

TOOLS IN PRACTICE. GENEALOGY TO TACKLE ACADEMIC INEQUALITIES

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Abstract

This paper introduces the method of genealogy to analyse the government of disability in Italian higher education contexts. Looking at how power and discourses construct disability within the academic setting, I problematize the truths that, throughout the last century, brought disabled subjects to be part of the mainstreamed education. Ethnographic work within a specific university milieu situated my research in the present of disabled students. That provides me with the access to tactics and power relations in specific and local settings, problematising the use of standardised criteria and classificatory systems. In depth-interviews with disabled students allow me to look for those technologies of power that work on the bodies and in the souls of disabled subjects, enabling me to delve into disabled students' subjectivities.

Seeing disability as a complex social function (Foucault, 1978; Peter and Fendler, 2003), the study shows how relations of power within precise historical, political and economic factors fashion the ways we are governed and we govern ourselves.

1. Genealogy and Disability in Italian education

... There are environmental and psychological barriers to the integration of people with disabilities, but there are also significant financial, social and economic barriers which are fundamental and inescapable.

(Walker and Townsend, 1981, 16)

From the 1970s these truths about the condition of disabled people throughout Western societies scattered a series of on-going debates not only within disabled activist movements, but also among disabled and non-disabled scholars. The increasing awareness about human, social and civic rights, and the stirring of disability activism, feminism and civil rights (Shakespeare, 2006), was putting more emphasis on the role played by national governments and international bodies in guaranteeing access to basic and legitimate rights. Alongside these liberal-inspired cultural and historical contingencies, the increased access to education of disabled people was paired with the progressive dismantling of mental asylums and special schools.

The integrative/inclusive attitude towards disabled people came to be the imperative driving legislative and policy-making processes both in terms of improving the accessibility of spaces, and of making society more open to appreciate diversity and diverse conditions of life.

Many Italian scholars have focussed on retracing the laws (1948-1992) issued by a pioneering Italian government (D'Alessio, 2011; Mancini, 2005; Schianchi, 2008), the first government to mainstream education regardless of any physical or mental condition (Law 517/77). However, the traditional historiography of these scholars conceives facts as part of an ongoing flow, a linear and predictable historical

development, whereby social improvements and ameliorations are led by progressing and enlightened scientific knowledge. Foucault provides a different approach to historical enquiry, called genealogy, which draws our attention to historical discontinuities, reversals and contingencies, and suggests that 'linear causality and narrative of progress, continuity and evolution are not the most profitable methodological tools of analysis' (Hook, 2001, p.21). Genealogy gears educational research with 'a new framework', Marshall (1990, p.22) remarks, 'a new framework – not for studying the past, but for assessing the present.'

My study is placed within this interstice, looking at the present for those contingencies and historical discontinuities that enabled 'integration and not something else [to] come to be the dominant discourse within special education' (Corbett, 1996, p.225); with a specific focus on higher education policies and practices. The purpose of my research is not to construct a linear relationship of progress between disability and education. Rather the aim is to provide an analysis of the deployment of power and knowledge within Italian university, fashioning disability as a problem to be managed and governed.

2. Genealogy: overview of the tool.

Foucault, rather than adopting a traditional investigative approach to history, proposes a Nietzschean method of enquiry. The insight Foucault takes from Nietzsche concerns the nature of truth, which cannot be detached by the process of its production. The role that the philosopher is expected to fulfil is to criticise and debunk those phenomena which, through practices, have become objective truths. As Tamboukou (1999, 202) points further out, 'genealogy is concerned with the processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth and knowledge are produced, in what Foucault calls the discursive regime of the modern era'. Foucault expands the concept of genealogy into a sort of counter-history of madness, punishment, sexuality, and subjecthood. By discrediting the idea of an inner essence of things, demurring a progression and linearity of their history, his purpose is to shed a light on those mundane practices, demeanours, feelings, ethics, taken for granted practices, which we tend to feel are without history. By the means of Foucaultian genealogy, we are not looking for the origins of objects, as 'what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity' (Foucault, 1977, 142). This is the reason why Foucault calls genealogy the 'history of the present'. The process is reversed, and it springs from the problematization of what is in our very present, 'a history of problems and practices ... an analytics of power' as Ball (2013, p.27) puts it. Koopman (2007) elegantly joins objects and practices in a working definition of problematization, remarking how the study of the object problematized opens up for thinking about what constitutes our condition and how we constitute our condition. Drawing from this working definition, the history of the object of disability in Italian education requires problematizing disability within a wider social context of policies and practices. It entails looking at the present condition of disabled students at university in order to rethink present educational inequalities through rewriting their history.

