

Historical Vignette

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The cultural heritage of Gaetano Martino to the University Messina*

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I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Giovanna Spatari, the Magnifica Rector of the University of Messina, and Professor Francesco Trimarchi, the Director of the Class of Medical and Biological Sciences of the Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti, for their kind invitation to participate in this Conference, that marks a significant and scientifically relevant moment in the memory of Gaetano Martino, former Full Professor of Human Physiology and Magnificus Rector of our University.

The purpose of this lecture is to delineate the cultural heritage bequeathed to our Institution by Gaetano Martino. This undertaking is inherently challenging due to the multifaceted nature of Martino's contributions, including scientific and governance activities within our university. His contributions encompass numerous effective personal contributions in the domains of research, teaching, direction and development, that this lecture aims to summarise. It is vital to emphasise the potential significance of these contributions, if received positively, in determining and maintaining the role and position of the University within the national and international contexts of Science and Culture.

Gaetano Martino's activity at the University of Messina spanned a considerable period of time, from 1925 to 1957¹, and it remains a vivid memory for many lecturers and fellow citizens, as evidenced by the enduring need to commemorate his activity even after such a significant duration.

¹ *Gaetano Martino taught at the University of Messina from 1925 to 1957. At the Institute of Human Physiology, Gaetano Martino was Researcher: from 1925; Assistant Professor:1926; Free Lecturer in Experimental Physiology:1928; Free Lecturer in Physiological Chemistry: 1929; Extraordinary Professor of Biological Chemistry:1934; Full Professor of Experimental Physiology:1935; Full Professor of Human Physiology: 1936-1956. He was also Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy. Secretary General and President of the Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti. Magnificus Rector of the University of Messina: 1943-1956.*

Furthermore, even during his absence from Messina, due to his appointments to Rome, initially as State Minister and subsequently to 'La Sapienza' University² to assume the position of Professor of Medical Physiology, previously occupied by his Master Prof. Amantea, Martino continued to exert a notable influence in favour of the University and the City of Messina, even through his political activities³. Suffice it to recall that on the occasion of his appointment as State Minister, which would have prevented him from continuing as Rector, he himself said in the Aula Magna: "*Ma se a cagione di alte responsabilità che mi aspettano, non potrete contare sulla mia presenza fra voi, potete però esser certi che sarò qui sempre con il cuore, e che anche da lontano continuerò a seguire con la più vigile cura la vita di questa Università che, per tanta parte e così importante, è la mia stessa vita*"⁴.

The academic, cultural and political activity of Gaetano Martino has therefore been linked to the history of our University, our city and the society of our city, which he has helped to shape and develop, and which has also gone through some difficult periods because of the events of the Second World War and the post-war reconstruction, as I will explain later. Difficulties, however, that he always faced with determination and a positive intelligence that allowed him to take advantage of all the opportunities that those difficult years offered to the academic community.

I would like to point out at the outset that Martino, even after all the stages of his political and scientific career, still insisted that "*la ricerca scientifica è la sola fonte di benessere e di effettiva*

² From "La Sapienza" University of Rome Gaetano Martino graduated in Medicine and Surgery in 1923 under Prof. Francesco Durante with a thesis in Surgery on 'Bone Grafts'; but he was soon attracted to and attended the School of Human Physiology of Silvestro Baglioni - in turn a student of Luigi Luciani - who, 'a strict scholar, attentive and passionate about the figurative arts, music and poetry, ranges from Physiology to Philosophy, from Literature to the History of Science', and it was in this School that he trained. The same characteristics of a physiological scientist were to be found in Giuseppe Amantea -a pupil of Baglioni-, who was to become his Master in Messina. At "La Sapienza" University of Rome he was Full Professor in Human Physiology from 1957 and Magnificus Rector of the University from 1966 to 1967, when he died.

³ Elected to the Italian Constituent Assembly: 1946; Party Member and Vice-President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies: 1948-1954; State Minister of Education: 1954; State Minister of Foreign Affairs: 1954-1957; Messina Conference and Treaty of Rome establishing the EEC: 1955-1956; Italy's Mission to the ONU Assembly: 1955-1956; Chairman of the NATO Committee of the 'Three Wise Men': 1957; Party Member of the Chamber of Deputies: 1958; President of the Liberal Party: from 1961; Chairman of the Italian Parliamentary Delegation to the 15th and 16th UN General Assemblies: 1961-1962; President of the European Parliament: 1962-1964; Party Member of the Chamber of Deputies: 1967.

