of ratings – for the evaluation of university performances – is an example of the process explained by Desrozierès (2011, 2014), and regards a general change in the model of government, exemplified by the imposition on the public sector of New Public Management (NPM) and principles such as the idea of “accountability” and the related concept of “governance”. Making use of references to some of Foucault’s central concepts, English scholars have given an account of the neo-liberal modes of government whose direct form has been replaced by an indirect one founded on “the conduct of others’ conducts” and the interiorisation of constraints for subjects that have become “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Cfr. Desrozières, 2011, 349). In this sense, the imposition of NPM rules in the Italian university context has produced resistance and adaptation, but also conversions and mobilisation. The retroaction triggered by the deployment of *dispositifs* such as mensuration, classification, and evaluation has led to a transformation of the social world that was the desired objective itself: a transformation brought about by the very actions of the actors concerned. They have thus become part of a new *agencement* which comes together in a new order: rules, standards, statistics, institutions and actors. We consider a *dispositif* as being something that disposes (to order) and creates new dispositions (habits).

We share M. Callon’s exploitation of the notion of *agencement*, which involves the establishment of an order with a specific design, and implies the emergence of a new frame. Such order entails the connection and the participation of different actors (human and not-human, to use the STS jargon) whose very actions contribute to creating and to institutionalising this order. This reference seems helpful to explain how an institutionalized field may be affected by a process of change which originated externally, i.e. not in a vertical manner but through the functioning of an ensemble of *dispositifs* whose combined actions modify the role and the hierarchy of an ensemble of actors. In this case, the *agencement* modifies the space of possibilities, intertwining the semiotic sphere and the concrete action and generating new concatenations.

From a methodological standpoint, this research draws on a wide range of research methods and data.

First of all, we interviewed schoolteachers involved in managing orientation projects in order to understand the point of view of school actors contributing to the orientation processes and to detecting the accessibility of networks and how they function. Second, we undertook a content analysis of web sites dedicated to orientation and guidance. Third, we have observed and are continuing to observe different kinds of events such as student fairs (Italia Orienta in Rome, Salone dello Studente in Bari, Job & Orienta in Verona, Aster Orienta in Cagliari), university orientation events (University Open day in Milano “Bicocca”, Cagliari, Sassari, Roma “La Sapienza”); through direct observation and

shadowing, we also interviewed two managers from three of the main guidance and orientation companies. Fourthly, we interviewed both university managers responsible for orientation (Milano “Bicocca”, Cagliari, Roma “La Sapienza”, Napoli “Federico II”, Bari, Normale di Pisa and Sant’Anna di Pisa) and actors involved in the organization of fairs in order to identify the different strategies and discourses adopted by them. In this paper, we will not refer to all the cases we have studied, but will analyze some cases that we consider as paradigmatic of different ways to conceive orientation. Moreover, and conclusively, we shall give an overview of the current “panorama” of orientation fairs in Italy with the purpose of showing how this *dispositif* is pervasive and how much it is conditioning university practices and strategies and the disposition of students and, at the same time, how much it contributes to creating the emergence of a “university market”.

In this article we will focus on results from the latter two stages of our research.

1. Changing the rules of the game

In the last two decades, university and school reform has been a priority for both European institutions and international agencies. Almost every country has adopted programs to change the governance and funding of national tertiary systems. Today, there are four connected but at times conflicting main goals affecting the life of tertiary institutions:

1. The increase in the number of graduates
2. The development of student mobility
3. The pursuit of “excellence” and the internal diversification of the HEIs
4. Participation in a globalized higher education market.

The three “structural” elements underlying and affecting these processes are: 1) the rise of “global educational governance” and the role that international agencies such as OCDE play in reinforcing the symbolic and cultural domination of hegemonic countries (Goodman *et alii*, 2013); 2) the permanent and central role of the state in the construction of higher education “markets” at the national level (Charle and Soulié, 2015); 3) the radical influence of the Internet in facilitating the exchange of information and, more significantly, the development of MOOCs by dominant American universities (Taylor, 2013).

Individual countries have pursued the first and second of these goals by adopting a common framework for the introduction of three levels of qualifications in higher education as well as by developing the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). The goals of “excellence” and “global competition” have also been pursued by transforming the governance of national systems through the introduction of “quality assurance” mechanisms and the evaluation processes that legitimate a redistribution of the state budget among universities.

As in other countries, Italy has introduced reforms in the “managerial” models of HEIs, increasing the power of the University Chancellor and introducing a Board comprised of academics and stakeholders, replicating the model used by English universities. These processes have been encouraged by institutional changes (The Bologna Process), the creation of national and international rankings, and the pursuit of diversification via a differentiated allocation of resources. In cases where the choice of the indicators used for establishing “ratings” are perceived as irrelevant, and where disparities have increased as a result of political struggles in the area of bureaucracy (Vaira 2008,

2013; Turri 2015; Porta *et al.* 2015; Capano *et al.* 2016), the outcomes are often denounced as unfair by those who lose out (in general, southern universities in Italy) (Viesti 2016). For example, indicators of attractiveness or effectiveness (such as “employability rates”) – that are related overall to economic, geographic and social variables – are used as proxies to classify university “processes” and “products”.