3. Power and knowledge: a situated approach

Bacchi (2012, p.2) underpins how Foucault ‘selects his sites – his “problematizing moments” – by identifying times and places where he detects important shifts in practices’. This is because of the very instable and circumstantial nature of his interpretation of power, which he defines as being ‘the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate’ (Foucault, 1978, p.92-3). Power is not plain oppression, it ‘is not an institution, not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with’ (1978, p. 93). Subjects are not oppressed by power, they are vehicles of a productive power. This productive nature manifests in the struggle over power, not reducible to an oppressor-oppressed relationship. ‘In order to be a relation where power is exercised’ Mills (2003, p.40) highlights, ‘there has to be someone who resists.’ Power generates behaviours and resistances; individuals are the places where power is both enacted and resisted.

As Foucault (1978, p.93) continues with his definition of power ‘it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society’. Disability is the strategical situation I am making reference to here, and the Italian society constitutes the context explored. Contributing to Foucault’s aim of creating ‘a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (Foucault, 1982, p.208), I investigate the ways through which power objectifies disability in university practices, and makes disabled students subjects through its techniques. As he continues, the objective is to ‘discover the point at which these practices became coherent reflective techniques with definite goals, the point at which a particular discourse emerged from these techniques and came to be seen as true’ (Foucault, 1980 in Rabinow, 1984 p.7). Foucault (1982) organises these practices according to three different modes of objectification of the subject, which I will explain in details in the following paragraphs. With each of the modes he associates some technologies, whereby the subject is governed and govern him/herself.

The contingent and unstable nature of power and its production of truths are observed at work within a selected case study university. The unfolding of discourses that fashion present bodies and the institution lead me to ask myself how and why disability became a problem within Italian higher education. In order to understand this, I go back and seek for the historical conditions that allowed disability to become an object of regulation, an object of power and knowledge, and I look for these conditions to emerge within a wider educational and social context and within university in the specific context of Italy.

An ethnographic study allows me to engage with a context-bound perspective, it opens up possibilities for both emphasising the modalities ‘in which setting members construct social realities by making sense of practical issues’ (Miller and Fox, 2004 p.38) and for critically deconstructing the ‘micro-operations of power’ (Tamboukou and Ball, 2003, p.4) in context. Moreover, it provides a setting within which ‘local and immediate struggles’, as Foucault (1982b, p.780) calls them, are observed, and provides the research with ‘instances in which people are criticising the immediate conditions of their lives and the way that certain people, groups or institutions are acting on their lives’ (Mills, 2003, p.38).

Moreover, through observation techniques I show the effect of power/knowledge on the generation of truths on disability and the enactment of disability in university; they enable me to see how different discourses are present in social setting and how setting members articulate discursive practices (Miller and Fox, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews with institutional personnel and document analysis of policies and regulations explore how disability is managed, how constructed it is. How and why it is rendered object of policies and practices.

In-depth interviews with disabled students provide me with accounts of how discourses fashion subjects' souls, conducts and practices, enabling me to see how discourses subjectify disabled students and what techniques of power are deployed in the process of subjectification.

