Formez- Research and Development – News Programs

Convention Formez & Campania Region

Seminars Cycle
“The frontier innovation on Public Administration”

Lello Esposito, important contemporary artist from Naples, kindly donated this picture, enriched with the colours of the Mediterranean: blue, green and yellow

- Guido Melis – Seminar of 04th October 2004
The views expressed do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the United Nations and of Italian Department for Public Administration, and Formez.
Formez is running a “Program of cooperation for the diffusion of organizational models in the budget and accounting offices in the south Mediterranean countries”; it also covers relationships with the Mediterranean area, in line with the Centre for Administrative Innovation in the Euro Mediterranean Region – CAIMED. This program of cooperation is centred on an advanced training Master’s diploma for 20 experts in cooperation and development of the Campania Region in the Mediterranean Area.

As part of this training scheme, the Centre is organizing a Seminar Cycle “Frontier Innovations in Public Administration”, with the participation of several international experts.

Profile: Guido Melis

Guido Melis was born in Sassari on November 8, 1949. He is currently professor of administrative history at the University of Rome “La Sapienza”’s Special School for Librarians and Archivists and president of the faculty of library and archival science at the same university.

He graduated from the University of Sassari in 1972 with a degree in law, and won a scholarship from the Sardinian regional government to pursue his studies at the history of political institutions department of the University of Sassari; subsequently, he signed a four-year contract in that same department (1974-1978). In 1975-76, he taught history of the public administration in the political science faculty of that same university, a position he held (initially without retribution, with retribution starting in 1977) until he was appointed associate professor (in 1982, after having met the necessary requirements). After winning the open competition for the chair in history of the public administration announced by the University of Sassari, he took a position as extra-ordinary professor in that university’s law department in September 1986, and became ordinary professor in September 1989. He remained a professor at the University of Sassari in 1991. On November 1, 1991, he accepted a position as faculty chair in history of economic and political institution at the University of Siena’s department of economics and banking, which then was transformed into the department of administrative history after reforms. Between 1996-99 he was a full-time professor at the Superior School for Public Administration (where he taught history of the institutions and was the co-ordinator of the history department). Between 1986 and 1991 he was also the director of the history department of the University of Sassari. In April-May 1988 he was a visiting professor at the Faculté de Droit in Aix-en-Provence (Marseille), where he held a series of lectures on Italian institutional history. In July 1994 he held a course on credit institutions at the Escuela d’especializacion en ciencias economicas of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata. He also taught for two academic years at the University of Cagliari’s School for Administrative Executives (faculty of political science,
subject: administrative history), and for four academic years at the University of Siena’s Banking School and School for Administrative Executives (teaching respectively history of credit institutions and administrative history).

From 1973 until today he has collaborated with various scientific journals, including Studi storici, Archivio sardo del movimento operaio contadino e autonomistico, Quaderni sardi di storia, Rivista trimestrale di diritto pubblico, Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno, Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica, Annali della Fondazione Ugo Spirito. He was a columnist for the L’Unione Sarda (1976-1994) and La Nuova Sardegna (1994-2002) newspapers. He is currently a member of the editorial board of Jahrbuch fur Europaische Verwaltungsgeschichte, of the scientific committee of Studi Storici, of the publishing and studies committee of the State Archives, and of the steering committee of the Interior Ministry’s Superior School for Administration. He is a member of the scientific committee of the Ugo Spirito Foundation. Between 1994 and 2000 he was the president of the Italian Society for Historical and Institutional Studies, and since 1995 he is the director of the Society’s biannual journal Le Carte e la Storia (edited by Il Mulino).

In 1997, with his volume Storia dell’amministrazione italiana. 1861-1993 (Il Mulino, Bologna), he won the Acqui Award for historical non-fiction as well as the Sisco Award. His book was included among the “books of the year” by the Jurists’.