This drive to create diversification is a political project, constructed over time using various strategies such as the diffusion of a dominant *doxa* (public sentiment and opinion). This *doxa* has long been apparent in the discourse of experts who have worked in this direction over the last forty years, denouncing the conservatism of faculty staff who have taken stands against the rationale of reformers (Vaira 2011; Moscati e Vaira 2008; Molesworth *et alii* 2009; Clark, 1977).

Thus, coerced into embracing neo-liberal policies, universities have been obliged to incorporate the demands of stakeholders, local territories, labour markets, and the market economy in general (Barone *et alii*, 2009; Neave, 2012). Assessment has become not only a keyword for quality, but also the central *dispositif* of a new form of governmentality. The upshot of this has been that the Centralist State has been transformed into an “Evaluative State”, maintaining its supervision throughout all stages in the evaluation of outputs or processes (Neave, 2012). “Legal Homogeneity” and “Evaluative State” are two opposite paradigms that characterize two different periods in the history of higher education systems (Neave and van Vught, 1991, Neave 2012).

The Old Italian university system had also created its own internal differences, e.g. regional disparities and social class inequalities. However, these were hidden under the guise of “formal” equality while presently, reforms that have changed the “rules of the game” with the explicit goal of redeploying an ever-decreasing state budget, allocating resources on the basis of evaluation criteria, indicate “diversification” as a goal (Porta *et al.* 2015).

Moreover, the Italian case shows that internal student mobility flows mainly in one direction, from South to North, and for this reason, “student mobility” is not a neutral social process (for an analyses of the process see Pitzalis and Porcu, 2015). In the last few years, the historical divide in student mobility has become wider, resulting in southern universities facing the risk of further decline and of becoming increasingly local and marginalized. Southern regions are consequently experiencing a notable drain in cultural capital.

2. Market driven changes in school to university transition

The restructuring process and commercialisation of tertiary education over the past few years have produced slow but inexorable changes, notably the emergence of new actors involved in several activities in the area of orientation and guidance. School-to-university transition has become a field in which various actors and agents struggle to impose their own legitimate definitions of the rules of the field and thus end up acting on and favouring their own interests (Bourdieu, 1984).

The chief consequence of this struggle is the conversion of a state university system into a corporate one, a multidimensional field where commercial goals and institutional assignments reign. As we shall see, “public interests”, “commercial goals” and private “interests” are often entwined, in the public and private sectors alike. Moreover, public universities have also been lured into the market logic, which may be in contradiction with their institutional or service logic. The emergence of the corporate university is today apparent in the attempt to bring business management practices to orientation and guidance processes.

Over the past three decades, certain actors have consolidated their roles in this field, making themselves increasingly indispensable. First and foremost, among these are the “educational brokers”, or mediators advising students in transition who need post-secondary orientation. They act as “mediating devices” or “go-betweens” who contribute to the organization of the educational market.

The pioneering period for this was the decade from the late eighties to the late nineties, which saw the rise of certain commercial initiatives in the academic field designed to deal with the selling of services to students. Private actors have seized on the opportunity to exploit the failures of the state university system, characterized by high dropout rates as well as by the difficulties and uncertainties created by the introduction of a *numerus clausus*. Examples of these private initiatives include the “Salone dello Studente”, an editorial initiative set up in 1987 that provides tests and courses to students preparing the entrance exam for degrees in Medicine. Another example is CEPU, a private company created in 1995, which offers private courses and tutoring in preparing university exams for students who fall behind. It has also developed programs in university orientation.

The second period, from the end of the Nineties to the present, has been characterised by three main factors:

1. The implementation of the Bologna process, which has increased university autonomy in the field of education and has led to greater differentiation and variability in the assortment of university courses, radically transforming the regulatory function of the state in the accreditation of higher education qualifications.
2. The development of a private tertiary education sector with new “universities” and “academies” offering specific vocational qualifications. These companies often operate only on-line, seeking to compete with the traditional university system;
3. The creation of international and national university rankings, designed to provide an orientation and guidance service for the public but at the same time have developed as a commercial enterprise. Rankings serve not only to direct students’ choices but also to make people see the idea of choice as a necessity and a rational investment. Indeed, “indicators” put more emphasis on the viability of education as a family investment rather than on the university rankings *per se*.

The combination of the above factors has created the cultural and organizational conditions that have transformed university education into an educational market.

In the first part, we introduced the notion of the “Evaluative State”, noting how it has brought about a transformation in the mechanisms of regulation. These changes have compelled universities to re-organize and re-think their objectives and these process have generated a radical change in the relationship between universities and their “clients”.

For example, until a few years ago, students falling behind could be considered an “economic resource” for universities, since they would continue to pay their fees anyway. However, the Ministry of education is now using dropout rates as an indicator for assessing the quality of the learning processes in all universities, allocating fewer public funds to those with higher dropout rates.

