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TERTIUM NON DATUR.
THE "THIRD MISSION" AS A TOOL FOR PUBLIC LEGITIMACY:
AN AGENDA FOR THE ITALIAN GEOGRAPHY¹

Abstract - The international debate on the academic legitimacy has almost focused in the recent years on «third mission» and its evaluation as commitment to a territorial and social role of universities. This topic is of particular relevance for geographers, naturally involved in the seek for a territorial balance, and particularly stressed by reference to the social role of knowledge. A careful consideration and evaluation of the “third mission” from a geographic viewpoint – beyond its economic and entrepreneurial definition and towards a dimension of knowledge as public service and engagement – could increase academic legitimacy within the contemporary society, also through a rebalance of the evaluation system. The aim of this paper is to encourage a reflexion about the theoretical and practical role of geographers in the definition of the “third mission”, since now misunderstood or neglected with mutual damage, both to the legitimacy of territorial involvement and activity, and both to the usefulness of geographic knowledge.

¹ The paper is the outcome of the speech *Tertium non datur: The Third mission as a Tool for Public Legitimacy: A Geographical Viewpoint*, presented in the IV Congress EUGEO's Session «Ethics and geographical knowledge: Which research for which legitimacies?» (Rome, 5-7 september 2013). The text is also available at the following URL: <http://nuke.luogoespazio.info/>, with further bibliographic references, here reduced to the essential ones.

«By asking which civil servants are going to pay to access our articles, by wondering which policy-makers will struggle with our academic English and by questioning which public-sector employees are going to make the effort to translate our conclusions into policy recommendations, it become clear that we – and the system designed to evaluate us – have to value more than our bibliographic records in the Web of Science alone»².

1. Introduction

This paper originates from two different and almost contemporary sources: the publication of the Green Paper *Fostering and Measuring Third Mission in Higher Education Institutions* (May 30, 2012)³, and a mail correspondence with Gabriele Zanetto dating back to the first weeks of June 2012, when the venetian geographer was already struggling against the disease that would lead to his untimely demise on April 5th 2013. At that correspondence, and at the writings there mentioned⁴, refer the excerpt included in the paper below.

It is surprising that among the Italian geographers a reflection about the third mission in the Universities is still lacking, although a heated debate in other academic fields has occurred. This paper aims to partially fill this gap, emphasizing the role that the third mission could play in the overall renewal of our discipline, especially towards a deeper social legitimacy, a demand emerged also in the «Giornate della Geografia»'s Session *La geografia non istituzionale: gruppi, soggetti, siti*, held in Udine last 11th September 2014.

2. The (lacking) revolution of the Third Mission

The term "third mission" starts to be used in the eighties referring on the one hand to the role of public communication of science, on the other hand to the role of technology transfer and applied research. Third mission is also defined *third stream*, "third circle" of research or "problem solving research" related to the model of enterprise university and of the "Triple Helix" University-Industry-Government.

In the last decade the international debate has progressively enlarged the spectrum of its definition, and has brought clarity around this "umbrella term", reaching in the Green Paper some important results, here summarized:

² MEEUS B., SCHUERMANS N. AND DE MAESSCHALCK F., *Is there a world beyond academic geography?*, in «Area», 2011, 43, 1, p. 114.

³ The document (from now on E3M) is available at the following URL: <http://www.e3mproject.eu/docs/>. It is the final result of a triennial project on «European Indicators and Ranking Methodology for University's Third Mission», which involved 8 research centers funded by the European Commission.

⁴ ZANETTO G., *L'identità del geografo*, in CENCINI C., FEDERZONI L., MENEGATTI B. (eds.), *Una vita per la Geografia. Scritti in ricordo di Piero Dagradi*, Patron, Bologna 2009; ID., *La tradizione oltre la modernità: ovvero non cercate i paesaggi tra i presepi, trovereste solo ortiche*, in BOTTA G. (ed.), *Tradurre la tradizione*, Giappichelli, Turin 2011 (both available on www.academia.edu).

- a) E3M recognize the “social dimension” of the third mission, beyond the first economic and industry-related meaning. The third mission is thus to be articulated in three activities: Technology Transfer & Innovation, Continuing education and Lifelong Learning, and Social Engagement (E3M, 1.1.6).
- b) The third mission is not to be understood as a mission in itself, but it is called to redraw the entire spectrum of university activities, as well as research and teaching (E3M, 1.1.3).
- c) Third mission requires a careful evaluation of the criteria for measuring the whole university activity, adding to the existing quality indicators other parameters or better guidelines to steer, before evaluate and classify, the university activities to the «social welfare».

In the Green Paper the framework of indicators and evaluation methodologies is just sketched, lacking yet a clear identification and measurement of the activities to be monitored.

