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“Unsafe Education”: Misconduct and Abuse in the Risk University

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“Unsafe Education”: Misconduct and Abuse in the Risk University

Andrea Lombardinilo*

Abstract: The paper deals with the increasing phenomenon of sexual harassment in the academic environment, according to the figures of The Guardian investigation concerning sexual misconduct in UK Universities. In particular, Cambridge University recorded the highest number of incidents, after introducing a new reporting system. Thanks to its communicative impact, The Guardian investigation allows a further analysis into the reasons why universities failed to tackle sexual misconduct and did not succeed in enacting reforms to support and protect victims. This could be one of the most significant aspects of post-modern universities, partly enhanced by the perception of danger, both psychological and physical. Thanks to The Guardian’s investigation, and media emphasis on those figures, it is possible to interpret universities as places of risk in an era marked both by connected knowledge and relationships and by mass slaughters and the collective risks sometimes stemming from the involvement in research activities in unsafe countries. Sexual harassment in universities – perpetrated especially by students, as The Guardian inquiry emphasizes – sheds a light on the silent but painfully awkward situation of victims, usually unable to denounce the misconduct perpetrated by both students and staff.

Keywords: risk society, university, misconduct, education, report

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Introduction. “How did it get to this?": The Guardian investigation on sexual harassment

“Universities are home to a rape epidemic. Here’s what they can do”. The headline of the article by Emily Reynolds (2018) alerted the academic communities, students and their families to the risks related to sexual misconduct in universities. This is what The Guardian investigation about sexual harassment in UK universities shows, a year after the recommendations issued by the higher education representative body Universities UK (UUK).

The attempts to tackle any potential incorrect and illicit behavior inside higher education institutions seem to have failed. A total of 4,500 students from 153 different UK institutions responded to the study, whose results - published in March 2018 - are quite shocking: 62% of university students and graduates have experienced sexual violence (accordingly to the Rape Crisis definition), including groping harassment, unwanted touching, coercion, sexual assault, rape.

The most shocking figure is that 8% of female respondents claimed they had been raped at university, double the 4% of all women in England and Wales that the Office for National Statistics estimates. This is one part of the most relevant data diffused by The Guardian soon after the conclusion of the investigation about sexual harassment in universities, carried out through a questionnaire anonymously filled up by former and current students. This figure was opportunely emphasized in the sub-headline of the article: “Nearly one in 10 female students who responded to a study of sexual violence in higher education said they had been raped. How did it get to this?” (Reynolds, 2018).

To the fore is the journalistic representation of risk inside educational institutions, not rarely involving violent events (terrorist massacres, mass shooting, fanaticism, abductions, rapes, etc.). Furthermore, the risks connected to the academic mobility in the alleged “unsafe” countries (especially in North Africa, Middle East and Latin America) should not to ignored, as the assassination of Giulio Regeni in Egypt and Valeria Solesin in Paris demonstrate. The death of the 24 year old Erasmus student Giacomo Nicolai, stabbed in Valencia in March 2017, along with the demise of Davide Maran in Lubiana on March 2018 suggest an underestimation of the risks concealed in a foreign country featuring different cultural paradigms and linguistic patterns (Lombardinilo, 2018b).

When something bad happens to a student or a young researcher engaged abroad, media reports usually emphasize the criminal events, reported as crime news. This is what happened when English student Meredith Kercher, attending the “Università per stranieri” in Perugia, died on November 1, 2007, assassinated in the notorious house in via della Pergola. The long ju-

dicial proceedings involving the former American Erasmus student Amanda Knox and the Italian engineering student Raffaele Sollecito became a media spectacle, both morbid and obsessive, with a particular focus on the alleged sexual implications of Meredith's murder. In that case, the involvement of foreign students in a criminal affair was abundantly exploited by media as an added value in terms of informative relevance¹.

Despite the mystery still enveloping the story, the involvement of the three university students indicates the possibility that any education experience may indirectly engender a negative event, especially when violence springs from the use of drugs. The myth of educational institutions as safe spaces becomes strained whenever students are compelled to undergo violent misconduct, inside and outside the educational perimeters.

The recurrent shootings on American campuses and in schools, as well as abuse by primary school staff and the frequent cases of bullying involving students in Italy, focuses reflection on why violence is perceived by public opinion only as a remote perspective within educational spaces (Scanagatta & Maccarini, 2009). Hence the media relevance of reports involving assassinated university students and researchers, especially those regularly attending degree courses in their own universities.

Much less relevant appear the concealed and specious forms of violence nestling in the academic environment, usually involving students. Sexual harassment has been neglected and underestimated for a long time, although many foreign universities have a specific office for the prevention of harassment and discrimination (Ophd). The UUK investigation sheds light on a deep-rooted and diffused phenomenon, probably unexpected in the dimension denounced by the newspaper. Nevertheless, the risks permeating the academic environment may refer not only to the uncertain identity of the perpetrators, often presenting psychic and medical conditions, but also to the misconduct of students and staff leading to sexual harassment and physical abuse.