The upshot is that the quality of students and their careers has now become a crucial factor for universities.

On the other hand, the reduction in the enrolment rate in universities in general indicates the existence of a growing and fiercer competition in the field of tertiary education. Furthermore, the point at which supply and demand meet has become an area of intervention for various actors who

must deal with pressures and tensions arising from conflicting interests. Indeed, a professional market has developed to offer services regarding school-university transition. Different kinds of specialists offer their particular expertise and students and universities are transformed into clients of these agents specialising as mediators. Also, within universities themselves, there are now offices providing career guidance and advice.

Nonetheless, it is the State that remains the dominant actor through its assessment systems and apparatuses; it produces most of the data that other actors must use to produce rankings. In fact, what our observations have shown is that institutional actors, that is universities and public administrations, are not merely external actors but in a way have become “clients” of these intermediary organisations, and have effectively been co-opted into the logic of higher education markets, thereby contributing to their development.

3. Service logic vs. market logic in the field of “Orientation”

The new framework outlined above serves to explain why guidance and orientation have become central *dispositifs* affecting university life. The two central issues at stake are on the one hand, that universities need to increase their ability to compete for and to attract and enrol students, viewed as “clients” (Pitzalis, 2012); on the other hand, that they must ensure students do not drop out or fall behind with their studies (Vaira, 2007).

In order to accomplish these goals, universities have established orientation activities (such as Open Days, Student Fairs etc.), commercially promoting their teaching activities and courses. They also use others “tools” – such as aptitude tests, career tests, psychometric testing – designed to guide student choice on the basis of topography, student “dispositions” (profiles) and “motivation”.

Also, as a result of the need for more organized orientation, a number of management positions have been created for university central Administration staff, and new management criteria have been established to facilitate reaching new organizational and administrative goals. Among the experts in various areas of specialization who have been called upon to apply their know-how in this emerging market, we find the “orientation counsellors” whose scientific and deontological credentials lie in psychology. Their professional discourse is centred on the interests of the person, and they position themselves decidedly within the “service dimension”, although they effectively act in a professional market. We find the “inspiring principles” of this logic in EU texts, such as in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (EU 2001). Furthermore, the development of higher education as a service industry (Shank *et alii*. 1995, p. 101) has brought to light the role that marketing professionals can play in increasing the market share of academic institutions.

The following analyses focuses on two kinds of orientation activities:

1. In-house activities, such as general meetings organized by the University for secondary school students (open days for schools) or more targeted and specific activities such as *summer schools* for selected students.
2. External activities, such as events organised in secondary schools to provide specific information through the presentation of university courses and explanations of enrolment procedures, the organization of the academic calendar, etc. Some faculties may organize

seminars or lectures focused on the specific scientific content of courses; furthermore, universities take part in external “commercial” events such as student fairs and orientation meetings organized by external actors to provide educational and professional guidance.

Our main focus will be the evolving relationship between schools and universities, both of whom are “interested in”, and institutionally committed to, effective orientation policies. Firstly, how can schools and universities best form liaisons and establish useful relationships? Second, how can they establish stable networks? To answer these two questions, we selected some local schools in Sardinia as samples and drew a map of their networks vis-à-vis the Italian Universities towards which Sardinian students are mostly attracted. We then tried to establish whether and to what extent these institutional networks influence the educational choice and job-related destiny of the students concerned.

In this article, we focus on the guidance activities of four universities. Although the orientation activities they organise are similar (for example “open days”) these activities are centred on different strategies and rhetoric. The first two are the Scuola Normale di Pisa and the Scuola Sant’Anna di Pisa (these schools were created on the model of French “École normale”); the second pair are two “generalist” public universities, the “La Sapienza” in Rome and the University of Cagliari in Sardinia. Members of the administrative staff for orientation were interviewed at each of these universities and in the case of Scuola Sant’Anna di Pisa and University “La Sapienza” in Rome, we were also able to interview the teaching staff involved in guidance services.

Any action conducted in an institutional framework tends to be characterised by the customer-oriented discourse of institutional actors. We detected two separate rhetorical styles influenced either by a “service centred logic” or a commercial “market logic”. The former highlights students’ personal “interests”, while the latter focuses on the customer as a client. Every university adopts a different combination of the two logics that coexist in the practices and in the discourse of university orientation staff. Nevertheless, the relationship between these logics is, in our opinion, fundamentally antagonistic, due to their potentially discordant role in the reproduction or redefinition of the structure of the field and its principle of classification.

Our hypothesis is that the prevalence of a service or a market logic may depend on a university’s position in national (and global) university fields, as is the case for the elitist public universities (the Scuola Normale di Pisa) compared to public universities in general in Italy.

3.1 Performing excellence. The service logic.

Scuola Sant’Anna di Pisa (SSAP) and of Scuola Normale di Pisa (SNP) (hereafter, AS - Academic Schools) are specific Italian HEIs. Modelled on the French model of École Normale Supérieure, these higher education “AS” are highly selective and enjoy a solid reputation among Italian cultural, academic and political elites. However, notwithstanding their prestigious status, they still engage in orientation activities, such as open days, using marketing and communication strategies (such as the production of flyers, web pages and participation in orientation fairs) as do other less illustrious universities. Nevertheless, these AS are keen to publicise activities such as their *summer schools*, a two-week training programme for a limited number of talented high-flying school students chosen by school principals on the basis of rigorous academic criteria.