⁴ "But if, due to the high responsibilities that await me, you will not be able to count on my presence among you, you can be sure that I will always be here with my heart, and that even from afar I will continue to follow with the most vigilant care the life of this University, which, for so much and so important, is my own life". Inauguration of the academic year 1956-57 University of Messina.

grandezza che conoscano gli Uomini" ⁵. And let us not forget that he perceived his service to the university academy with the lively feeling of belonging to an "*Ecclesia*"⁶.

After graduating from "La Sapienza" University in Rome, Gaetano Martino began his academic career at this University under the guidance of Giuseppe Amantea, who had created in Messina a forge of high level research, which had its origins in the Physiology Laboratories of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery in Rome, founded by Luigi Luciani, a renowned neurophysiologist.

Following the neurophysiological experiments of the Roman School - which had already enabled Amantea to present the discovery of experimental reflex epilepsy to the international scientific community - Gaetano Martino carried out his scientific activity, which I have already mentioned in more detail in the past ⁷, at the Institute of Human Physiology in Messina.

In this vein, he studied and researched the state of excitability of the cortical areas of the encephalon and the functional mechanisms of the establishment of conditioned reflexes. But he also began independent research on the effects of fasting and refeeding, pancreatic function and muscle biochemistry, which left innovative contributions of undoubted value for intuitive and reflexive abilities, expressed in published works.

This scientific activity enabled him to pursue a prestigious university career, which soon led him to become a full professor of Human Physiology.

With regard to Martino the researcher, I would first like to highlight the modern vision he applied to his research work, which deserves to be remembered as an unquestionable cultural heritage. After completing his studies, in fact anticipating today's most advanced directions in the evaluation of research, Martino consolidated his scientific training and general culture, immediately confronting the international scientific arena of the time.

In fact, he was educated in the best European schools of Physiological Chemistry and Applied Physiology and visited the most important international research centres in various European cities (Berlin, Paris, Frankfurt, London), which allowed him to get close to the most renowned scientists of the time: Pavlov, Eggleton, Embden, Meyerhof, to name the most famous. He also acquired a rich linguistic training that he would later use in scientific and political debates. He was thus able

⁵ "*The scientific research is the only source of well-being and true greatness known to mankind*". In Martino G. "*Cultura e Scuola nella Società Democratica*". Speech delivered at the Senate of the Italian Republic in the sitting of 7 April 1954.

⁶ In Martino G. "*Il fattore costituzionale dell'epilessia di Amantea*". Course of Human Physiology Prolusion at "La Sapienza" University of Rome (15 January 1958). *Arch. Sc., Biol.*, 1958, vol. XLII, 1-22.

⁷ Ferlazzo A. *La dimensione scientifica: Gaetano Martino docente e scienziato*". In "*Gaetano Martino Scienziato Rettore Statista (1900-1967)*" (a cura di Marcello Saija). Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Messina, 24-26 November 2000, pp. 29-43, Edizioni TRISFORM.

to document and discuss international research first-hand and publish his scientific work in several foreign languages. The clinical training he received in his early years also favoured an interdisciplinary approach, involving not only experimental research but also its application in the clinic. This enabled him to engage in a close, intense and complex dialectic on the international scene, firstly by participating fully in the very lively scientific debate and then, as it is well known, in the political arena, with highly prestigious personal results.

I would also like to highlight another important aspect of Martino's activity as a young researcher, which is evident when reading his scientific works. Indeed, he knew how to devote himself to research with passion, intuition and absolute dedication, ensuring an assiduous presence in the laboratory and in the library. I am referring to a working method for scientific research that can still be an important cultural heritage for young people who approach it today: identifying a logical approach to the problems to be studied, applying and/or researching the most precise experimental method for solving the scientific problem, providing a precise description of the phenomena observed and conducting an in-depth discussion of them, which, through dialectical confrontation, makes it possible to formulate original research perspectives. In fact, Martino was convinced that *"nella scienza non vi è niente di definitivo e duraturo e ogni traguardo raggiunto si trasforma subito in un impulso a procedere più innanzi ..."*⁸.