This fact seems to mark our globalized modernity as well, triggered by eagerness for progress and connectivity. In the background is the phenomenology of risk society, surveyed by Beck referring to the metamorphosis of our communicative strategies: "In times of digital communication, world risk society accounts for an important structural dynamic through which global risks create new forms of 'communities'. To realize this structural dynamic

¹ That incident was reported worldwide and even became the subject of a movie. Furthermore, Amanda's experience was described in several documentaries. Exonerated as a murder suspect, Amanda is nowadays hosting a TV show about women who have been publicly shamed, even though she was at the center of a high-profile murder trial Rudy Guede's conviction for raping and then killing Meredith is judicial truth, which does not wipe out suspicion on Raffaele and Amanda, who allegedly took part in a sexual game that went wrong.

means to understand the metamorphosis of modern society in the digital age" (Beck, 2016, p. 127).

Higher education institutions are no exception, insofar as the transition to digitalization has implied deep changes both in learning and teaching skills (Peters & Roberts, 2012). Furthermore, internationalization and rationalization compel universities to build more dynamic scheduling, since accreditation and evaluation can no longer be neglected. Such profound changes are fueled by the communicative accelerations going on in the public sphere (Boccia Artieri, 2012; Castells, 2001).

The audience's perception of academic activities is sometimes dimmed by the negative news regarding professional misconduct, as Coetzee (2000) recounts in his novel *Disgrace*. Bad news is good news, of course. Nonetheless, the UUK report on sexual harassment deals with a phenomenon unreasonably underestimated, involving countless silent victims. The journalistic evidence on this issue certifies students' participation in the investigation, emphasizing the efficiency of the anonymous involvement.

On the one hand, the shocking figures published by The Guardian impose an attentive reflection on the collaborative synergies inside academic environments, confirming Sennett's analysis on the politics of cooperation going forward in functional institutions (Sennett, 2012). On the other hand, the misconduct reported by students seems to strengthen the concept of the individualized society proposed by Bauman, especially if we are dealing with the contrast between togetherness and individual style: "Individualization is here to stay: all who think about the means to deal with its impact on the fashion in which we all conduct our lives must start from acknowledging this fact" (Bauman, 2001, p. 50).

Risk society matches the individualized communities, in which the atomized individuals strive to pay attention to the sources of risks concealed in the daily act (Alexander, 2012). Universities and schools are not perceived as risk places, despite the not infrequent cases of infrastructural collapse, poisoning and abuse, both psychological and physical. The "symbolic capital" of academic actors (Bourdieu, 1988) is fading away, obscured by journalistic reports dedicated to the bad behavior of academic staff. The figures of the UUK investigation deserve to be framed into a sociological and communicative pattern, so as to realize the origins and the dimensions of a worrying tendency involving young university students.

Furthermore, the UUK investigation allows us to focus on the interpretation of universities as risk places, overshadowed by violence, uncertainty and insecurity. These facts are rife enough to impose a close reflection on academic misconduct: "Young women are often terrified about the consequences if they make a complaint about a staff member. So often, when they

do, the university’s chief concern is to downplay any wrongdoing and protect its own reputation by keeping the whole thing quiet” (Reynolds, 2018).

Downplay and wrongdoing are the keywords of this embarrassing phenomenon, undermining the traditional image of universities as safe places. Once again communication is a fundamental documentary resource, especially when it is broadcasted by authoritative media (Morcellini, 2013).

Risk society and university of risk: sociological notes

The rise of the phenomenon of misconduct and sexual harassment, along with the potential risks concealed in activities involving young researchers and students while abroad, legitimate a sociological interpretation of the academic environment as a risky place, featured by a tendency to minimize or underestimate the consequences of bad behavior. This might be one of the main characteristics of our post-modernity, probed by Maffesoli (2003).

Even though the boundary between connivance and abuse of power is usually clear-cut, the increase of sexual harassment imposes a careful reflection on the degeneration of behavior inside educational institutions, in line with the construction of the risk society drawn by Beck and the individualized society probed by Bauman. This heuristic approach can perhaps be developed through an analysis of the devaluation process of the traditional symbolic and intellectual paradigms, undermined by consumer fever, both social and economic (Baudrillard, 2017).

Educational institutions are no exception, since they have increasingly freed themselves of the solid old patterns of social value. The sense of uncertainty hovering around social actors matches the interpretative limits of our postmodern condition, marked by the end of “great narrations” (Lyotard, 1984), bolstered by the eagerness for connectivity and virtual participation in the relational dimension. What Beck emphasizes about the digital metamorphosis of our world is worth specific consideration:

“Digital communication has become the historical space for public communication. In the past it used to be particular territorial spaces, such as streets, public, churches. The advantages of the digital space are evident: groups can organize without moving physically, costs are low, the exchange happens in real time, physical violence is ruled out. In this sense protest and participation in the web are possible.” (Beck, 2016, 135).

The idea of the “Politics of visibility” evokes the contradiction within the practice of the internet as a relational environment. Together with the undeniable advantages of the non physical relationships taking form in the digital space, we are reminded that the psychological violence emerging on the internet can engender worrying consequences, as daily reports show. If

we take into account the profound changes fired by digital interactions in universities as well, then we observe the new forms of violence and psychological pressures going on in academic environments, despite the outstanding advantages of digital exchanges (De Martin, 2017; d'Alessandro, 2016).