The experience of summer schools is a revealing indicator of the difficulty faced in forming a constructive relationship between schools and universities. In fact, schools do not show great interest in the “exit” orientation of their students, but are instead more focused on attracting ‘clients’ from middle schools. Furthermore, school-to-university guidance is often limited to supplying information through the school website, concerning higher educational provision at regional or national universities. SSAP orientation activities do not aim to assess students’ aptitudes, abilities and competences in order to guide them in their higher education choices. Therefore, since it is difficult for principals to select and guide properly, they normally follow the recommendations of teachers and/or parents’:

We do not have a structured relationship with secondary schools. Generally, students do not talk to a guidance supervisor or to the Principal; they discuss their future with their schoolteachers. For example, the philosophy professor who might say “you are really good at Philosophy, so you should try to get into Sant’Anna or Normale” (orientation manager, SSAP).

At the end of the Summer School, students are asked to say how they found out about the summer activity. Most of the time, it is the school, their schoolteachers and their family (through word-of-mouth), who orientate them. (orientation manager, SNP).

Orientation managers have realised that students who take advantage of these activities benefit from “hot knowledge” (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Slack *et alii* 2014), given to them by teachers and parents who are themselves university graduates. This is a well-known self-generating model that testifies to the establishment of reputational capital that self-perpetuates itself through a network of teachers or families who act spontaneously as mentors.

Such informal “guidance networks” rely on the mobilization of the students’ family’s relational resources or the teacher’s chain of contacts. If students show interest and potential, the Principal or the guidance supervisor set these contacts and resources in motion and start the application procedure for the summer school.

Orientation Managers contrast their “focused” orientation to the “extensive” type of orientation provided elsewhere.

In the past, we participated in orientation fairs, but now less so, as we no longer have sufficient available resources to spend on things we do not actually need. We don’t aim to attract the masses, as do generalist universities. Our purpose is to attract students that we know can succeed in the admission exam. The goal is to enrol those who deserve to be admitted (orientation manager, SSAP).

Our activity is not marketing. It’s not a call to enrol students, or a promotion campaign that other universities, both public and private, engage in. Our orientation activity has a service logic (orientation manager, SNP).

In these statements, SNP’s orientation managers clearly state their position in the national field of higher education. Their prestige frees them from the “necessity” of selling themselves, and exonerates them from any “mercenary” motivated interests, unlike non-selective universities, who are obliged to engage in market-like promotional activities.

Summer schools do not serve to present and promote the SNP; their courses and activities are devised to give a broad overview of university life and the world of research. Eminent scholars from Italian and foreign universities are invited to give lectures – 3-4 lessons/day on a wide range of

subjects. The orientation manager of SNP says: “The aim of the summer school is more to disorient than to guide prospective students”, i.e. to introduce the students to the complexity of university knowledge.

Therefore, their orientation activities are planned according to a pre-determined symbolic strategy. They manage their reputation capital, as they draw – without the need to attract – students with proven academic qualities who come to them thanks to networks constructed by cultural proximity or established through the creation of social capital. We observed for example, that the secondary schools interested in these orientation activities had often previously succeeded in national school competitions, such as the Maths Olympiads which is promoted by the Ministry for Universities and organized by the *Unione Matematica Italiana* with the collaboration of SNP. Factors such as this help create cooperative networks arising from mutual knowledge and recognition, in other words social capital. Secondary schools and teachers alike increase their interest thanks to the credit they may acquire through forming relationships with higher standing institutions and they may use the social capital created to guide students.

In addition, during the summer school, the assistance of SNP students reveals the communitarian spirit of their academic life, which differentiates this institution from other public universities.

[*The student*] She lives here, in continuous contact with her fellows, from other subject areas as well, in a relationship of constant dialogue, exchange and mutual assistance. The Administrative staff are available to supply any information or respond to any request, but the very core of the Orientation activity is this sort of spontaneous tutoring. This is the life they live here, it's their home for almost five years. Naturally, we become a family. We help each other (Orientation manager, SNP).

Summer schools exemplify a model of cultural authority and are expected to enact an experience of the communitarian spirit that is a key part of the daily life of their students, in stark opposition to the oft-cited image of hazy university life elsewhere.

Finally, placing emphasis in their rhetoric on a “service logic” is also a way of obtaining state funds that are not only used for summer schools but also for experimental projects aimed to lower school dropout rates. SAP, for example, is involved in a national project directed at deserving students from disadvantaged families. Sardinian schools involved in the project included technical institutes. In this case, a different kind of summer school was set up, designed *ad hoc* for the specific needs of these students, who were not considered as “recruitment material”, as stated by one informer:

Put bluntly, if we had to follow the selection criteria for summer schools these students would not qualify. This brings us back to the initial problem of the social and cultural gap. In fact, their standard is lower even if they were identified as brilliant students within their schools (Orientation manager, SSAP).