His method of investigation, which allowed him to carry out his research despite the limitations of the instruments of the time, often paved the way for later, more consolidated scientific discoveries and practical applications. I will only mention the hypothesis of the presence of a hyperglycaemic substance in pancreatic juice, later identified as glucagon; the studies on the role of phosphocreatine in the muscle, which opened the door to the study of the physiology of exercise and sport, which has also seen important recent contributions at this University; the studies on the facilitation of central excitability, with its fundamental implications for the identification of a congenital predisposition to reflex epilepsy, also triggered by acoustic and light stimuli (think of the effect of discos!), and the re-examination of the establishment of conditioned reflexes, which has opened up new horizons for the understanding, treatment and prevention of convulsive manifestations and the relationships between central functions, psychic functions and behavioural manifestations; finally, those on fasting and nutrition, which have provided the impetus for the most modern scientific applications of food science and nutrition, as I will discuss later.

⁸ *'In Science there is nothing definitive and lasting, and every goal achieved is immediately transformed into an impulse to proceed further ...'*. In Martino G. *"Il fattore costituzionale dell'epilessia di Amantea"*. Course of Human Physiology Prolusion at "La Sapienza" University of Rome (15 January 1958). *Arch. Sc., Biol.*, 1958, vol. XLII, 1-22

A method that was the daily heritage of all those who followed in the footsteps of Martino the researcher and teacher, stemming from the concrete teachings he received and from his proud membership of the university "School" of Professors Baglioni and Amantea, his Masters.

And it seems to me that this sense of belonging to a scientific and academic School, which Martino recognised and felt very strongly, is another important cultural message to emphasise and offer to the new generations.

In order to better explain what it meant for Martino, and then for the students who succeeded him, to be a "*Maestro*" and to belong to a "*Scuola*", concepts that may sometimes seem obsolete today, I will let Gaetano Martino himself speak, who, at the commemoration of Prof. Baglioni, expressed it in these words: "*Il fatto è che ogni vero e grande Maestro si palesa non solo e non tanto nelle opere che lasciano tracce visibili ma anche e vorrei dire soprattutto nel quotidiano commercio con i giovani, attraverso la parola viva che è fatta di illuminazioni e lampeggiamenti, di improvvise rivelazioni, di confidenze e abbandoni, di incitamenti e di ammonimenti; e questa parola, che non lascia orme concrete ed è con grande fatica ricostruibile nella memoria, è ciò che più accende la mente e la coscienza dei giovani e le plasma e le fortifica. Così sorge e si forma ciò che noi diciamo una Scuola: che non è occasionale vicinanza di persone legate da un occasionale scopo, raggiunto il quale si sciogliono e si disperdono, ma è profonda intimità spirituale e ideale, piena concordanza di aspirazioni, letizia del dare e del ricevere*"⁹.

And how true this is, as many of us can still testify!

This method of research, this academic style and this pride in belonging to a School, which in many ways today is unfortunately very little practised, is a heritage that Martino acquired, passed on and continued to demonstrate to his Master Prof. Amantea, even after his retirement, and which has been the guiding star and the pride of all those who have been inspired by Martino's School.

Many episodes and anecdotes have been recounted several times by direct and indirect students and illustrious colleagues; and they can be easily found in the numerous publications dedicated to Martino, which emphasise in particular the loyalty with which he conceived the bonds of the School

⁹ 'The fact is that every true and great Master reveals himself not only and not so much in the works that leave visible traces but also and I would like to say above all in the daily dealings with young people, through the living word that is made up of illuminations and flashes, of sudden revelations, of confidences and abandonments, of incitements and admonishments; and this word, which leaves no concrete footprints and is with great difficulty reconstructed in the memory, is what most kindles the minds and consciences of young people and shapes and fortifies them. This is how what we call a School arises and takes shape: which is not the occasional closeness of people linked by an occasional purpose, once they have reached it they dissolve and disperse, but is profound spiritual and ideal intimacy, full concordance of aspirations, joy of giving and receiving'. Martino G. "In memoria di Silvestro Baglioni", Accademia Nazionale dei XL, serie IV, vol. VIII, Roma, 1957.

and the devotion to his Master, even when he was already Rector and State Minister. Concrete examples, therefore, that still today can represent an important cultural heritage to be cultivated.