Although "physical violence is ruled out", the web society, and in particular the educational actors, cannot set aside the sources of risk stemming from the erratic frequenting of the internet sphere, where images and words can be misused or manipulated. This is why Beck dwells on the appearance of "public bads" within the communication sphere, as *The Guardian* investigation confirms, inasmuch as the journalistic report of abuse and misconduct represents the acknowledgment of a new social and civil awareness by the victims of sexual harassment, in universities and at home as well.

The risk society triggers the disappearance of the ideas of safety, security and shelter, wiped out by the decline in religion, family and solidarity. Moreover, the media narration fuels the sense of precariousness marking the rise of global insecurity, fostered by the specter of terrorism, mass slaughter and natural catastrophes. Everything is about to become public, thanks to connected broadcasting:

"Side-effects or risk publicness, which centers on the production and distribution of bads (risks), develops in competition and conflict with this. Here the metamorphosis of communication and the public dimension begins to unfold. Side-effects publicness focuses on the culturally perceived violations of nationally organized progress that are widely ignored in the mainstream public." (Beck, 2017, pp. 130-131).

Crimes and misconduct that once could be neither told nor reported are now investigated by media and newspapers, thus feeding a new culture of publicity about physical and psychological abuse perpetrated by public actors². Violence perpetrated by subjects beyond suspicion usually becomes a media issue, since audiences are eager to be informed about misconduct or disgrace involving powerful people. Ambivalence seems to be one of the possible keywords of our relational dynamics, made more complex by the overlapping of digital interactions (Altheide & Snow, 1979).

This is what Bauman pointed out in reference to the value instability of the individualized society: "Ambivalence, ambiguity, equivocality... These words convey the feeling of mystery and enigma; they also signal trouble, whose name is uncertainty, and a dismal state of mind, called indecision or hesitation" (Bauman, 2001, p. 57). The lack of safety interlaces with the per-

² This is the case of reports of sexual harassment involving the American film producer Harvey Weinstein, reported on media by countless actresses. Weinstein's case became a media affair, bolstered by the debate going forward on the social networks.

ception of violence as an incumbent risk, hence our need to be protected by alarm systems.

Furthermore, diffidence may represent a self-protection remedy, imposed by our awareness of the risks inherent in everyday encounters and relationships, both occasional and professional. This is why Goffman’s theory of everyday life as a representation can supply us with useful advice on how to decipher the symbolic ambiguity of our life, coping with the ambiguity of words and gestures (Goffman, 1959).

The academic environment, according to Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic capital, is an authoritative interactional laboratory, marked by best practices and drawbacks as well. This is why we can still exploit the metaphor of the “embattled university” to underline the potential risks lurking in academic environments, as Habermas (1967) did soon after the murder of the German student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on June 2, 1967.

The construction of the University in democracy was inspired by the need to counteract the protests and clashes between students, police and academic governance, so as to lay the foundations of the incoming mass university. Furthermore, the image of Paul Virilio’s University of disaster allows us to reflect on the negative events happening in academic contexts, usually covered by silence. To the fore are the consequences of technological globalization: “Inhabiting the inhabitable every bit as much as harmful and uninhabitable instantaneity, the delocalization of our activities also taints the realm of knowledge essential for life, in particular, social life” (Virilio, 2009, p. 8).

Unexpectedly, globalization collides with social identity, undermined by the risks of individual indeterminacy. This is why Bauman’s focus on “modernity and clarity: the story of a failed romance” can be applied to educational institutions, as *The Guardian* investigation seems to bear out. Ambivalence is one of the most underestimated drawbacks of our everyday relationships, especially when role and functions are exploited in terms of power practice³.

Sometimes the boundary between evidence and suspicion can be unfathomable, thus nourishing the sense of ambiguity corroding professional and inter-personal interactions. In this sense, the advent of the cosmopolitan civilization engenders a new awareness of the risks concealed in places, institutions, environments once considered safe through the lack of perception of risks in such public structures.

³ “Instinctively or by learned habit, we dislike and fear ambivalence, that enemy of security and self-assurance. We are inclined to believe that we would feel much safer and more comfortable if situations were unambiguous – if it were clear what to do and certain what would happen if we did it” (Bauman, 2001, p. 56).

The communicative speedup makes us aware of the dangers hovering around social and private engagement, inasmuch as the instant sharing of information and images enables social actors to be more conscious of the negative consequences stemming from bad behavior and breach of trust. To the fore is the slow but constant dismantlement of public institutions, deprived of the authoritative value once recognized on a larger scale.

This is what Bauman highlights when he dwells on old and new violence, within the wider framework of the individualized society:

"Ours are times of transition in as far as the old structures are falling apart or have been dismantled, while no alternative structures with an equal institutional hold are about to be put in their place. It is as if the moulds into which human relationships were poured to acquire shape have now themselves been thrown into a melting pot." (Bauman, 2001, p. 212).

In such a fluctuating scenario, violence is an incumbent hypothesis, no longer connected to decay phenomena, but also related to the appearance of new forms of distress. Wholesale slaughter at schools and universities and terrorist attacks indifferently striking private and public places imply the rapid breakdown of educational institutions as safe environments, often reported by media exploiting an emotive theatricalization.

Misconduct and abuse in nursery schools, hospitals, asylums and old people's homes may keep pace with increasing sexual harassment and misconduct in educational institutions, including sports facilities, where the risk perception has never been so high as in our times. Safety is on the verge of belonging to the past when trust and faith were social clues.