In 2002 he was awarded the President of the Republic’s second class medal for achievement in culture and the arts.
INTRODUCTION

Monsù Travet: the rise of a strange civil servant

On 4 April 1863, in the Teatro Alfieri in Turin, a comedy in Piemontese dialect by comic dramatist Vittorio Bersenzio was staged for the first time. It was a text about himself. It was called The Miseries of Monsù Travet. Crudely realistic, and not without a hint of sociological insight, it told of the bourgeois, or rather, petty bourgeois adventures of the state official. From then on, he would call himself, with barely concealed commiseration, il travetto (The lowly little clerk). Monsù Travet is a clerk in a ministry in Turin, some time after the Risorgimento. Monsù has a wife with grand airs, a fine daughter ready for marriage, and a house in the centre of Turin that must be maintained in the appropriate manner. His life unfolds between the contradiction of how things are and how they appear to be. How they are means his state wage, insufficient and increasingly inadequate for putting the bread on the table. Appearances are the requirements of outward social representation; by virtue of the privileged position with which he has been endowed, the servant of the state cannot possibly mix with the lower orders, especially those illiterate classes who were invading the bourgeois city in those times: tradesmen, private employees, and above all, shopkeepers. And the daughter of Travet even has an admirer whose father is a shopkeeper. Travet puts every effort into opposing a marriage that would leave him related to a family who were comfortably off but lacking in any social prestige. In the end Monsù gives in and in a sort of final catharsis, he resigns his civil service job and follows his father in law into business. Bersenzio’s background to this story is a masterly portrayal of the humiliating reality of nineteenth century office culture: authoritarian rules, arrogant superiors, hostile, jealous colleagues and the alienated existence of the copyist. In Mario Soldati’s 1945 film of Bersenzio’s story, Carlo Campagnini donned the “mezze maniche”, (half sleeves) the symbol of bureaucracy, to give an unforgettable performance in the role of this defeated, regretful, displaced and resigned character – an exponent of a universe of losers.

1. Public employee and bureaucracy

And so the Italian civil servant made his debut in literature as well as theatre. The height of his heroic stature is that of a lunatic, his persona that of the defeated. And yet this is 1863 and we are in Piedmont: the time and place when nineteenth century bureaucracy was at its best and its social recognition at its most visible. Nevertheless, that bureaucracy, though constituting the backbone of the new state, is genuinely similar to Travet. The Cavour order of 1853 is the first charter that is more about the duties rather than the rights of state officials: endless office hours, mornings and afternoons with a lunch break just long for a snack in the office itself; obligatory Sunday attendance, office cleaning chores, strict disciplinary codes enforced with a formidable catalogue of punishments; absolute obedience; unremitting subordination to superiors; office duties extending even into one’s private life, which had be led with irreproachable and exemplary conduct, canonical dress codes; out of office associations to be conducted with extreme vigilance. All in all, an authoritarian universe that forged the figure of the official, that made him the tool of the state, its social personification.
The literature was quick to exploit this paradox (a man of flesh and blood reduced to a symbol of an institution). Bersenzio ridiculed his Travet to good comic effect, but in the end he sympathised and commiserated with him; he made him a pathetic person: the little downtrodden cog crushed by the machinery he is part of. Representation dominated not only the contradiction between how things were and how they appeared, but also how the official in fact was and how he was supposed to be.

2. The paradox of the obsolete civil servant: Policarpo

We continue on our journey through nineteenth century literature: in a story from 1859 called The Civil Servant and His Family, minor writer Paolo Bettoni lists the monthly budget of the bureaucratic family:

“Baker, 20 lire; wood and coal, 8 lire; washerwoman, 5 lire; rent, 20 lire; breakfast and lunch, 60 lire; oil and candles, 8 lire; maid, 6 lire; piano hire, 8 lire; wardrobe and shoes, 20 lire; miscellaneous expenses, 6 lire. Total, 161 lire”

What is remarkable about this list is what we could call “status expenditure”: the maid, because anyone working for the state could not expect his wife to burden herself with domestic chores; the cost of the piano hire, because it is refined to give one’s children a musical education; wardrobe and shoes because the mezze maniche must be worn in the office to preserve one’s jacket; one’s dress must always be impeccable; the rent, because one must live in appropriate circumstances - in the residential quarters, not the lower class areas - preferably near the administration offices where one goes to work every day.