But I also like to recall that we young physiology teachers were often reminded of the respect that Martino regularly showed for his students, never delaying the start of a lecture even when he was under pressure from high academic or political commitments; and of the fluent, clear and seductive way in which he managed to convey the experimental elegance of his studies to the young students who attended his lectures, which were also rich in cultural and humanistic references. And the authority he inspired, especially in those who chose to attend the Human Physiology Laboratories as internal students. Many young people who have gone on to become professors, not only in the field of physiological sciences but also in other areas of medicine, have paid tribute to this School for the lessons they learnt at the Institute, where Martino taught them to base their future clinical practice on the solid foundations of their knowledge of Biochemistry and Physiology.

This recollection and the totality of his research lead me to highlight another aspect of modernity that Martino practised in his research and teaching, a direction that has also been urged in recent times by numerous ministerial indications: the importance of applied research, that is, not research as an end in itself, but rather research aimed at social progress. "*L'Università italiana*, Martino wrote, *considera suo fine essenziale non tanto cangiare il mondo, quanto quello di conoscerlo.... Stenta, perciò, ad ambientarsi nel mondo in cui vive ed opera; potenzialmente dominato dalla esigenza di un pensiero atto a tradursi in azione*". He continued: "*nostro dovere è quindi quello di modernizzare le nostre Università... aprendole alle esigenze del mondo che rapidamente si rinnova*"¹⁰.

In fact, the interdisciplinary preparation that Martino had acquired in Italy and abroad allowed him not only to express a high level of teaching right from his first years of teaching, but also to develop his charisma over time, opening himself up to comparisons with studies in other disciplines and other faculties.

And if you read his publications, you will find numerous examples of such collaborations, which also became a tool for developing, with the methods permitted at the time, experimental animal models that were very useful for the subsequent application of the results obtained to humans.

¹⁰ *'The Italian university considers its essential purpose not so much to change the world as to know it.... It therefore struggles to settle into the world in which it lives and operates; potentially dominated by the need for thought to translate into action'. 'Our duty is therefore to modernise our universities.... by opening them up to the needs of the rapidly changing world.'* In Martino G. "*L'Università nella vita italiana d'oggi*". Speech delivered at the Associazione della Stampa estera, Roma, 28 May 1954.

In a tribute to Gaetano Martino at the Accademia Peloritana, Gaetano Livrea, past Magnificus Rector of this University and his successor in the Chair of Human Physiology, described him as a "*brilliant physiologist*" and a "*Master of Science and Humanism*"¹¹.

In addition to Human Physiology, in both Messina and Rome, Martino developed research and teaching in Physiological Chemistry, now Biochemistry, and Food science and Nutrition. It is in this field in particular that he was recognised for his fundamental contribution to proposing a modern methodological approach to the discipline. This methodological approach, of an interdisciplinary nature, which is still so useful today in providing adequate answers to problems relating to nutritional requirements, the importance of intermediary metabolism and the influences of correct nutrition on pathology, was also developed during the years he spent in Paraguay, at the University of Asunción, where Martino soon found his vocation as a master, directing numerous South American students towards research, and confirming his already strong social interest by directing his research towards the study of nutritional problems in human populations and the social impact of food.

As far as our University is concerned, we owe to Martino not only the creation of autonomous Schools of Physiology in the different Faculties, but also the development of many medical disciplines in the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery.