The common perception of uncertainty becomes a permanent condition of suspicion with such attention focused on the potential risks posed even by those closest to us and those beyond all suspicion:

"The newly named varieties of family and neighborhood violence – such as marital rape, child abuse, sexual harassment at work, stalking, prowling – illustrate the 'reclassification' processes. The phenomena which all these outrage-and-panic-generating catch-words try to grasp are not new. They have been around for a long time, but either they were treated as 'natural' and suffered in silence like other unwelcome yet unavoidable nuisances of life, or they stayed unnoticed, like other features of 'normality'." (Bauman, 2001, pp. 213-214).

Bauman pays attention to the social meaning of this reclassification processes, triggered by the new communicative relevance that global violence gains in the public digital spheres. This is made possible by the faltering projection of a globalized community, allegedly founded on the unconditioned sharing of values, cultures, behavioral patterns (Augé, 1992).

Once again, cohabitation may fail when institutions are not able to dilute the consequences of sudden changes, as the migration phenomena show. Foreigners are usually those most at risk, projected as they are into an unknown and rarely hospitable world. As a matter of fact, the condition of the foreigner described by Sennett fits this sociological framework, featuring violence risks:

"Since the foreigner cannot become a universal citizen, cannot throw off the mantle of nationalism, then the only way he or she can cope with the heavy baggage of culture is to subject it to certain kinds of displacement, which lighten its burdensome weight." (Sennett, 2012, p. 92).

The sense of displacement afflicting the post-modern society described by Boudon (1984) is strengthened by the need to escape from violence and abuse, as asylum-seekers escaping from war areas show. Nonetheless, Bauman (1997) invites us not to underestimate certain forms of violence perpetrated in so called safe environments, especially educational and religious contexts.

The project of a universal cohesion founded on culture and education is becoming weaker and weaker, despite attempts to implement internationalization and mobility. The media relevance on "educational crimes" (such as sexual harassment, mass shootings and professional misconduct) has fortunately emphasized the lack of normality once characterizing such violence, often unnoticed or untold (Axelrod, 2002).

This is why our communicative acceleration supplies a new social consciousness about the diffusion of such a collective emergency, as The Guardian inquiry shows. Sexual harassment and stalking are some of the risks hiding in every professional context, increasingly reported by the media and victims. The construction of a digital public opinion may effectively fuel the process of emotional and psychological analysis of such tendencies, ever more urgent when they involve educational actors. This is made possible by the fact that "the discursive vitality of the public sphere plays a role in this process" (Habermas, 2009, p. 135).

The new interactional and informative potentials offered by the internet are an outstanding source of participation for students, who may bolster the reflexive process about improvement of the educational act (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The metaphor of the "embattled university" proposed by Graubard and Ballotti (1970) in the Seventies should be accepted in the light of the new digital evolutions of academic environments, subjected to new forms of risks, both individual and collective (Lombardinilo, 2018a).

The way to tackle the worrying scenario drawn by The Guardian inquiry should give due regard to the recuperation of the old academic authority, to be achieved through the practice of assessment, rationalization, efficiency

and legitimacy. This is what Stanley Hoffman pointed out in the volume edited by Graubard and Ballotti:

“Efficiency and legitimacy today go together. Efficiency requires the capacity to take an over-all view of the university’s problems so as to redefine its purposes. Legitimacy requires a less authoritarian and oligarchic structure, in which the constituents have a greater sense of responsible involvement (by contrast with mere emotional commitment without corresponding responsibilities).” (Hoffman, 1970, p. 203).

Responsibility is the main keyword of the reformist process still involving European universities, almost twenty years after the launch of the Bologna Process and the construction of a harmonized academic system. Unfortunately, the lack of offices for the prevention of harassment and discrimination can induce people to perpetrate violence towards the weakest actors attending our schools and universities. Students are often left alone when something wrong or bad happens.

This is why “broadening and democratization should not be separated” (Hoffman, 1970, p. 203), especially in times of globalized knowledge and permanent connectivity. Democratization, efficiency, information and legitimacy are to be adopted by universities worldwide, striving to contrast behavioral misconduct and tackle the negative effects of uncontrolled power. The most relevant risk is the underestimation of the effects of abuse.

This is one of the most important targets of the risky university of our times, closely related to the recovery of a new form of responsibility, more effective and reliable, along with the dismantlement of the traditional values of authority (Brown, 2009; Bowden & Marton, 1998).

Misconduct in the academic environment: research and narrative perspectives

The increase of rapes and sexual harassment in universities imposes a specific reflection on the more general phenomenon of sexual abuse in the workplace. The journalistic evidence gained on the misconduct in the academic environment sheds a light on the stronger awareness of victims, families and audience about the risks of an “unsafe” education.

The presence of offices for the prevention of harassment and discrimination in UK and US Universities confirms the attention paid to a dangerous tendency inside the higher education institutions, often enhanced by the spiral of silence and shame. This is what some important researches aim to demonstrate, focusing on the causes and consequences of sexual harassment perpetrated both by students and staff inside academic contexts.

Some general researches highlight a number of violent events on campuses and define the strategies for action, as for example Hoffman, Schuh

and Fenske (1998) did. *Campus violence* is paradigmatically the title of the work edited by Whitaker and Polland (1993), pointing out typologies, causes and measures able to tackle these issues. The list of general research on violence both in schools and universities could be longer. Mention should be made of the recent work by Clark and Kuhn (2017), *Violence in schools, colleges and universities*, further investigating the relationship between awkwardness and behavior among the youngest.

