

“The brain drain, not only an Italian problem”

Pubblicato: Mercoledì 2 Dicembre 2009

"The brain drain is not a typically Italian phenomenon, it affects all European countries. There are no certain sources concerning the extent of this phenomenon, and the only data available is from the US Immigration Office. However, in Europe, Italy is seventh in biomedical sciences". **Renzo Dionigi, the Chancellor of Insubria University, Varese**, knows the problem of research and researchers in Italy very well. His interview comes on the very day that **the general manager of Luiss University, Pier Luigi Celli, wrote a letter to his son**, asking him to leave Italy.

"I started working in that sector in Cincinnati. I stayed in the United States for four years, and I go back very often, thanks to some connections with the Harvard Medical School. There are profound differences between their system and ours, and some of these clearly explain the research phenomenon. Their Universities can exist thanks to private foundations, that provide finance. Another aspect in their favour is the direct relationship with students and researchers. Selection takes place after personal interviews, and not after simple tests, as it does in Italy. This is sufficient to illustrate how the choice of one student rather than another can be based on the actual characteristics of the person. The purpose of the tests was to eliminate the terrible practice of recommendations, but now everything has become trivial".

But why does this brain drain continue?

"In the United States, research is very carefully organised. I'll give you a simple example: in a laboratory, there is one, or at most, two researchers working, and each of them has technicians and a secretary that carry out the bureaucratic work. In two years, results can be published, and so, the work can progress. In Italy, there are three researchers and no technicians, or any other people. This is sufficient to see how there is also a problem of roles. Then, there is still the fundamental question of funding. If we go to MIT, in Cambridge, what we first notice, apart from the size of the buildings, is the fact that each one is dedicated to a large corporation, and it is these that fund the research directly. There is a systematic relationship between the economy, education and research. In Italy, nobody takes risks, because research is a dangerous investment, it might produce great results, but it might also go down a blind alley. Finally, some large Italian companies also prefer to go directly to the United States."

Why?

"The first reason is that in the United States, taxes have been abolished on everything, so foundations and companies have an incentive to invest. Then, because there are more studies that are more developed, but here, it's a vicious circle, and if this

situation is going to change, it depends a little on us."

But with the new technologies, and with the opportunity to discover how the rest of the world works, why can't we change this situation?

"There are various reasons. I can tell you that there is resistance, also in the academic and research world, but the main reasons are those I explained before, also of an economic nature. Of course, with the advent of the Internet, a lot is changing because spreading news more quickly, exchanging information and, above all, getting access to data libraries throughout the world, means greatly simplifying the work of the researcher."

What is Insubria University doing internationally?

"We have many connections, and, keeping with the United States, for some time now, we've been using the same medical protocols as two important Boston hospitals, the Medical General Hospital and The Beth Israel Hospital. We have constant exchanges and regular meetings with them. Also thanks to a connection we have with Martin Mihm, who is the world expert on melanoma, this work has led to the creation of the Insubria International Summer School, which has organised five conferences so far. Half of the lecturers come from the Harvard Medical School, and the other half, from a number of Italian institutions. We have a high number of foreign participants."

Talking about Boston and Harvard, the US branch of Biocell for amniotic stem cell research opened a few weeks ago. Do you have any connection with them, and what do you think about this?

"I've been following this venture, and it's a positive example of what we, as Italians, can do. We are very highly regarded. On the stem cell research, I am convinced that they represent the future of medicine. As I was saying, there are always risks, but this field is really fascinating, and there have already been serious findings relating to cardiology, oncology and dermatology."

Is Insubria interested in this field?

"There are already three researchers who are working with stem cells, and we will be interested in extending our collaboration."

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