Since the early years of his university career, Martino had been in charge of the teaching of Physiology in the Faculties of Sciences, Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy, and he encouraged its autonomous development through his students. In fact, Martino's ability to recognise the potential of each individual and know how to guide their path enabled him, who had been in charge of the Physiology School in Messina since 1936, to make wise choices for the advancement of studies in this University. In fact, it is thanks to his work that, with the attainment of tenure and the passing of the competitive examinations for professorships, the teaching of Biological Chemistry and then of Human Physiology in the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery was entrusted to Giovanni Aragona; that of General Physiology in the Faculty of Sciences to Antonino Alibrandi; that of Physiology of Domestic Animals in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine to Ada Barbaro; and later that of Food Science and then of Human Physiology to Gaetano Livrea. Recent history teaches us that Physiology has developed in these Faculties with the creation of important new scientific Schools that have opened and carried out high-level and internationally recognised specialised lines of research.

¹¹ Livrea G. "*Commemorazione di Gaetano Martino*". In Atti dell'Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti, Messina, 8 Aprile 1968.

In 1943, immediately after the war and the landing of the Allies in Sicily, Martino was elected Rector of the University and was able to establish a positive relationship with the Allied Command, working to rebuild the University and encouraging the recruitment of lecturers in the most important disciplines: Salvatore Barberi in Paediatrics, Letterio Cannavò in Medicine, Luigi Carmona in Surgical Pathology, Francesco Monforte in Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Bruno Ricca in General Chemistry, Francesco Scullica in Ophthalmology, to name but a few. Later on, he also worked to develop the medical disciplines already present at the University with new and important recruitments, in order to strengthen the Clinics with an important research activity, such as, for example, the recruitment of Prof. Eugenio Ferrari to the Clinic of Nervous and Mental Diseases, who founded an important scientific School in Messina and consolidated a fundamental and innovative clinical activity. All of them were teachers who honoured this University and who, in turn, founded renowned scientific Schools in this University, and who are still remembered with respect and gratitude. And, as Rector, stressing the importance of university teaching, which "*non crea gli scienziatima prepara i pensatori di domani*"¹², he also promoted a significant increase in the number of university teachers in all the Faculties.

Certainly also because he was convinced that "*l'insegnamento universitario, as he stressed in a memorable speech, tende soprattutto a formare le coscienze degli uomini e dei cittadini di domani ed è in ciò il suo compito fondamentale e la sua migliore responsabilità*"¹³.

Martino Rector did not only care for the cultural development of the University, but also for its structural strengthening. He succeeded in getting the Ministry to recognise the re-establishment of the Faculty of Literature, Arts and Humanities, which had been suppressed during the Fascist period for ideological reasons, and the establishment of the Faculty of Economics, convinced of the need for "*a scientific study of economic problems*" that went beyond mere technical and professional interests. For both Faculties, he also promoted the construction of new buildings in the central complex of the University. Above all, however, he was able to secure the approval of a project for the construction of the University Polyclinic, which was completed a few years later by his successor, Rector Pugliatti, and was named the "Gaetano Martino University Polyclinic".

Finally, I would like to highlight other, more general aspects of modernity in Gaetano Martino's cultural heritage. A heritage that certainly stems from his vast experience as a researcher, teacher and academic in the broadest sense, a modern outlook that he also sought to promote in his

¹² "*The university teaching does not create scientists.....but it prepares the thinkers of tomorrow*". Inauguration academic year 1953-54 University of Messina.

¹³ "*The university teaching tends above all to form the consciences of tomorrow's men and citizens, and therein lies its fundamental task and best responsibility*". Inauguration academic year 1955-56 University of Messina.

governmental activity. I am referring to his firm belief in the freedom of teaching, his call for a common European science policy^{14,15} and his appeal for the principle of university autonomy and regulation.

In his first inaugural speech as Magnificus Rector of “La Sapienza” University in 1966, he declared that *"nella società di questo nostro tempo è mutata l'idea stessa dell'Università Grazie alla sua nuova idea, l'Università ha posto e pone nuovi problemi di riforma qualitativa degli ordinamenti, delle strutture e dei metodi, ma ha accolto in sé nuovi elementi funzionali che ne condizionano l'attività necessariamente multiforme"* ¹⁶. And again: *"Il nostro legislatore è chiamato in primo luogo a dare disciplina normativa all'autonomia universitaria, sancita e tutelata dalla Costituzione della Repubblica, per salvaguardarla e valorizzarla e non per minimizzarla... A me preme solo dire ... che l'autonomia in senso giuridico non è che lo strumento necessario per la difesa dell'autonomia della cultura nel suo più alto e determinante grado che è la scienza. Senza l'autonomia della scienza non può esserci e non c'è Università che sia adeguata al fine per cui si richiede e giustifica. Ma senza l'autonomia strumentale degli ordinamenti universitari non è possibile salvaguardare l'autonomia della scienza dalle ingerenze del potere politico"* ¹⁷.