Through studies on the habitations of nineteenth century state officials, and also thanks to the personal documents of employees, it has been possible to trace a sort of map of their residences: a network of dwellings located in the areas surrounding the ministerial seats; in Turin, as in Florence, but especially in Rome, where, after the city was made the capital of Italy, the bureaucratic quarters sprang up, out of a sort of bundling logic. This was a social and political phenomenon, rather than a town-planning trend. As observed by Maggiorino Ferraris, a not unimportant representative of the liberal political class of the late nineteenth century, the workers in the outer zones were concentrated in the banlieue quarters, as in the Paris of the great urban reorganization policy of Napoleon III; the public officials were located in the city centres, making a protective belt with their loyalty to the institutions, as opposed to the potentially subversive underclasses.

The nineteenth century official, with his tics and manifest contradictions, is at the hub of a very effective genre of literary representation; it is not hard to notice how this depiction of the Italian public official differs somewhat from the great anti-bureaucrat satirical tradition of France and Russia, to which it perhaps aspired. In France there was Flaubert, and before him again, Balzac. In Russia there was Gogol and his dead souls. In Italy, nothing similar to the Balzacian accusation and trial of the bourgeois society of the Restoration; nothing that resembles the Russian’s harsh criticism of Tsarist society. Instead, there were glimpses, vignettes, captions, delightful parodic sketches, one step away from genre journalism.

Thus it is in the masterpiece of Gandolin, the famous humorist of the early twentieth century, otherwise known as Luigi A. Vassallo: La famiglia dé Tappetti /1903). The protagonist is Policarpo, “careless father and copyist”. Like Travet, he experiences the same schism between the public role and the private condition. The former is ostentatious, the second ignoble. On the one hand, there is the ethic of respect for superiors, acquired from the office, and on the other hand there is the negation of his authority as a parent, which torments him in his family life; on the one hand there is the dignified order imposed by public office, and on the other, there is the customary disorder of his domestic life.

A house with two rooms and a kitchen in a damp, decrepit block in the centre of turn of the century Rome (in those years the relation between pay and the cost of living was even less favourable than for Travet in 1860: moreover, Giolitti was soon to inaugurate the “policy of the humble”, i.e. an attempt to tackle the problem of low pay in the bureaucratic sector (albeit only partly successful);
furniture that was both ostentatious and squalid - a mirror of the social aspiration and the limited
taste and cultural horizons of the masters of these houses; the monthly wage of 95 lire, 45 of which
went on rent (and the celebrated 70s ministerial inquest into rents paid by public sector employees:
the results were shocking) - everyday life burdened by bakers’ and grocers bills, and the stress of
having to keep up an outward appearance appropriate to the status of the state official. And then the
values of the petty bourgeois: his habits, his devotion to civic duties. The vestiges of an improbable
classical culture emerging again and again from the pompous rhetoric of Policarpo, determined to
educate his adolescent son according to an educational doctrine that was a comical parody of the
official one of the Italy of Umberto; the admiration for the army and the patriotic Sunday military
parades in Rome; the jealous sense of his position on the social scale (meaning humiliating
obeisance to his superiors, and arrogant superiority towards the inferior classes). “I represent”, says
Policarpo in a moment of solemn assertion of his status, “love of family, order, progress and
morality”
Like Travet, Policarpo was transferred to the big screen in a well remembered portrayal as a
“writing official”, filmed in 1959 by Mario Soldati, with Renato Rascel in the lead role. Only that
the goggle eyed vitality of Rascel makes Policarpo a kind of model official, hated by his colleagues
because he aspires to work harder and harder, and tormenting his reluctant bosses with endless
proposals for improving efficiency; he plays at being top of the class without actually being it, and
attempts to get to grips with the advanced technology of the day – the typewriter. Whereas, in the
book, Policarpo is the incarnation of nineteenth century civil service rhetoric: a satire on the values
that were considered already moribund in the early twentieth century; a comic portrayal of the
inadequacy of psychological models and codes of behaviour drawn on stereotypes that were already
obsolete.
The whole point, both in Travet and Policarpo, is the outdatedness of the old style official, and his
inability to inhabit the modern world, big and terrible as it is, as Gramsci might have said. So he
relies on the authoritative virtues absorbed from the office system.
Right from the start, the administration has been one step behind the times. It creates men nurtured
by values that are already considered outdated by society. It proposes a vision of the world that is
deemed ludicrous.