In the Italian context, the transposition of the principles provided by the Green Paper is still in its infancy, so much so that the Italian Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) is still anchored to the first definition (relating to the transfer of knowledge and innovation measured by patents, business incubators, spin-offs etc.), explicitly recognizing the need of a clarification of scopes and methods of the social engagement, going beyond the most easily quantifiable aspects⁵. Even if there are general references on the territorial and social role that universities have always been called upon to play, there is still no clear explanation in the Universities’ Statutes of the term «third mission», except for the University of Camerino⁶.

It is evident that third mission and social and territorial sciences as geography are called to enlighten and support each other. In other words there is a close relation between the new «social» definition of third mission and the social-oriented knowledge of geography. The third mission is therefore an opportunity for our discipline to see recognized its role of science oriented to the social and territorial development, strengthening its relations with the territory where they are still weak. On the other hand, such opportunity turns into a renewed commitment that geography is called to play, redefining the contours of its mission and the criteria of evaluation of its activities, according with the third mission guidelines. Such commitment moves towards a more precise definition of how geography should respond to the challenges of the knowledge society, and also to an ethic of science that rests on a renewed social dialogue. In the following section I try to organize around five strategic goals a sort of «agenda» for geographic legitimacy, following the principles set out by the Green Paper from a geographical viewpoint.

⁵ ANVUR (National Agency of Universities and Research Evaluation), *La terza missione nelle università e negli enti di ricerca italiani. Documento di lavoro sugli indicatori*, Workshop 12 aprile 2013 (cfr. www.anvur.org).

⁶ LUZZATTO G., “Terza missione” delle università: la situazione italiana, www.astrid-online.it (2011).

3. Third mission: an agenda for geography

«To make a book is less-than-nothing, if the book made doesn't make people better» (Giuseppe Giusti)

A) *Sharing Knowledge*. The third mission requires to take into account the principle of the widest dissemination and accessibility of scientific production, as the Association of European Universities pointed out in 2008. The new social researches and the information revolution opened a deep reflection on the different meanings of *publish* and *public*: the first in recent years has not always been synonymous of the second, being the most renowned international scientific reviews holders of exclusive rights over scientific articles (as the petition *The cost of Knowledge* denounced versus Elsevier or Routledge's academic journals).

The issue involves the debate on transparency and free use of research products paid with public funds, and tricky but unavoidable problems, such as the copyright and the difficulty of making accessible on the net the products of their research or teaching, mainly in the EU countries in which is lacking a Teaching Law as in the United States. Only the Statute of Camerino in Italy at art. 1 states «the full public availability of acquisitions that the university produces». Otherwise, increasingly researchers share the results of their researches in scientific social networks (Academia.edu, ResearchGate.net etc.) or weblogs, but this practice is not adequately encouraged.

From this point of view, the Italian geography is profoundly backward, without an efficient website to organize and share its production (the review of the two geographical societies have only print subscription, and there is not a website of the Italian geographers thought for this purpose), and also about cartography, it appears vaguely outdated – compared to the open access cartography of other nations – to pay for Italian IGM cartography or for the regional cartographies.

The sharing of the results of the research should involve primarily the scientific journals of geographical associations, still only accessible in hard copy or by subscription - with the recent partial exception of the «Bollettino». In this sense, the phrase that appears on the website of the «Rivista Geografica Italiana» («Anyone who downloads or send around materials published by the magazine without authorization commits an offence») appears quite tragicomic in front of the exhortation to the maximum social diffusion of knowledge. While promising appears the proposal of the site <http://nuke.luogospazio.info/>, which contains a first open source database of geographic scientific articles. The use of unconventional or non-academic ways of dissemination and debate (blogs, social networks, science festivals, audio-visual tools etc.) should be fostered to enhance an effective dialectic between science and society, following three main directions: access to information, audience engagement and accountability.

We have to publish less, but to publish better, in other words to make really public the results of our researches, in a more effective and pervasive way. A deeper level of involvement opens if you switch from sharing the results of your studies to sharing your research methods and steps, as suggested by Nielsen and the new *open web science*, arguing that science is less and less in the hands of scientists working in laboratory solitary and more and more groups of scientists working together, earning capacity, speed and power through the net⁷.

⁷ Nielsen M., *Le nuove vie della ricerca scientifica*, Einaudi, Torino 2012.

«Crushed between criteria of international legitimacy and logic of the product local, national communities will survive only if will help these two other performances»

B) *Multiscalarity*. The third mission should lead to a balanced and multiscalar development of relations inherent scientific production, from local to global. The Green Paper defines the University as a «social ecosystem» connected in many ways to the wider social ecosystems of its city, region, nation state and supra-national institutions (E3M, 1.1.10). This complexity of relations isn't adequately recognized and evaluated today, enhancing international relations or scientific products as the only one of great impact or excellent level, and considering relations and products at lower scales less important, while it is generally at the local level that social expectations are higher. This kind of assessment produces a devaluation of lower scales of publication and the risk of their atrophy, with consequences in terms of impact-factor-oriented scientific activity instead of real-needs-oriented: for example, nowadays a geologist will give up the revision of a geological map, because it would have an insignificant scientific impact, and a geographer will reject a local monography, unless it is a useful case study for international subjects, and so on.