These activities are carried out in collaboration with any kind of secondary school including technical ones, even though the probability that a student from a technical school will enrol at the SAP is very low. Through them, the universal spirit of universal selection based on cultural and academic excellence can be promoted without altering the elite status of the institution.

3.2 Reshaping the image of universities: the role of open days

In educational markets, “communication” is considered to be a quantifiable asset used as an indicator of quality in academic institutions. This is the case of the ranking tables published by CENSIS (2015), a *dispositif* that focuses stakeholders’ attention on “brand identity”, i.e. “the creation of a coordinated image and the realization of channels and tools to carry it forward” (p. 9). Specifically, quantifying means the evaluation of the contents and the functionality of web sites.

Communications are devised not just to promote educational activities, but also to convey a clear picture of what the academic mission and university culture and values should entail.

The central position that communication can help a brand achieve has an important effect in the orientation process (i.e. a “retroaction effect”, cfr. Desrosières, 2014), both in the construction of web sites for the purpose of providing guidance and in the organization of “open days”, the focus of our inquiry.

Both in Cagliari and Rome, communication plans for organizing “open days” involve various factors such as “media relations” and “media contact”, graphic design and preparation of advertising material, marketing and preparation of exhibition stands. Moreover, every university department indicates a delegate responsible for the content of the advertising brochure and the presentation of the undergraduate courses offered by the local university. It also indicates which professors and students will participate in the public presentation of the undergraduate courses. Central university administration offices coordinate these activities and are responsible for their material execution. The University of Rome “La Sapienza” guidance staff are supported by their communications department.

In addition to its “marketing function”, the “open day” also serves as an occasion for collecting data on participating schools and students. The object of the survey was to identify the social and educational profiles of participants and to discover their study preferences. Moreover, the level of satisfaction of this activity is also measured and evaluated.

Students can register directly on the web-site. In this way, we retain their personal details and their email address. This system is called a “Communication builder”: it realizes communication systems with a targeted group of people in our system. In so doing, we can send a feedback request to our students who give us their opinions about the orientation days (Orientation Manager, University of Cagliari).

These data-collecting devices contribute to transforming the open day into a consumer event. Students are asked to evaluate the clarity of “orientation” speakers during the presentation of courses, as well as the communicative competence of teaching staff.

Moreover, teaching staff are called upon to take an active part in embracing consumer logic, which “implies that the desires of the customer reign supreme (‘customer sovereignty’) and that the customer should be easily satisfied” (Potts, 2005 p. 54). Molesworth *et alii.* (2009) consider this to be the inevitable outcome of the transformation of the HES in “a market addressing consumer ‘needs’ rather than a public good addressing learners’ needs”. The implementation of such a model implies that among the institutional tasks that teachers have, a primary one is to respond to the demands of the student as a client (Vaira 2011), an approach that does not always find consensus among all faculty members. The order of discourse produced by Managerialism is in contrast with the roots of traditional academic values that tended to focus more on the idea of a disinterested service and commitment (Freidson 2001, Pitzalis, 2002). The competition for gaining and maintaining student share in the educational market is the focal element of this discourse and imbues it with its power of conviction. It is a market logic imposed in such a way as to classify institutional choices, consumer preference and relate the activity of faculty members to this. The organization of communication for

open days is an example of the conflict between different groups and may manifest itself at department or faculty level. On the one hand are scholars that dominate the scene because they have a leading position in the administration of undergraduate/graduate courses, departments and the faculty. They are committed to the administration and organization of university life and espouse – explicitly or implicitly – the dominant managerial discourse, some because of an ideological adhesion to it, others because it is considered as unavoidable, as a result of their investment in and commitment to academic and administrative power. Their aim is to gain symbolic status and create material resources. On the other hand there are scholars who criticize this evolution, who are labelled as “resistant to change” (Van Zanten, 2008; Pitzalis, 2002) and who often remain in the margins because overshadowed by both the administration and the symbolic order.

In the following abstract, the delegate of one department criticizes his colleagues because they consider it essential to simplify academic and specialist language, making it more student friendly. The issue at stake here is that some staff are instinctively suspicious of those with new managerial and communication competences.

I fear that there is too much resistance... They don't want to acknowledge that a part of the faculty staff has already acquired a professionalization in the field of communication and guidance. (Faculty delegate for guidance, University of Rome “La Sapienza”).

This adjustment of academic discourse has also been a consequence of the strategy to employ university students as “emissaries” of the university. These student “ambassadors” (Slack *et alii* 2014) help decode information, producing “warm knowledge” (Hutchings 2003), which is the outcome of “chance meetings” with people who are seen to be “just like me” (Slack *et alii* 2014, p. 220). In this sense, it is quite the same as “hot knowledge” produced by acquaintances.

Our observations on communication and guidance during the open days were especially focused on the activities carried out at the stands and in conferences for the presentation of undergraduate courses.

