

Why science is hunting for an audience: the reasons of Italian researchers

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“We can only appeal to society, considering that governments and parties have fallen constantly short of expectations since the late eighties. The public must know that without research there is no innovation, and without innovation there is no state-of-the-art. The lack of research is a handicap for the development of the country.” The words of Silvio Garattini, director of Milan's Mario Negri Institute, reveal rage and passion. This is how he explained the reasons why more than one year ago 1,500 Italian scientists made an [unprecedented, resolute and unmediated appeal to the general public to back research in Italy](#) (appendix 1). Garattini was among the most active in the group of scientists who, since November 2000, had been acting against the restrictions imposed in the field of GMOs by the then Minister for Agricultural Policies Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio. Garattini promoted a number of initiatives which in some cases became real media *coups de théâtre*, at least if we consider the traditional “privacy” of Italian scientists and researchers, who have always been reluctant to consider the public as a direct interlocutor. Maurizio Zuccotti, from the Development Biology Laboratory of the University of Pavia, one of those who signed the [Manifesto for the Freedom of Research](#) (appendix 1), said that “those initiatives intended to draw attention to the problems encountered by researchers in carrying out their research. Shared understanding of all aspects of science needs to be improved. By ‘shared’ I mean above all with the general public. In the case of historic achievements, such as the cloning of

Dolly the sheep, which bring about great changes in the scientific sector and have enormous spin-offs for all people, non-scientists must be informed about the results of our research. In these cases communication is fundamental, and we must learn how to do it. What we want to do with our initiatives is to improve the spread of scientific understanding, but these activities are only secondary compared to research: others should be doing the spreading.” Zuccotti has journalists in mind, who above all “must be able to follow and critically discuss the research that is carried out”. Though he eventually hopes that “the public, in turn, will acquire basic scientific knowledge which will allow them to follow the researcher and his/her job.” This request to be publicly recognisable is shared by Roberto Defez, a microbiologist at the CNR, Naples and promoter of the [Manifesto](#) (appendix 1), who believes that “to be visible for citizens we need access to the media. This access is notoriously reserved to politicians, which means that to gain access we must first and foremost prove that we are alive.” The necessity to become visible expressed by Defez found unprecedented confirmation in November 2001, when astronomer [Margherita Hack publicly delivered a symbolical funeral oration](#) (appendix 2) in memory of Italian research. The initiative, backed by CGIL, an Italian trade union association, and promoted by a group of researchers of the CNR, Milan, was defined by the organizers themselves as “stagy and grotesque”. However, Marco Padula, one of the organizers, said that it is “important to notice that to express the discontent of the category new communicative strategies are being attempted, basic forms that can address a vast public”. Marco Scodiggio, another of the researchers of the CNR, Milan who promoted the requiem, believes that “the purpose of the demonstration was to address the general public by resorting to something singular enough to obtain coverage by newspapers and television.”

Appendix n. 1

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF A “REBELLION”

Michela Bertolani

Over a year ago, in February 2001, scientists sensationally demonstrated in defence of freedom of research, a protest which began with an appeal signed by 15 researchers—a number which soon rose to 1,500 thanks to the Internet—and published by the Italian daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* on 5th November 2000. The protest was against the banning of the experiments with genetically modified organisms (GMOs), planned by the former Minister for Agricultural Policies Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, and against the inadequate funding of scientific and technological research. For the first time in Italy, more than a thousand researchers chose to demonstrate publicly to communicate their needs, declaring that they were ready to take to the streets and “march on Rome”, if necessary.

October 2000. Pecoraro Scanio signs a decree concretely blocking research on genetically modified organisms in the agricultural and zootechnical fields. The decree has a retroactive effect, thus blocking already financed and started projects, too.

November 2000. 1,500 Italian and foreign scientists sign the Manifesto for the Freedom of Research (published by *Il Sole 24 Ore* and subsequently by *Nature* and *Science*), which opposes the directive. Among them, two Nobel prize-winners and several prestigious names.

13th February 2001. “Rebel” researchers take to the streets—in theory. In actual fact, there is no parade. Rather, there are two meetings: a public conference in one of the two houses of the Chamber of Deputies, where scientists, politicians and journalists met; and a meeting in the government building between a delegation of the demonstrating researchers, Pecoraro Scanio and Giuliano Amato, who was Prime Minister at the time. In the meantime, another delegation of scientists met Silvio

Berlusconi and then Francesco Rutelli, who were both running for election as Prime Minister for the centre-right and centre-left-wing coalitions respectively. The issue of the freedom of research becomes a political case, as well as a case for the media.

March 2001. Backers of the freedom of research, gathered in a “Permanent forum on the freedom of research”, formulate ten questions to find out the orientations of the coalition leaders. The Forum aims at “disseminating information; debating with the public; being available for the media; monitoring the situation; defending itself when necessary; and being propositive. This is the long-term, indeed the very long-term project of the first rebel scientists in Italian history” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 18th March 2001).

Appendix n. 2

A REQUIEM FOR RESEARCH

Barbara Montoli

“May the soul of Italian research rest in peace”: these were the first words of the Requiem for Research written by astronomer Margherita Hack, emeritus professor at the University of Trieste. Her words were pronounced as a funeral oration on 12th November 2001 on the square of Milan’s Istituto Politecnico, during a highly unusual demonstration: a symbolic funeral had been organized to celebrate the trade union strike (led by the CGIL, the CISL and the UIL, the main Italian unions) in favour of school, universities and research. Antonio Verona, Lombardy secretary general for SNUR-CGIL (National TU Organization for Universities and Research) said that “the strike-day of the category presented a perfect opportunity to stage a funeral, faked but with all the wherewithal: hearse, coffin, music band, and black balloons thrown after the oration, so as to celebrate the death of public research metaphorically”. The procession followed the empty coffin walking through the campus of Milan, from the CNR in via Bassini up to the Istituto Politecnico, where the message sent by Margherita Hack was read out:

“May the soul of Italian research rest in peace, surreptitiously killed off by the famous scientific research expert Minister Moratti. This government, positively brimming in outstanding brains, has finally managed to fill all the holes left by the communists, and has cut all those useless expenses at university. But why worry? There is TV, which provides culture for everyone through its quiz shows. And, anyway, Italy is one of the Great countries for its commitment to war, even though it does spend less than a third of the other Greats on its university research. *Requiescat in pace.*”