4. Objectifying disability: university practices and the disabled subject.

Foucault's philosophical endeavour is to investigate the modalities in which discourses and practices have turned human beings into subjects of a particular kind (Marshall, 1990). However, the term *subject* has for Foucault a two-fold meaning, implying being tied both 'to someone else by control or dependence', and to 'one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (1982, p.212). The subject, as Marshall (1990, p.14) perfectly highlights, 'carries the twin meaning of an active knowing subject and of an object being acted upon – a product of discourse'. Through some preliminary data from my fieldwork, still being carried out, I seek to show the dual dimension of disabled students as subjects of power/knowledge within Italian university. For doing so, I follow Foucault's modalities of objectification (1982), that is through scientific knowledge, dividing practices, and subjectification. After briefly introducing each of them, I supply evidence from both interviews' excerpts, and document analysis.

4.1 Scientific knowledge

This mode entails the production of scientific knowledge around a specific object and the development of scientific classifications. This mode of turning human being into objectified subjects stems from 'the modes of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences; for example, the objectivizing of the speaking subject in *grammaire générale*, philology, and linguistics ... [or] ... the objectivizing of the productive subject, the subject who labors, in the analysis of wealth and of economics' (Foucault, 1982, p.208). This mode materialises the necessity of creating, classifying and organising knowledge around the object under consideration. Scientific knowledge constantly opens space for new sciences to allow precise and scientific study of objects (for example criminology for the study and observation of the criminal, medicine for the investigation on the body); however, its range of action is limited by what Foucault in *The Order of Things* identifies with the modern *episteme*. The *episteme* designs the limits within which our knowledge is comprised. It sits primarily on three regimes of knowledge, regimes that set the rules around the concepts of life, labour and language. The objects or knowledge are defined within, and by, these three regimes and are observed, studied and discussed within what Foucault (1967) calls the 'human sciences'.

Making the university example, in Italy a disabled student can benefit from the disability allowance if he or she ticks the criteria imposed by the Framework Law 104/92, which refers to the ICIDH (1980), the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps. These two documents are part of what is considered as truth and knowledge about disability, interlocking knowledge from economics, medicine, and law.

4.2 Dividing practices

The second form of objectification implies dividing practices, which grid and classify disabled students. They refer to a mode of manipulation that combines a scientific discourse with practices of segregation and social exclusion (Tremain, 2001). Combining human sciences and segregating practices, the subject comes to see him/herself scientifically, setting in motion the process of subjectification and tying of the identity to outcomes of classifications and grids.

However, nowadays, dividing practices are not as evident and visible as they were sixty years ago. National and international organisations are making themselves advocates on inclusion and human rights, promoting formally and practically equality for all those groups that have been excluded and physically segregated from the civic and social arena for long time. Public spaces and institutions are progressively reshaping their architectures in order to be accessible for all; educational institutions are making themselves the first promoters of the diffusion and creation of a new culture on inclusion and tolerance. The university is one of most crucial settings entitled to create new knowledge around inclusion and to deliver new good practices for its promotion within society. Besides that, regulations and legislation are pushing for a more accessible university not just in terms of architecture but also in terms of opportunities and rates of attendance. Disabled students enjoy specific benefits and allowances in order to get access to the same opportunities of academic success of their non-disabled fellows.

The classifications used for differentiating students according to their abilities and physical conditions constitute prompt information for the management of subjects. By the means of what Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) calls 'normalising judgements', these categorisations identify classificatory practises that homogenise and classify the students, and they 'normalise' in the sense that they categorise students according to a fixed benchmark that is called the 'norm'. On an institutional level, they actively impact on the government and functionality of the disabled subject at university, especially because disability is to be considered as a category that deviates significantly from the norm.

A very effective example can be a platform that the Disability Office in concert with the Neurocognitive Rehabilitation Centre is implementing. The intent is to supply the lecturers with a grid to read before any written exam, within which dyslexic students are marked out. Thought to be a useful tool for the lecturer, disabled students come to be identified as *diverse* since the beginning and are given the chance to accord their exam criteria to their special needs.