Every department/faculty had its own stand where information materials were displayed for customers. Exhibition stands may be organised in a variety of ways, e.g. two or more students and a professor as a controller.

When a school student approaches the desk, the first interlocutor is always the university student. The professor listens and participates when he considers that he has to provide additional information. Moreover, he may intervene if he considers that the conversation is becoming too informal or too focused on the personal experience of the university student (especially if the school student asks “How did you get on?”).

The information brochure is – first and foremost – centred on two dominant discourses: 1) student mobility (the Erasmus program) with a seductive narration of an “experience abroad”; 2) the connection between higher education and the work market, which relates to the field of competition between faculties.

Data collected by Almalaurea, a consortium of 64 universities, regarding the career opportunities that certain degree programs are likely to lead to, is used to produce information packages by some universities, especially programmes in the field of applied sciences. Indeed, Almalaurea provides an important orientation and classification service for Italian universities and through delivering statistics and information, it has become a significant *dispositif* in developing the market. It supplies

detailed reports at both the macro-level, analysing competition among universities, and at the micro-level, which looks at competition between sectors and scientific areas.

The narrative constructed by the university orientation staff reflects the tension between each degree course's market value and its cultural and educational value (Bourdieu 1984). First of all, it is a narrative that focuses on selection criteria, taking into account the social prestige attached to a field of studies, also linked to a particular occupational stratification system. The information provided during the fairs, both in the stands and during the conferences of presentation, targets students from specific social and school backgrounds.

Departments that form part of the "intellectual pole" – in particular Mathematics, Physics, Arts and Philosophy – construct narratives that focus on their academic prestige, emphasizing that students may face certain difficulties if they have not benefited from the right school culture (i.e. academic schools). Departments and faculties more associated with the "mundane pole" (Engineering, Economics, Law) focus on expectations more closely linked to achievement and "success", defined especially in terms of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, during these activities, departments and faculties choose their own audience by projecting an image that they know their target audience will respond to.

Our focus here is on the discursive register used in presenting degree courses in two disciplines: physics and engineering. In the first case, through the technique of shadowing, we found that students coming from non-academic backgrounds and who therefore had lower academic achievement, were somewhat discouraged. In physics in particular, university students involved in guidance activities showed genuine concern that school students coming from a technical or professional school program, were making choices that were "too ambitious". Furthermore, it was noted that during their presentations, teachers neglected to give information on job opportunities outside the academic context, emphasising only cultural and pedagogical traditions focused on knowledge, capacity of analysis and research methods (Quassoli, 1997). In short, the attractiveness of physics programs lay in the "transferability" of fundamental scientific knowledge to other fields.

On the other hand, the degree program in engineering emphasizes the usefulness of this qualification in the work market. For example, during "open days" at Rome's "La Sapienza" University students are keen to point out employment opportunities ("as soon as I finished my bachelor's degree in [Information Technology] I immediately found work ... look at me, they are still calling me, so you're on the market, you understand?"). Also, during "open day" presentations in Cagliari, professors focused their attention on "what is an engineer", especially with regard to the needs of local industrial production. The connection between knowledge and labour markets is clearly rooted in professional cultures. Engineering is one of those disciplines defined as "hard-applied", the nature of knowledge is proactive, pragmatic, related to the physical control of the environment and tending to the development and implementation of productive projects (R. Moscati, 1997; Sarfatti Larson 1977; Calcagno 1996).

Such communication strategies form clearly defined symbolic and social boundaries generating and generated by the homology between students' cultural and educational background and the professional habitus of academic disciplines.

4. Orientation Fairs as an "expression" of the market.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, the network of contacts between schools and universities has been reinforced by external orientation events organized by free-standing agencies that have a founding role in the creation of the “higher education markets”. Among these, “Fairs” have become central components in creating contemporary higher education space (Van Zanten & Legavre, 2014). In our observations, institutional actors, universities and public administrations are not only external actors but have become “clients” of these organisations, having been effectively co-opted into the logic of the market, thereby contributing to its development. In recent years, public administrations have developed and expanded fields of action where public resources can be committed, the objective being to legitimate the actions of both public administrations and political actors. The websites of the companies that organize orientation fairs (such as Job & Orienta, Italia Orienta, Campus Orienta, Aster, ecc.) use a wide range of institutional symbols, from national ministries to regional and local administrations. The presence of institutional “symbols” sanctions the commitment of political actors and administrators in what is seen to be an activity of considerable public utility.

The key point in our analyses is to show how educational brokers are in fact accentuating previously existing differences. In particular, our analysis of university participation at orientation fairs, revealed a clear gap in levels of commitment between south/north and private/public universities.

The methodological approach employed was to reconstruct the panorama of orientation events held in Italy in the academic year 2015/2016 and to measure the participation of Italian public universities (n. 67) and private universities (n. 30). We constructed a database, collecting and cross-checking the information on the web pages of the universities with lists of exhibitors in each fair (44 fairs organized by 21 agencies). In most cases, private companies organize these events, though we also surveyed fairs organised by public institutions. We contacted two of the most important freestanding Italian agencies, “Italy Orienta” and “Campus Orienta” and interviewed the founder of the former and the head of the communications office of the latter.