The book published by Bennett-Johnson (2004) deals with the American situation and analyzes the influence of mainstream violence on daily life in schools and colleges. Bullying is no exception, as Cowie and Myers (2016) demonstrate, also considering the cross-national aspects of the issue. In the meantime, scientific research tries to focus on the situation featuring single countries afflicted by a particular social emergency. Quinian, Fogel and Taylor (2017) deal with *Sexual Violence at Canadian Universities: Activism, Institutional Responses, and Strategies for Change*. They focus on the increase of sexual harassment episodes in a country considered safe.

Furthermore, Khaminwa and Nyambura (2006) analyzed the emerging violence in Kenya’s public universities, claiming the right to build a culture of peace and dialogue. Meanwhile, Dzurgba (2004) dealt with the *Violence and bloodshed in Nigerian universities*, marking the need to achieve peace and academic excellence as well. These works enable fuller awareness of the local characteristics of violent events inside schools and universities, especially in risky countries and safe environments. They confirm the deep social and educational shifts going on in the risky society drawn by Beck (1992), even though scholars aim to define some possible actions to prevent sexual harassment in educational systems as well.

This is what Carrigan Wooten and Mitchell (2017) do in their *Preventing Sexual Violence on Campus: Challenging Traditional Approaches through Program Innovation*. This book flanks the works by Murphy and van Brunt (2016), proposing a guide for *Practitioners and Faculty* to tackle sexual violence in higher education. Alastair J. D. Hibberd (2017) is more focused on *How University Policymakers Problematize Sexual Violence on Their Campus*, thus developing ‘a Policy Discourse Analysis’ on the issues. Vohlídalová’s (2012) book highlights the phenomenon of Sexual Harassment in universities from women’s point of view, reporting the barriers in Women’s Educational Paths and showing students’ coping strategies.

All these recent works can be allegedly connected to other older researches, pointing out the social and educational emergency engendered by violence at universities and schools. Such is the case of Long Tillar’s (1980) *Sexual harassment in Employment: Legal perspectives for University Administrators*, along with Wright Dziech & Weiner’s *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual*

harassment on Campus (1990), revolving around the misconduct and abuse of power by academics.

M. Diane Jordan's (1999) research dedicated to *Sexual Harassment: A Sourcebook of Policies in Colleges and Universities*, proposed in some reformist paths to tackle the academic abuse and develop a new culture of respect and loyalty. The violence inside academic contexts may become a narrative issue, as Nobel prize-winner John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* shows. The story of the relationship between an English literature professor, David Lurie, and his student Melania Isaacs, focuses on the interlacing of violence, loneliness and disease, as the novelist emphasizes in reference to the inappropriate exploitation of the professional status to seduce young subjects.

The relationship between the professor and his student, reported by the family and punished by the academic institutions, leads to the justified dismissal of the professor, who gives up any attempt to defend himself from the charge of sexual harassment and professional misconduct. This novel, commented on by Carine M. Mardorossian in an essay entitled *Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, provides a harsh and ruthless image of south-African academic reality, described realistically as follows: "Coetzee's book exposes not just the contingency of justice but also the deeply racialized nature of this contingency, whether the response to rape occurs in black South Africa or in the white liberal context of the university" (Mardorossian, 2011, p. 72).

To the fore is the dialectics between ambiguity and spontaneity, with a focus on the risks inherent in the construction of sentimental interactions between teachers and students. What happens to the main character of Coetzee's *Disgrace* deals with the moral and ethical deconstruction of the educational environment, reported by the novelist as an unfathomable tendency of our post-modern society, especially in a country marked by a high degree of violence.

52 years old and divorced, Coetzee's character "has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 1), frequenting a prostitute who suddenly decides to interrupt the relationship. Professor Lurie regularly gives lectures at university, but without any particular enthusiasm. His lessons are neither exciting nor fashionable, inasmuch as he is more concentrated on his research about Byron than on didactic engagement. Coetzee precisely describes his apathy:

"Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit. Nevertheless he fulfils to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 4).

Despite his apparent proficiency, his world is confined within the university library, affording an escape from the failures of his private life⁴. But one day something unpredictable happens. Professor Lurie is unaware of the catastrophic consequences of the casual meeting with a student on the way home:

"He is returning home one Friday evening, taking the long route through the old college gardens, when he notices one of his students on the path ahead of him. Her name is Melania Isaacs, from his Romantics course. Not the best student but not the worst either: clever enough, but unengaged." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 11).

Briefly, he falls in love with her, underestimating the dramatic developments of the facts. The family's reports and the academic inquiry lead to his dismissal from the university management. These facts undermine the family's perception of university as a secure place, thus nourishing the idea of an "unsafe" education, the concept of a "university in ruins" (Readings, 1996) embodied by inappropriate behavior and sexual misconduct.

Coetzee's narrative representation of such an issue helps us in further investigating the media and social impact of crimes connected to abuse of power inside the educational sphere, framed into the sociological pattern proposed also by Paul Virilio (2009) in his *University of disaster*. To the fore is the lack of prudence and attention in the practice of misconduct by academic actors involved in sexual affairs. Professor's Lurie's words in the presence of the academic investigator are highly damaging: "There are more important things in life than being prudent" (Virilio, 2009, p. 49).