Accounting for physically dividing and segregating practices, a student in a wheelchair provided a meaningful example during an interview. While he was

reading in a study room located in the faculty basement, a fire drill occurred. Being all the lifts deactivated, he was put in a fire-proofed room on the same level, whose existence he was previously unaware.

The two instances extracted by my preliminary data show modern examples of dividing practices. A marked roll call before the exam highlights the subjects who, before the inclusive/integrative discourse came into play, were segregated in special institutions or were not even considered as able to attend university. The impossibility of finding a fire escape becomes emblematic when considering architectures thought exclusively for able bodies.

4.3 Subjectification

Scientific knowledge and dividing practices tie the subject to a *true* self. This *true* self, Marshall (1990) explains, corresponds to a human being with beliefs about him/herself. The technologies of power, which Foucault refers to in the shaping of human beings' subjectivities, are defined here as technologies of the self. These technologies operate at the levels of body, soul, thought, and conduct (Foucault, 1988), acting as tools of power that shape their thinking and behaviours. The disabled student is both fashioned and fashions him/herself as a disabled subject, inscribing its daily routine within these specific subjectivities. They accommodate themselves within social and physical spaces; they build their comfort zone in order to fit into the social system.

An undergraduate disabled student neatly displays the interlocking of dividing practices and subjectification of disability.

M: I have been disabled for two years. I wasn't before. And it happened while I was doing the English exam. As it is a computer exam, I realised I couldn't stare at the screen, all the words were overlapping one another and I had to leave it incomplete. Thus I went to the Disability and Special Needs Office, I told them what happened during the exam and they told me that that setback occurred as I was partially-sighted. In that moment I realised I was disabled.'

'In the normalising procedures of examination and "confession" people are classified as objects' Marshall (1990, p.26) reminds us, 'and the truth about them is "revealed" to themselves'. The subject as recipient and object of regulations is constituted, and the disabled identity of the student is forged.

Another example is supplied by the test for a dyslexic student, a 23 questions test with questions ranging from 0 to 4. Students with a final score equal or above 50 are classified as dyslexic. The questions develop throughout all life-study experience of the subject, varying from any difficulty encountered in learning to read at the primary school, to their habit of reading or not newspapers on Sundays. They pervade perceptions and experiences and actively working on the student's self-definition as 'disabling subject'.

5. Conclusion. Is there another way?

Genealogical tools, when applied to the history of the subject, allow for inscribing the subject in a different history. My research can contribute to highlight the existence of other ways of being, and it can do so by showing the ways in which university turns students into disabled subjects (dividing practices such as the dyslexic text or the certification of disability to ask for benefits and specific provisions); and by pointing out the ways in which disabled students think about themselves and govern themselves as disabled. 'Maybe nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are', Foucault (1982b, p.785) remarks. Disabled students can think differently about the function of the category disability, and seek alternative ways of governing themselves and of redesigning their own identities. The undergraduate student classified as partially-sighted (M.) after the impossibility of concluding her computer exam, gears me with the perfect example

... It is a work we have to do on ourselves, and I think it is rather independent from the disability... yes to me it happened the disability, but it can happen to be a bad relationship with your parents, I think anybody has some things, some feelings which he (sic) carries within himself, which is difficult to deal with. Learning how to acknowledge them and being a bit more indulgent with ourselves sometimes is not easy, but it is a work we have to do, it is something we learn how to do, it is not innate.

This student's perspective on disability shows how subjectivities can alternatively be seen as '*process of becoming*, that focus on *what we do* rather than on *what we are*' (Ball and Olmedo, 2013 p.87).

The way in which we understand ourselves is always connected to the ways in which we are governed, Dean (2010) prompt us. Hence, via questioning our understanding both an institutional and an *individual* level, my research strives on the one hand to 'criticise the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them' (Foucault, 1974, p.171). On the other hand, to rethink subjectivities otherwise. Through an ontology of the present and of ourselves disabled students can 'explore the contemporary limits of the necessary' (Foucault, 1984, p.43), critically giving them the opportunity of going beyond them and to self-reinvent them.

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Biography

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