The need to cooperate and to communicate with different audiences by geographic scale and social extraction requires the use of communication tools targeted. Even the Statute of Camerino, art. 9, c. 1, provides: «[The University] shall disclose the information in the most appropriate to reach out to potential stakeholders, using all channels and communication tools and information available, also in collaboration with other public and private». The geographic awareness of the multiscalar nature of processes invites us to reconsider not only the value of the results of researches and education training, but also the different scales and levels on which it should measure its implementation, with parameters that must be identified in accordance with the context (academic structure, research group, till to the individual scientist), as suggested by ANVUR, inviting each institutional level to define a profile of commitment on the three missions, taking into account the variation of broader regional, national, international audience.

This aspect involves not only research but also teaching and training, where international training offers are fostered and better evaluated (Erasmus Mundus program, Summer Schools etc.), without adequately considering the balanced coordination and rationalization of regional or national supply with the consequence of a «strike» in geographic high education in Italy.

«There are those who dedicates their lives to the book of life, and who acts as a connective tissue. Both are valuable, in the right measure»

C) *Articulation of scientific outcomes*. Some years ago, in a debate at the XXIXth Congress of the Italian Geographers (Palermo 2004), Ola Söderström observed how, once crossing the Italian border, to find a geographer you should always look «behind a book». The sentence is not intended to be a critique of a descriptive geographical practice, rather poses the problem of a geography which saw the monography or a text as the main product of their work. One criticism that move first to the Italian geography, in which the social accountability of the geographers is not recognized outside the academy.

In other words, our work and commitment should not only scientifically recognized or be intended to write a book or a scientific article on the international reviews (although those remains inescapable outcomes). Going beyond the idea that a scientific article in a famous international review or the proceedings of an international conference are always the highest point to which the researcher must strive,

the spectrum of evaluation should be expanded to other products and methods of production, always guided by clear scientific criteria embedded into their specific audience. A geography that aims only to its scientific books run the risk of being a discipline with a very weak legitimacy.

Just from a discipline with a strong territorial involvement should start a call for a serious consideration of other profiles of activity, not necessarily aimed at publishing a product in classical terms. The third mission urges geographers to recover the traditional role of «craftsmans» of territorial knowledge, whose products can be very different: report of activities carried out in agreement with local authorities, cartographic or GIS elaborations supporting spatial planning or development projects; planning documents or policies at the local, regional or national level, events or outcomes of territorial animation projects, education projects and long-life education or geographic education initiatives in collaboration with schools, targeted products for communication and knowledge dissemination, i.e. all those products included in the area of «Community Services» by ANVUR.

All of these aspects, so far considered peripheral, are the heart of the third mission, and point the finger on the fragility of solipsistic forms of publication validated by academy but often locked up inside it, as the exergon at the beginning of this paper remember us.

«Running alone can apparently pay more, but only in the short term,
as each disguise»

D) *Engagement*. «Engagement» is a central term in the documents of the Working Group E3M. The meanings of the terms are related to understand the needs of society and thus to a double process of co-creation and mutual learning (E3M, 1.1.9). The process of engagement should reflect the values of inclusiveness, participation and reciprocity in the resolution of public issues of a democratic society. The final goals should therefore aim to prepare educated and engaged citizens, strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility, address critical social issues and thus contribute to public welfare, as indicated by the *Committee on Engagement* of the U.S. Committee on Institutional Cooperation (2005). Engagement means first of all to share and extend the cornerstones of the research activity outside of the discipline and the academic world (E3M, par. 1.2.1), to avoid the risk of self-referential knowledge reduced to the cultivation of its own backyard.

The recent literature offers us different profiles of *engagement*, from the individual, voluntary and episodic level to the deeper and institutionally structured, with related indicators⁸. Also the vague and nuanced lands of civil commitment in personal battles for the environment, the right landscape, the social and cultural renewal, or political commitment in the highest sense of the term, must be stimulated if not yet recognized. There are those who went so far as to prefigure the petition or the investigation as an integral part of the institutional responsibilities, in order to carry out its own investigation into the heart of economic and social processes⁹.

It means to approaching also the teaching program to civil society through constant public occasions of debates, confrontation, organizing courses and training opportunities in close touch with the needs of the territory, steering the search paths (projects, PhD candidates, publications) to the concrete needs of the area (E3M, 1.2.8). well beyond the current, episodic confrontation with the social actors interpreted as a bureaucratic formality (e.g. in the establishing of a new degree course).