Counting how many times each public and private universities took part in fairs, we cross-checked this data taking into account both the university’s geographical location (North West, North East, Centre or South) and the site where the fair took place (Table 1).

Tab. 1 Number of presences of the public and private Universities at orientation fairs, by Italian macro-region

	North-west	North-East	Center	South
Public North-West Universities	31	8	3	26
Private North-West Universities	34	16	16	32
Public North-East Universities	3	42	5	20
Private North-East Universities	0	2	0	0
Public Center Universities	0	8	36	46
Private Center Universities	3	6	22	35
Public Southern Universities	0	4	5	61
Private Southern Universities	2	2	4	13

A first point to note is that most fairs take place in southern regions, because these are the main catchment areas for all Italian universities.

Focusing on the presence of public universities (figures 1,2,3,4), a further striking factor is that fairs organized in northern regions rarely, if at all, host southern public universities and in general no southern public universities participate in fairs outside their own region. For example, in fairs

organized in the two islands (Sardinian and Sicily), numerous north and centre universities were present but none from the southern regions.

The stronger presence of southern universities in terms of the number of fairs organized in southern Italy (i.e. 61, see fig. 4) is also due to the fact that more events are organised there. For example, the fair known as the ‘Salone dello studente’, organized by Campus Orienta and promoted by the publishing house Class Editori, Milan), operates in five locations (Pescara, Naples, Bari, Catania and Lamezia), only two in north-west sites (Milan and Monza), one in the northeast (Rimini) and two in the centre (Florence and Rome). In southern regions, there are also private institutions specialized in providing guidance services *in* the south but not *for* the south. One example is the Sicilian Association Aster, which set up the first fair “Orienta Sicilia” and later expanded its activities to other southern regions: “Orienta Sardinia” and “Orienta Calabria”. Another example, the Neapolitan foundation called “Italian Orienta” organizes the “Orienta Sud” fairs.

The higher number of fairs that take place in southern regions is simply due to the increasing competition among northern universities to attract students from the southern-customer area. On the other hand, southern public universities are forced to adopt defensive strategies, in order to maintain their traditional local clientele. Southern universities do not compete in other areas because of their lack of prestige, founded and reinforced by the symbolic and cultural domination of centre and northern towns and regions.

Fig. 1 Number of presences of the public North-West Universities at orientation fairs, by Italian macro-region

Fig. 2 Number of presences of the public North-East Universities at orientation fairs, by Italian macro-region

Fig. 3 Number of presences of the public Central Universities at orientation fairs, by Italian macro-region

Fig. 4 Number of presences of the public Southern Universities at orientation fairs, by Italian macro-region²

The university of Cagliari only participates at the Orienta Sardegna fair (Aster association, which has no other competitors in Sardinia). One witness commented that the problem is not only the cost of the participation in fairs (participation in fairs in their own towns carries no cost), but also because it is difficult to reverse the traditional and current trend for students to migrate towards North-West Italian universities. Defensive strategies are justified for this reason.

Our university educational programs are quite similar to those you find in other Italian universities, for this reason, it is relatively difficult for a student to come here and enrol in Communication Sciences courses. Our limitation is our insularity since we are a regional university (orientation manager, University of Cagliari).

As regards the central Italian regions, universities from Tuscany (especially the University of Pisa and the University of Siena) and those from ‘Le Marche’ (in particular the University of Urbino) do generally participate in southern fairs. However, universities from the Lazio region tend to be underrepresented, with the exception of Rome “La Sapienza” university, which in recent years has invested in marketing and communications to reverse the decline in their enrolment rate.

Before, the strategy was to stay in our territory ... in recent years we have been trying more to participate in nationwide events. It is the university management that has set us this goal. (Communications manager, University of Rome “La Sapienza”).

² Figures have been realized by Sergio Loi (Dipartimento di Scienze Sociali e delle Istituzioni).

In North-East regions, universities are mainly involved in fairs organized by the school community with the support of local public authorities (regional or provincial education offices).

These meetings often take place in schools themselves, their goal being to publicise the regional higher education courses available and thereby increase the transition rate from school to university. In the north-east, transition rates have traditionally been lower than the Italian average due to the large number of small and medium-sized enterprises (Montanaro e Palmerio 2011, p. 712) who readily employ young people with vocational and technical secondary school qualifications. This is a further explanation as to why universities work to attract students from southern regions (figure 2).

Let us now observe the participation of private universities in fairs organized by geographic area. The distribution is similar to what we observed for public universities (table 1)³. Nevertheless, there is an overrepresentation of private universities in all the fairs in every area, but north-western private universities have a nation-wide recruitment strategy, whereas other private universities focus more on their local areas.

The mapping of fairs in this way shows a clear asymmetry in the distribution of information. The dominance of private or public north-western universities reinforces the distribution structure of economic resources and power in the Italian academic field.