This is his answer to his colleagues on the internal committee, appointed to inquire about the facts. The decision not to respond to the charges and the acceptance of the version of facts proposed by those accusing him seem to enhance the perception of the academic environment as a narcissistic actor, so persuaded of the role and authoritativeness of their intellectual involvement. Lurie embodies the essence of post-modern egotism, leading to the underestimation of the boundary between seduction and prevarication. Whereas his colleagues try to persuade him to backtrack and admit his moral errors, he does not seem at all interested in convincing the prosecution of his repentance⁵.

⁴ "He spends more time in the university library, reading all he can find on the wider Byron circle, adding to notes that already fill two fat files. He enjoys the late-afternoon quiet of the reading room, enjoys the walk home afterwards: the brisk winter air, the damp, gleaming streets" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 11)

⁵ Thus, when Dr Rassool is requested of his opinion, he points out: "Yes. I want to register an objection to these responses of Professor Lurie's, which I regard as fundamentally evasive. Professor Lurie says he accepts the charges. Yet when we try to pin him down on what it is that he actually accepts, all we get is subtle mockery. To me that suggests that he accepts the charges only in name. In a case with overtones like this one, the wider community is

Coetzee's novel shows the social and representative force of the literary medium, especially when novels cope with the social phenomenology of reality. Misconduct and sexual abuse in universities worldwide are no exception, in compliance with the sociological and educational factors related to the infraction of the academic reputation. Literary narration may represent a sociological medium, especially when a great novelist such as J. M. Coetzee decides to probe the contrast between instinct and reason inside and outside the academic environment⁶.

The Guardian and the figures of a concealed scandal: journalistic evidences

The Guardian extensively emphasized the figures of the UUK report, thus highlighting the dimension of a real educational emergency. The relationship between "Rape and sexual assault" is accepted as an alarming reality found in universities, where students may become victims of the academic staff's misconduct.

This is what Sally Weale and David Batty point out in The Guardian on October 21, 2016. In their article, entitled "University abuse report fails to tackle staff attacks on UK students", they deal with the serious situation outlined by the UUK recommendations, which had the merit of denouncing not so rare inappropriate behavior on academic campuses, often tolerated by both students and academic governance. It is in particular the failure to tackle sexual harassment that is emphasized in the report, properly focused on the persistent silence imposed on this issue.

The inquiry was begun in 2015 due to the growing alarm about harassment and sexual violence in universities. It concerns the way some of them intended to contrast the problem. The main purpose is to create a "zero-tolerance culture", recommending the creation of a centralized reporting system and an annual conference to share experiences and good practices. This endeavor requires well-trained staff, capable of realizing the real needs of students and dealing with the conspiracy of silence.

Communication, information and sharing are three strategic keywords, and a reporting system actively tackling misconduct and violence towards young women. Furthermore, the taskforce has published guidance to universities about managing situations in which a student's behavior may consti-

entitled –" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 50).

⁶ As Carin Mardorossian argues, "the disciplinary hearing to which Lurie is subjected as well as its parodying of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's proceedings also seem to legitimize Lurie's perspective so much so that his appeal to an instinctual paradigm of Byronic desire ultimately feels less extreme than the university's appropriation of human rights discourse in response to his crime" (Mardorossian, 79).

tute a criminal offence. This guidance is about to replace the so-called Zellick guidelines dating back to 1994.

In particular, The Guardian’s report dwells on the reactions of the campaigners, providing journalists with significant evidence of the violence suffered by academic staff. The UUK report may be interpreted as a valuable sample of anti-academic cooperation, targeted to contrast a seriously underestimated phenomenon.

“Campaigners said the report, by the higher education representative body Universities UK (UUK), failed to tackle staff-student harassment adequately, focusing almost exclusively on incidents between students but also described it as a positive first step.” (Weale & Batty, 2016).

The alarming figures of the report require a prompt tackling strategy, inasmuch as sexual harassment and rapes risk being an endemic disease, with such dangerous consequences for the reliability and attractiveness of universities. Communication and reports may enforce awareness of the relevance of the problem, as the Guardian inquiry shows. “Changing the Culture” is the last of a series of exclusive reports (in The Guardian) certifying the scale of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated by students and university staff on students and more junior colleagues. The social function of this communicative strategy is empowered by the gravity of the problem, imposing an attentive reflection on the risks lurking on university campuses.

The Guardian received approximately 200 statements, mainly from women, “detailing incidents of sexual harassment, assault and rape, carried out by staff often on postgraduate and PhD students at a wide range of UK universities, including those in the elite Russell Group” (Weale & Batty, 2016). The report confirms that students’ and academic misconduct concern both public and private universities, with no differentiation of social origin, financial condition or religious faith. Allegedly, the relationship between violence and educational contexts has nothing to do with belonging to a specific academic community, since risks are found in every relational environment ruled by hierarchy and submission.

Furthermore, the report highlights the scale of online harassment and hate crimes, especially involving the social networks. To the fore is the lack of effective counteraction and academic shortcomings in understanding the gravity of such shocking evidence⁷.