⁸ WARD E., HAZELKORN E., *Engaging with the Community*, in «Leadership and Governance in Higher Education» 2 (2012), pp. 9-20 (online available: <www.lg-handbook.info>).

⁹ DANTINI M., *Come cambia la «storia» dell'arte? Mutazione di una disciplina tra «prima» e «terza» missione*, 16 june 2013 (online available: <<http://www.roars.it/online>>).

Engagement means equal dialogue, it involves the weakening or sale of a portion of autonomy to the community, through increased communication, sharing and inclusion in the evaluation of non-academic actors. The risk of loss of independence and autonomy is opposed to the possibility of introducing ethical issues in economic and social processes.

To make so, it must tie the initiatives now left to the initiative and personal feeling – often unsupported, unrecognized, poorly tolerated – in an organic framework, in a fair relationship between public and private benefit. Engagement does not offer easy routes, requires vision, commitment and leadership and a balanced relationship with the outside world.

«If we seek an external parameter of evaluation of our work, the markets are at least three: the scientific production, education, and assistance to local and regional development. Only the latter is not considered by the evaluation system of our Ministry»

E) *Recognition and Integrated Assessment*. The last but not least goal that must be carried out as geographers is a strong strain in order to apply the principles of third mission in our universities, fostering the development and the social legitimacy of the discipline. The social relevance of academic activity is not always taken into account by the usual practice of evaluation: the aspects of «engagement» of research and teaching, so far ignored or marginally considered, must make his way in the official evaluation or bibliometric criteria.

At this stance a serious work of individuation of the evaluation criteria for the attainment of this objective should follow, underlining that the «third mission» should not be understood as additional and therefore subaltern to the first two, but as guidance which have to ensure a validation of each other. This required a thorough revision and enrichment of the parameters of evaluation/assessment relating to the first and second mission, in the last period subject of debate and criticism.

On the side of the research evaluation, it is strategic to recognize officially and give weight in the evaluation also to curricular activities complementary to those classics, carefully considering the presence of mixed partnerships, the social impact of projects. In the evaluation of scientific products, it is important to identify more adequate mode of refereeing scientific articles (including in the panel of referee also non-academic expertise or parameters such as the dialogic capacity, the involvement of stakeholders and the social legitimacy, the effectiveness and applicability of concrete scientific analysis).

On the other side of education and training, we need to recognize the value of even non-institutional training, aiming at a wider audience and not exclusively academic (continuous training, support to lower schools or professionals), different ways to involve local stakeholders and social participation in the educational curriculum (such as excursions, local workshops, field trips, summer schools etc.), and considering these aspects in the judgment of the students and of the Evaluation Groups.

On the specific side of the «third mission» activities, a clear disciplinar articulation of activities and sectors could address the evaluation, currently totally inadequate in Italy, as pointed out by the same ANVUR, which limited its work to a quantitative analysis of the public access to archaeological sites or museums. Even foreshadowing the possibility of a different dosage of the commitment in the three missions, their calibration should be considered the most desirable. Hence the need for evaluation on a comprehensive framework which sees the mutual support of the three spheres (research related to teaching, and in turn linked to a specific project of social development).

4. Tertium non (solum) datur

«Tertium non datur»: the title of this paper at least has two explanations: «tertium non datur» because the third mission is not yet recognized (above all in Italy) and it needs to be properly considered starting from the Statutes of the universities, but also «tertium non (solum) datur», i.e. third mission doesn't be understood as simply third and ancillar practice after the two others. The risk in this case is to emphasize a «mercantile» third mission, detached from everything else, with the consequence of a missed opportunity, a «failed revolution» in the ethics of the entire university.

«A strong leader who spoke the language of external world, was respected in academia, and was competent in networking» (E3M, 2.8.2): Gabriele Zanetto has embodied perfectly those requirements necessary to support projects in third mission. He went through the different souls of the third mission (providing its scientific expertise to the world of public administration as councilor in the City Council of Venice, animating the business incubator of VEGA and the IDEAS spin off, speaking often with great skill on thorny issues in the public debate)¹⁰, but especially he transferred these experiences in his research and teaching activities. For this reasons, it is not possible to measure the value of the activity of Gabriele only by bibliometric indexes (to which, however, was not opposed, used to play and criticize from the inside the rules put in place by the system), or by measuring the students appreciation of his teaching, but considering the wide range and variety of his contributions, that characterized his entire career, coalescing the three missions in his intellectual action understood otherwise than as deep civic engagement.

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¹⁰ LANDO F., *Un ricordo di Gabriele Zanetto*, in «Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana» XIII/VI (2013), pp. 593-601.