Following Van Zanten e Legavre (2014), fairs support and accentuate symbolic violence because they do not merely have a commercial purpose but also convey new representations of the university and of its institutional tasks through specific communication strategies such as the ‘packaging’ of products and services (Cochoy 2002). As noted above, educational brokers have become “cultural intermediaries”, in Bourdieusian terms, a group of tastemakers and need creation merchants (Bourdieu 1984; Maguire & Matthews, 2014; De Feo, 2016).

Companies organizing orientation fairs (foundations or editorial groups) also sell other ancillary services such as advertising services, training courses in the field of counselling, research and database compilation regarding student preferences, orientation training and professional publications etc. The involvement of university academic staff legitimates these activities as they are seen to be a guarantee of universal values and have public interest as a priority.

The editorial group Class editori promotes the project “Voice of Youth” involving a research team from the University of Rome. The goal is to investigate university choice with an annual survey involving students that participate in the Campus Orienta fairs, while the “Italia Orienta” foundation has a guidance committee formed by university scholars from universities in Rome, Milan, Naples and others. The task of this committee is to guarantee a rigorous scientific approach to the orientation project and to uphold its public ethos (such as in the Orienta Sud and the Young International Forum fairs).

All these initiatives, however, convey a clear and precise message that ultimately influences student preferences: i.e. that the fundamental task of universities is to contribute to economic competitiveness; they are not only producers of innovation and knowledge, but are an integral part of the productive system, to which they must “adequately” contribute (Vaira 2011). On this note, one manager of a fair affirmed: “Our paradigm is: What I study, what I will become”.

In sum, all actors in the field are producers of symbolic values and are agents of the legitimation of a specific political and cultural discourse (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, they play a clear role in the production, diffusion and application of accepted social norms.

³ Except for the North East where there is only one private university, the Free University of Bolzano.

5. Conclusions

This article sheds new light on the process of change affecting the university field in Italy. On the one hand, it has focussed on the action of different *dispositifs* whose actions originate outside the field:

1. Ratings and rankings serve to categorise and classify with a view to facilitating the orientation process. In reality, their fundamental function is to re-define the university system as a hierarchic space of competition and objective differences. Far from having a purely descriptive role, they have a performative one, which has emerged as a powerful instrument of symbolic violence.
2. Promoted by external actors, the brokerage work carried out in university fairs creates new concatenations of actors and meanings; through their actions they create a symbolic and material space where demand and supply meet.

On the other hand, we analysed the work of various actors, from different Italian universities and schools, all of whom are engaged in the orientation process. First, these actors produce discourses and actions that are coherent with their position in the field; second, through forming connections to the actions of external *dispositifs*, their own contribution to the resulting effect of these actions is reinforced.

What orientation and guidance services do is to produce a specific *agencement* that gives universities (and their actors) new roles demanding their mobilisation within new models of action.

We identified two main logics and types of rhetoric behind guidance practices which have merged and blurred in everyday practices. We have endeavoured to separate them for analytical purpose.

First, we observe guidance practices based on the logic of marketing, where students are viewed mainly as customers. The main message in this case is the supply of services (presented during open days, campus visits, etc.). These activities are not driven by students' needs but rather by the interests of the organizations, which consider their own attractiveness as their main parameter of success. In the field of orientation in HES, "public interests", "commercial goals" and private "interests" are often intertwined.

Second, we also identified selective guidance practices implemented by institutional actors who have assumed the role of "talent scouts". These practices are mainly associated with public universities that have high symbolic capital. Such universities generally organize summer schools for highly selected students, i.e. those who have demonstrated superior academic skills during their secondary school years. The main goal of summer schools is not to advertise specific university programmes but to provide students with a broad overview of what they will experience and the problems they may encounter working in the world of universities, research and in professional or institutional fields. In so doing, elite academic schools take a dominant position within the university field and display a service-dominant logic. These academic schools are already prestigious enough and have no need to attract students. In this sense, the rhetoric of "service logic" that governs their guidance activities is mainly a symbolic strategy. It is precisely this misrecognition of the "interests", this *denegation* of "academic markets" that perpetuates, protects and maintains their privileged position in the academic market itself. What we observe here is how social class determines the logic of selection, since those students selected are invariably endowed with a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 1987).

“Market logic” has its selection bias as well, given that the information presented in promoting university programs targets students with specific profiles.

Market and service logics represent diverse but not opposing strategies in the university field. On the one hand, they are produced in a field with evident structural and symbolic differences (private/public universities, northern/southern universities); on the other hand, they produce their effects on both symbolic hierarchies and on the structure of the field through the re-shaping of pre-existing structural differences.

In conclusion, a project that aims to nurture and develop a higher educational market is consistent with the goal of creating a leading ‘group of excellence’ among universities in Italy, which can hopefully compete in a globalized educational world. Nonetheless, it is taking place in a context of structural regional inequalities, a process very likely to accentuate both social and regional inequalities. This hypothesis questions educational policies establishing a competitive agenda on a historical framework of structural disparities (Pitzalis, Porcu, 2015).

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