3. Demetrio Pianelli written by De Marchi
Some years before, a major Italian writer (more significant than Gandolin), presented a story whose
discontented protagonist was set in the drab world of the private rather than public office (though
this point is not significant).
Emilio De Marchi and his story ‘Demetrio Pianelli’ (1890). The setting this time is turn of the
century Milan; the first mixed banks, the city centre offices, the fledgling industries, the
construction of the bourgeois city. The drama – this time it is more serious than mere ridicule –
concerns an obscure, insignificant copyist, Demetrio Pianelli, someone who weathers the storms of
life in the protective little cocoon of his world, and is suddenly struck by tragedy.
His profligate brother, also an official (indeed the book gives us a glimpse of the bureaucratic
world at play, in the scene of the civil servants’ dance), is crippled by gambling debts and commits
suicide. All of a sudden, not only does poor Demetrio have to face the social opprobrium resulting
from this, but must also act as father to his little nephews and tutor to his all too beautiful sister in
law.
When she is seduced by Demetrio’s office boss, she forces him to make an excruciating choice
between two alternative codes of conduct: the first one (public) is to stay in his job, respect his boss,
accept the situation and shut up. The second (private) code is, now that he is the man of the house,
to defend the virtue of his sister in law and the honour of his dead brother.
Naturally he chooses the second path, but at a price – a genuine personal tragedy in which he sacrifices, in the name of his human dignity, all benefits of career and position as soon as he inevitably moves to Sardinia. This sad affair is not so far from the basic dichotomy we have already seen in Travet and Policarpo: the inside and the outside, the office and the outside world, the duties of the official and those of the man.

One can sense here the weight of contradiction that ministerial legislation codified in a series of different, coherent regulations, and that in the first statute of state employees of 1908, Giolitti would translate into a single general law: the contradiction between the official and the citizen, between the special duties of the state servant (in the name of whose appearance he would forego certain basic rights) and the existence of the everyday citizen. A radical action that would occupy the attention of the first public employees’ unions.

3.1. Demetrio and alienation

But there is something else about De Marchi that is worth noting. A careful reading will uncover a vivid representation of the of the civil servant’s alienation. From the outset, Demetrio is almost the embodiment of this alienation. The first pages contain this very illuminating passage:

“He arrived at his workplace, which was a table beside the window, protected from the draught by a battered old screen. First of all he took his cigar from his pocket, scrutinized it against the light to make sure it was all there and, holding it as if it was a precious relic, placed it above the window shutter. He opened the drawer and examined the two bread rolls in the paper bag. He made a rapid inspection of his round hat, giving it a smart blow to brush away a speck of dust, lowered it delicately into its special paper container and placed it on the clothes hanger. Then he opened another drawer and took out the two half-sleeves of shiny cloth that he wore for writing. He slid them on, and quickly, excitedly rubbed his hands, screwing up the lines on his face. Then he began the painstaking cleaning of his glasses”.