The report paints a picture of the academic environment as a social space not free of the uncertainties and risks permeating other professional con-

⁷ The report revealed a worrying lack of data within universities on how many UK students are affected by incidents of sexual violence. The taskforce, made up of university leaders, students and academic experts, also highlighted shortcomings in prevention and response in some institutions (Weale & Batty, 2016).

texts, in which misconduct and abuse are even more frequent. The educational institutions should be safe from any behavioral abuse, especially when they lead to interpersonal embarrassment. This aspect is underlined by former Universities minister Jo Johnson:

"We must now ensure that the work this taskforce has done goes on to make a real difference to students across the country. So I have asked UUK to survey progress in six months and make sure universities are doing all they can to protect the safety and security of their students." (Weale & Batty, 2016).

Hareem Ghani, the National Union of Students (NUS) women's officer, emphasized the social impact of the issue, also connected to the advent of the "post-Brexit society": "We know sexual harassment and violence is prevalent on our campuses and women are disproportionately affected by this. In our post-Brexit society we have become only too aware of the steep rise in hate crime" (Weale & Batty, 2016). The worrying scenario depicted by the UUK taskforce and their recommendations for improvement were confirmed by The Guardian investigation, summarized in the article by David Batty and Elena Cherubini, entitled "UK universities accused of failing to tackle sexual misconduct" (March 28, 2018).

Along with the shocking figures of the investigation, the report deals with the shortcomings of universities in tackling sexual abuse and violence, as the same sub-headline points out: "Guardian investigation finds many have not enacted reforms to support and protect victims". The communicative emphasis on the academic defaults interlaces with the social relevance of such a worrying scenario, afflicting UK university campuses to such a large extent. This is what The Guardian report highlights, supplying students with a small sample survey they could fill up online anonymously.

What is more shocking is that Freedom of information (FoI) found there were at least 1,953 reports of sexual misconduct perpetrated by students and staff at UK universities in the past seven years. These figures come from the analysis of the requests sent to 132 universities. "There were another 213 incidents over this period where the alleged perpetrator's identity was not recorded, which universities noted might include further allegations against students and staff" (Batty & Cherubini, 2018).

Hence follows the construction of a culture of suspicion, involving both academic staff and students. This is why The Guardian investigation may help us wipe out all the possible misunderstandings and underestimations of the phenomenon, especially because it deals with the capability of universities to contrast drawbacks and criticalities, regardless of any minimizing attempt.

Nevertheless, the features display a limited progress in tackling the spread of academic misconduct:

“The report also found that a fifth of institutions included in the survey had made very limited progress, and overall there was far less evidence of new measures to address staff-to-student misconduct. It also called for a greater focus on hate crime and hate-based harassment.” (Batty & Cherubini, 2018).

Despite the high number of cases of abuse perpetrated on women by the academic staff, universities have culpably underestimated the repetition of such cases, only occasionally leading to suspension or expulsion. This is what Sarah Green, co-director of the “End Violence Against Women coalition”, presumes: “It’s disappointing that the reporting is so inconsistent. The UUK taskforce made some strong recommendations but we are worried that momentum is being lost” (Batty & Cherubini, 2018).

The gender relevance of the phenomenon is emphasized by The Guardian investigation, according to the tendency to exploit the academic role to perpetrate violence on weak subjects who may often prefer not to report abuse rather than undergo a judicial experience. Nevertheless, universities are trying to tackle the spread of harassment, as the Freedom of information (FOI) survey highlights.

There were at least 732 investigations into sexual misconduct by students and staff. At least 54 staff were suspended, usually on a temporary basis during an investigation. Only 20 staff were banned from teaching. This was also usually a temporary measure. Less than half (62) of the universities surveyed offered training on sexual consent to students, and this was only compulsory at six institutions.

The university that recorded the most incidents was Cambridge. Between 2011-12 and 2017-18 there were at least 215 reports of student and staff misconduct. This high number compelled university to introduce a new system allowing students and staff to disclose incidents anonymously, “leading to 128 reports in none months”. In contrast, only three complaints were recorded between 2011-12 and 2015-16. The second highest number of cases over seven years was recorded at Durham University (88), where a full-time officer is dedicated to this problem. The vast majority of allegations – at least 1,133 – were made against students, compared with 264 against staff.

Of course, government stigmatizes such a worrying tendency. The universities minister, Sam Gyimah, said: “We encourage institutions to take a proactive response to tackle sexual harassment, including ensuring that students feel confident and able to report any issues” (Batty & Cherubini, 2018). In spite of the attempts to contrast such problems, The Guardian highlights that UK universities have been accused of a complacent and inadequate response to sexual harassment and gender violence after a Guardian investigation found inconsistencies in the support and services offered to victims across the country. This is what is reported in another article entitled “UK

universities accused of complacency over sexual misconduct”: “Almost two-thirds of universities said they did not have harassment advisers or sexual violence liaison officers who had in-depth training on responding to sexual misconduct” (Batty, Bengtsson, & Weale, 2018).

Briefly, the features of The Guardian investigation show the scale of a phenomenon that the same academic institutions might have minimized in some cases, also because of the tendency of the victims not to report the abuse perpetrated inside the academic environment. Nonetheless, some significant research confirms the gravity of such an issue, mining the credibility of higher education systems. For example, in the volume entitled *Gender based violence in university communities: Policy, Prevention and educational initiatives*, the editors Sundari Anitha and Ruth Lewis (2018) point out that until recently, higher education in the UK has largely failed to recognise gender-based violence (GBV) on campuses.