*"In una società come la nostra, fondata su principi democratici e che a questi principi intende dare il massimo sviluppo, lo Stato non può non proporsi in materia di pubblica istruzione di difendere la libertà di insegnamento e di assicurare la serietà degli studi."*¹⁸.

And I would like to conclude by letting the Master Martino, who was ahead of his time, speak once again: *"Oggi gli uomini e i popoli civili godono la ricchezza di un prodigioso progresso tecnico."*

¹⁴ Martino G. *"Per una politica scientifica comune"*. Lecture delivered at the Meeting of the Liberal and Mixed Group of European Parliament, Amsterdam, 27-29 Aprile 1966

¹⁵ *"L' Università europea"*. In Martino G. *"Verso l'avvenire"*, pp.346-365, Felice Le Monnier- Firenze, 1963

¹⁶ *"In the society of our time, the very idea of the University has changed..... Thanks to its new idea, the University has posed and continues to pose new problems for the qualitative reform of its regulations, structures and methods, but has also incorporated new functional elements that condition its necessarily multiform activity"*. Inauguration academic year 1966-67 “La Sapienza” University of Rome.

¹⁷ *"Our legislator is called upon first and foremost to give normative discipline to university autonomy, sanctioned and protected by the Constitution of the Republic, in order to safeguard and enhance it and not to minimise it.....All I have to say is ...that autonomy in the legal sense is but the necessary instrument for the defence of the autonomy of culture in its highest and most decisive degree, which is science. Without the autonomy of science there can be no university that is adequate to the end for which it is required and justified. But without the instrumental autonomy of university regulations, it is not possible to safeguard the autonomy of science from the interference of political power."* Inauguration academic year 1966-67 “La Sapienza” University of Rome.

¹⁸ *"For a society such as ours, which is founded on democratic principles and which intends to give these principles its fullest development, the state cannot fail in matters of public education to defend the freedom of teaching and to ensure the seriousness of studies."* Interview to G. Martino, Paese Sera, 13 Marzo 1954.

*C'è una speranza sola: che l'umanità non debba soffrire e morire di questo progresso; la speranza che il pensiero che lo ha prodotto continui a dominarlo e ad alimentarlo nella chiara consapevolezza dei suoi alti fini civili"*¹⁹.

In any case, he bequeathed to the University, as an everlasting cultural heritage a more general admonition that makes us all responsible: "*Passano i maestri, passano gli allievi, ma resta l'Università. Resta come fonte perenne di nuovo sapere, come infaticabile ricercatrice di vie e di strumenti nuovi atti ad accelerare l'avanzamento della civiltà, come grande educatrice alla vita morale, civile e politica. L'Università resta sempre. Tuttavia, essa sarà quella che noi tutti avremo concorso a forgiare con il nostro lavoro, con il nostro sacrificio, con la nostra salda e sincera fede nel suo progresso e nelle sue fortune*"²⁰.

Conflict of interest: The Author declares absence of conflict of interest



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¹⁹ *'Today, civilised men and peoples enjoy the wealth of prodigious technical progress. There is only one hope: that mankind will not have to suffer and die from this progress; the hope that the thought that produced it will continue to dominate and nurture it in the clear awareness of its lofty civilised ends'. In Martino G. "La ricerca scientifica in Italia". Lecture delivered at the Meeting on Electronics and Television for the fourth day of Science, Milan, 13 April 1954.*

²⁰ *'Teachers pass, students pass, but the University remains. It remains as a perennial source of new knowledge, as a tireless seeker of new ways and means to accelerate the advancement of civilisation, as a great educator in moral, civil and political life. The University will always remain. However, it will be the one that we will all have helped to shape with our work, with our sacrifice, with our firm and sincere faith in its progress and fortunes.'* Inauguration academic year 1966-67 "La Sapienza" University of Rome.