This almost seems like a sequence from a film. All the little gestures of a routine that is repeated unchangingly, day after day, obeying all the automatism tics of a life that which is even during its free time, modelled by the splitting up of time, by the sequence of movements and thoughts governed by inexorable procedural codes. In the end it is a life that is completely divided up and filed, ready to be archived just like any other piece of bureaucratic business.

In this context, the unchanging predictability of office life represents shelter from the perils of the outside world; the obsessive order of work contrasts with the disorder and intemperance of a society (we are in the midst of the turn of the century crisis) that the character feels is hostile, and which he wants to flee from. In the closed world that Demetrio inhabits, even the layout of the workspace, the positioning of the furniture, the distances between the desks, the comfort (or otherwise) of the seats conspire to underline the hierarchical relationships: Pianelli at his “table beside the window, protected from the draught by a battered old screen”, “the big table full of papers and documents, (…..) placed in the middle of the wall, under a portrait of the king, between two electric bells, a short way from the heater”.

However, it was already determined and established. In the great machine of the administration (was it not Cavour who talked of the “administrative gears” in 1853?”) the human cog plays his part without any friction: he goes to his place and stays there for always.

A fundamental element is punctuality. De Marchi says of his Demetrio that, when the apprentice dressmakers met him at Cordusio every morning at eight, regular as clockwork, they quickened their pace. The regulated life of the bourgeois city is the setting for the regulated life of the new Travets: the new urban industrial world pulses in unison without any waste or delay whatsoever. The reliability of the skilled copyist (“…that automatic ability that the hand acquires, to be able write on and on, to know where it has to go, almost to think by itself, even when the brain is absent”) contrasts with Demetrio’s shy interior, with his fragile insecurity. This is the weak point, and this
is the literary greatness of De Marchi: something inside is not quite right; despite everything, his emotions are in conflict with the world that towers over them and reduces them. De Marchi is not the only one to seize on this crucial element. In Pianelli there is also this sense of estrangement from the world. Roughly in the same period we find it also in the famous novel of Luigi Pirandello, Il treno ha fischiato (The Train Has Whistled)…..Here, the protagonist, civil servant Belluca, is described in this way:

“A man more docile and subservient, more methodical and patient than Belluca could not be imagined. Circumscribed….. Yes, who described him like that? Circumscribed, poor Belluca, within the cramped limits of his arid occupation, without any other memory if it was not about open entries, simple or double entries or write-offs, and deductions and withdrawals and formulations: notes, ledgers, bookkeeping entries, page shredders and so on. A walking filing cabinet; or rather an old ass, who plods wearily along, his eyes blinkered”.


Another step forward, another great Italian writer tackling the “underworld” of bureaucracy. In 1915 Piero Jahier published his work “Resultanze” in “Quaderni della voce”, on the life and character of Gino Bianchi, a bewildering tale, written almost as if it were an official document, that describes a life that was lived as if it were a bureaucratic practice. A bureaucrat’s day, according to Jahier’s scathing reconstruction, is slavishly modeled on office rhythms and routines. Even in the most intimate and private of functions – wrote Jahier – “Gino Bianchi performed his marital duties much as if he were reading his office mail”. His private week is organised much like an official form, in which every activity and function is run according to a precise schedule. For example:

“Monday, at 8 o’clock he wakes up; at 8,30, he walks into his office; at 9 he drops a load (including Sunday’s); at 9,30, he reads the newspaper in his office; at 10,15 he meets with his boss; at 11 he avoids his duties; at 11,45, he dusts himselfs, he preens, he passes water; at 14,20, he walks back into his office; between 14,30 and 16,30 in absolute silence, he breathes regularly, while his other activities are unknown; at 17, he avoids his duties; ore 17,45, he dusts himselfs, he preens, he passes water; between 18 and 19 he walks the city centre while window-shopping. He assesses the sexual desirability of the women he sees in the street; between 19 and 20 he eats dinner, at 21 he goes to bed (and on Saturdays, he “performs his marital duties”)”.