Thanks to the UK government task force set up in 2015, universities are becoming more aware of the issue, hence the first in-depth overview of research and practice in GBV in universities, provided by academics and practitioners. They set out the international context of ideologies, politics and institutional structures underlying responses to GBV elsewhere in Europe, in the US and in Australia, and consider the implications of implementing related policy and practice.

Presenting examples of innovative British approaches to engagement with the issue, the book also considers UK, EU and UN legislation to give an international perspective, making it of direct use to discussions of ‘what works’ in preventing GBV. However, universities are trying to tackle the diffusion of such a plague, both in the UK and America, where “State legislatures have responded, for example, by increasing the drinking age and implementing state laws related to hate crimes, antihazing, and ‘duty to warn’” (Hartwell & Kushilab, 1998, p. 273).

Universities have strengthened student codes of conduct, provided escort services, increased security, and developed educational programs regarding a variety of topics addressing violence on campus including “date rape”, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and “hate-speech” activities. This is what K. Hartwell Hunnicutt and P. Kushilab underline in *The Legal Response to Violence on Campus*, focused on the potential legal strategies to be developed to contrast academic misconduct and abuse.

These attempts cope with the need to renovate the administrative organization of university government (Frank & Gabler, 2006), with specific attention on the effective inclusion of students and young researchers in the decisional processes, as claimed by Habermas (1967) when the students’ movement was about to take form. The reform of the academic government should take into account the process of inclusion nurtured by the advent of

the connected society, founded on synchronized relationships and interactions.

Divisions and contrasts inside the academic space may hamper the scientific and social growth of a functional system inspired by the constant interaction between students and teachers, since the appearance of the first medieval universities (Kerr, 2001). This is why

“Leaders seeking to manage growth added administrative divisions that reflected a growing need to coordinate staff and resources. New units such as strategic planning, enrollment management, and research and assessment came into being and added to the complexity of administration while expanding the layers of bureaucracy.” (Alfred & Rosevear, 2000, p. 1).

All these factors go to outline the idea of a risk university, marked by uncertainties, dangers, worries, difficulties. This is why the metaphor of the “embattled university” proposed by Grabaurd and Ballotti can still be useful to interpret the dire straits concealed in academic life. This issue concerns the definition of “the styles of academic culture”, related by Jill Conway to the crisis of academic institutions, requiring a proactive approach in terms of reform planning:

“The present crisis in universities should not be regarded as the result of a breakdown of authority which brings in its train the politicization of a community which was formerly a-political. It should be viewed instead as a crisis in which the university is no longer able to carry on the political task which it has hitherto managed with some success.” (Conway, 1970, p. 49).

The figures of The Guardian investigation force us to reflect on the almost permanent crisis condition of our post-modern universities, affecting the value and ethic sphere of the academic act, entangled in the recurrence of misconduct and inappropriate behavior. The journalistic narration of such drawbacks compels scholars and academic operators to pay more attention to this phenomenon, framed into the sociological and educational scenario of the risk university taking form in our complex times (Znaniiecki, 1996).

Conclusion

The figures of The Guardian inquiry, together with the recent research results, demand careful reflection on the difficulties involved in tackling the phenomenon of sexual harassment in academic environments, specifically in England.

The Guardian investigation helps us probe not only the communicative impact of such an issue, but also the heuristic dimension of this problem,

dealing with the risks within educational contexts. The sociological framework provided by Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman may legitimate the interpretation of academic institutions as risky places, strengthened by the dangers residing in countries and cities considered to be insecure.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the embattled university drawn by Grabaud and Ballotti and the idea of the university of disaster developed by Virilio direct attention to the concealed risks, both physical and psychological, permeating academic institutions. The media narration of violent events inside universities confirms the close relationship between journalistic relevance and unexpected infractions, with particular regard to the criminal events taking place in locations usually considered safe.

Sexual harassment and misconduct require prompt tackling strategy by universities, compelled to counteract the abuse of power perpetrated by students and academic staff, as Coetzee relates in his novel *Disgrace*. Professor Lurie's story is both a paradigmatic case and a worrying representation, inspired by the underestimation of ambiguity and superficiality. Coetzee's novel deals with the social, professional and media implications of Lurie's sentimental involvement with his student, thus engendering the negative opinion of citizens, colleagues and relatives. His resignation from university is the failure of his educational endeavor, specifically due to the report of his misconduct.

The rhetoric on sexual harassment mingles with the harshness and ruthlessness of violence perpetrated on the weakest subjects, at times subjugated by the fascination of role and authoritativeness. UK universities seem to be linked to the worldwide academies, probed by researchers and novelists in order to analyze the social and educational implications connected to "unsafe" education. A few rare cases cannot undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the academic engagement.

As Veblen remarked in 1918, "the presence of scholars and scientists of accepted standing is indispensable to the university to the university, as a means of keeping up its prestige" (Veblen, 1968, p. 128). Nonetheless, we must not neglect the drawbacks stemming from the rapid metamorphosis that universities face in the era of globalization (Serpieri, 2018), marked by the media inquiry on the risks hidden (or imagined) in daily life (Barnett, 2013).

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