Jahier also stresses office conditions.

“ Only a rookie – he writes – could think that all employees working in an office are equal, and that their desks are assigned casually. Why is it then, one could ask this rookie, that when we walk into an office with many employees, only one of them is the person to whom we naturally turn, the first person we see? This is because desks are scrupulously assigned according to rank and seniority. Higher ranking employees have a light source on their left, so as not to shade themselves with their arm while writing; they have at least two shelves for themselves, and sometimes an entire cabinet; they have a spittoon; but most importantly they have a well-positioned desk, with an extra chair for their guests. A well-positioned desk faces the main office door, guarantees privacy for its occupier, and greets guests head-on, as befits a respected person”.

We should not marvel too much at this description. Recent writings stress this same link between hierarchy and office lay-out. In his recent – and very current - volume “Impiegati”, Angelo Mari wrote: “ Office lay-outs grant certain privileges to executives, in order to set them apart from the other employees. Detailed decrees from the Treasury set the characteristics of executive offices: lower-ranking executives have a personal office with wooden furniture, including a bookshelf and a
small couch; higher-ranking executives also have a conference table, some potted plants, and framed paintings; most importantly, they are more visible and they have access to a “company car” that picks them up in the morning and is available to them for the remainder of the day.

We should instead further explore the links between Jahier’s bewildering description of the employee Gino Bianchi and the events that affected public administrations in 1915. In particular, I am referring to the new techniques to measure productivity, spurned by the taylorist ideal of reducing working times and promoting modern industrial organisation (this was during Ford’s heyday in America). For Italian offices, a group of pioneers headed by the Post Office executive Torquato Carlo Giannini proposed the adoption of “administrative taylorism”. Therefore, Jahier’s grotesque description, a tayloristic rationalisation of the nothingness that is Gino Bianchi’s life, becomes a ferocious satire of the myths of modernity and of controlling social time.

Jahier is neither the first nor the only writer to grasp these new trends in bureaucratic rhythms, and to highlight the gap between the work of office drones and tayloristic rationalization. Before him, a famous author, Matilde Serao, described without sarcasm the hurried lifestyle and the alienating work of a group of Neapolitan telegraphists in the last few decades of the 19th century. State Telegraphs: A Novel for Ladies is not always a lighthearted read, although it features love stories, sentimental dramas, and human misery, in line with the author’s style and the trends of the time. The book provides a realistic representation of industrial alienation in a group of women working in Naples’ Palazzo Gravina. I use the term “industrial” because in the late 19th century, telegraphs were an important industrial tool, a laboratory for dynamism and innovation, whose employees (many of whom were women, as this was one of the few fields, along with the telephone monopoly, where women could work as public sector employees) had to work at a stressful pace:

“They began their workday without any merriment, all mechanically occupied with their tools: some were bent over the machinery, unscrewing the steel blade that engraved the signs, while others were busy changing the paper rolls, preparing the ink, or testing the elasticity of the ribbons”.

You will have noticed that a new character emerges here: machinery. For Caterina Borrelli, Maria Vitale, Annina Caracciolo and the other young protagonists of the book working with machines is alienating, with obsessively repeated movements, productivity tables to be respected, supervisors, and competition between workers:

“All the machines, Morse, Siemens, Hughes, double Hughes, were on, the two supervisors were pacing up and down like sleepwalkers, with unlit cigars, rolls of telegrams in their hands. The door that led to the female section was half-open, a new event, but no one was turning around. In the female section all the employees were present, each one of them manning a machine; the director came and went. The deputy director (...) ran from one machine to the other, taking care of despatches, fixing the clocks, handing out ink, agile as a squirrel, with bright eyes, quick hands, and few but sharp words. Telegrams were spouting everywhere, all were at least three hours late, the telegrams to be sent were piled on top of one another until they became small hills; while one was being sent, five others were waiting; just as a group of ten was being transmitted, another fifty-two were backed up. The employees became feverish, their temperatures rising by a degree with each passing hour”.

This fever from work was not a common event in the bureaucratic universe. In this case, we are talking about the farthest provinces of that world, the newest sector of the Italian administration.

5. Telegraphist

Nyta Jasmar, the pseudonym of a telegraph employee from Budrio, Clotilde Scanabissi Samaritani, describes the realities of her work in her Memoirs of a Telegraphist (1913). Although the book does provide some background on working conditions, it focuses on the double life of a young
woman, a telegraphist by day and a sophisticated daughter of her time by night, and described in the
D’Annunzio-inspired style of the time as a woman who scorned social conventions, and who
dedicated her secret life to luxury and eroticism, an unlikely incarnation of a duplicity that did not
exist in reality. Jasmar seem to be trying to tell us that women are not compatible with office life:
their imaginations are too unbridled, their attitudes towards life too non-conformist, to be able to
slavishly adhere to a lifestyle devoted to office and duty like Travet or Demetrio Pianelli. In the
novel, this thesis seems to echo early feminist (and perhaps also futurist) theories, but it also
matches the prevailing mood of that time: as congressman Bertolino said in a speech to the
Chamber of Deputies in 1921, in which he criticised the increasing number of women who took
public office jobs away from men

“The behaviour code of female employees includes disappearing from the office for a few days at a
time, every once in a while, but obviously never on a Sunday. During office hours, the industrious
ones keep themselves busy arranging flowers, while the sentimental ones devour romance novels
written by Guido da Verona or others of his ilk, and they all gather in the hallways to chat and
expound on the day’s gossip”.

The post-World War II years were marked by two novels that described the public administration in
an analytical way: Incendio al Catasto by Carlo Montella and Lo Scatto by Emanuele Bettini.
Carlo Montella in Incendio al Catasto describes a cadastral office in a provincial town. The main
character in the book is a slow, phlegmatic employee who works in an office flooded by the
“rotisserie aromas” of an adjacent restaurant, and paints a desolate portrait of bureaucratic realities
in Italy.

6. After second war

The post-war years were the most difficult ones for the public administration. The ongoing second
economic revolution (featuring, for example, the expansion of the automotive market) highlighted
all of the bureaucracy’s shortcomings in the face of changing times: anchored in the culture of the
past, it appeared more than ever isolated from a rapidly evolving outside world. During those years,
the great journalists of the time defined the public administration as Italian society’s “ball and
chain”. Once again, the gap between the economic system of the north and the administrative
system of the south emerged.
This gap is partly an inheritance from Giolitti’s time, when the public administration became a sort
of “hospital” where those who could not make it in the industrial system could take shelter. These
years saw the emergence of what is still the biggest problem for the Italian state: a huge chasm
between the economic system and the administrative system.
Indeed, our country speaks two different languages: the first belongs to the economic and industrial
world, and has a strong northern accent, while the second, southern-accented language belongs to
the administrative and bureaucratic world.
Emanuele Bettini’s Lo Scatto takes place in a provincial post office in the immediate post-fascist
era, and describes how the bureaucracy adapted to the change in regimes. This novel analyses inter-
personal relationships between employees, where the prevalent paradigm is that of the typical
careerist, who uses the various political structures (fascists, christian democrats) in order to further
his own career.
Post-war literature was characterized by other “bureaucratic” novels such as L’Ultima Provincia by
Luisa Adorno, which describes the life of a fat, immobile Sicilian prefect and his malaise. The
prefect tries to protect his private life from the outside world’s attacks, and as soon as his public
functions allow him to, he takes shelter in his beloved countriside.
7. The last years administrative figures

Un Borghese Piccolo Piccolo by Vincenzo Cerami was then adapted into a movie version directed by Mario Monicelli, starring Alberto Sordi. The movie’s main character is a state employee, filled with frustration. An interesting aspect of this novel concerns the hereditary nature of employment between father and son, which was typical of post-war Italy and evidences a paternalistic, familial nature that is the antithesis of a modern administration.

The most representative administrative figures of the last few years are summed up by two novels: Andrea Camilleri’s La Concessione del telefono and Ambrogi’s I Burosauri.

La Concessione del Telefono by Andrea Camilleri is an attempt to re-create language that can in part be linked to the extensive linguistic work undertaken by Carlo Emilio Gadda. Camilleri’s novel describes Italy in the late 19th century though his depiction of a ruling class that must govern an unpredictable, heterogenous country in which the various power hierarchies are still hindered by a muddled bureaucracy and ancient prejudices. Those who are caught in the bureaucracy’s web may never untangle themselves, as evidenced by the application for a telephone concession which is at the heart of the novel.

I Burosauri is a comedy in two acts written by Silvano Ambrogi in the 1960’s. It begins with this description: “An office in a Roman ministry: to the right, the rather squallid employees’ room, with two small desks on one side, and two others on the opposite side. In the middle sits the typist’s table, adjacent to a wall filled with files stacked upon rudimentary shelves, which give off clouds of dust as soon as they are touched”.

The comedy, written in a centre-left climate, describes a day at a generic state ministry office. In this context, it portrays realistic characters made grotesque by their jargon and by their adherence to obsessive, futile rituals, as if they were part of a secret society. These are characters straight out of the bureaucratic mythology, with a paralising fear of even the most insignificant initiative or responsibility, burdened by a chronic inability to recognise real problems, and capable only of procrastination.

I Burosauri featured extraordinary linguistic inventions that eventually became part of journalistic jargon, and depicts the power of the elephantine general directors who were the product of an authoritarian society during the fascist era.

Much like literature, cinema also portrayed the world of bureaucracy through the transparent, pitiless eye of the camera.

Among the movies of the immediate post-war period, Melis discusses Giovanni Episcopo, directed by Alberto Lattuada, an adaptation of the Gabriele d’Annunzio novel of the same title. Giovanni Episcopo is a modest employee who lives a quiet, happy life between his office and a small room he rents at a friend’s house, until he meets Giulio Wanzer, an adventurer who ends up involving him in some corrupt activities at the expense of the public administration.

Policarpo, Ufficiale di scrittura, starring Renato Rascel and directed by Mario Soldati in 1959, describes a low-level but know-it-all ministerial employee who wants to make the public administration more efficient, and turns all his colleagues against him in the process. This movie includes a memorable scene in which Rascel struggles with the first typewriters that were introduced in the Italian administration in the 1910’s. This event marked an important passage, and an administrative innovation on par with the one we are currently going through with new technologies.

Melis continues his trip through the movies by mentioning some masterpieces such as Monsù Travet, directed in 1945 by Mario Soldati and starring Carlo Campanili, an adaptation of Vittorio Bersenzi’s novel, and Il Cappotto directed in 1952 by Alberto Lattuada and featuring Renato Rascel, an adaptation of a classic Russian novel.

In Totò cerca casa, a 1949 film directed by Steno and Monicelli, Totò finds himself in the role of an employee and ends up stamping everything he finds, thus representing the bureaucracy in an ironic way.
Gianni Puccini, in the 1959 movie L’impiegato, tells the tale of a disaffected employee played by Nino Manfredi.
Il posto, directed by Ermanno Olmi in 1961 tells the story of a young man from the provinces who moves to Milan to work for a large firm there. This movie highlights the differences between a provincial town and an industrial one, and a young man’s adaptation to the culture of the public administration.
The Ragioniere Fantozzi series and Pupi Avati’s L’impiegato are emblematic examples of a bureaucracy where inter-personal relationships are marked by ferocious competition.