

Diario di uno scienziato (1950–2000) [Diary of a Scientist (1950–2000)]

Davide Schiffer

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The series of rapid scientific advances between 1950 and 2000, together with the disruption of what had appeared to be consolidated paradigms, gave rise to one of the most complex but fascinating periods in the history of science, which was also a period of profound changes in Italian society that inevitably affected both the academic world and the organisation of public health services. It is these 50 years that form the backdrop to this book by Davide Schiffer, *Diario di uno scienziato*, in which he gives an account of his working life as a neurologist and neuropathologist. Together with the book published about three years ago (*Non c'è ritorno a casa...* [No return home...]), which speaks about his youthful experiences during the years of racial persecution and the Second World War, *Diario di uno scienziato* tells the story of his scientific, medical and philosophical development, which ranges from Sartre to Popper and, above all, from the microscope to his patients' bedside.

The word *Diary* in the title is simultaneously appropriate and misleading: appropriate because the book describes the various stages in the life of Davide Schiffer from the time he chose the medical specialisation that was rapidly to become an all-absorbing experience; misleading because, far from being a mere chronicle, it offers a complex itinerary that uses his personal experiences as a basis for analysing the evolution of Italian society during the second half of the twentieth century. It should therefore come as no surprise that the narration of events and the entertaining (sometimes almost Dickensian) descriptions of characters alternate with wide-ranging reflections on science, research, philosophy and classical literary culture. Particularly interesting is the portrait of Professor Fortini, the hieratic Director of the Institute of Mental and Nervous Diseases, who Schiffer asked to provide the title of his thesis in 1951; Fortini is a prototype of the 'barons' who once represented such a distinctive part of Italian university life, accustomed to wielding authoritarian and almost autocratic power, but also endowed with a profound scientific and humanist culture. Another important figure in the story is Professor Montanaro, a slightly older friend but, above all, a sort of antagonist of Schiffer. Page after page, he becomes the personification of everything that Schiffer is not and

does not want to be (i.e., a man of power), but also serves as a paradigmatic example of a number of human and physical attributes ('Montanaro was well-built, tall and energetic, with the look of a bully but good at heart') that Schiffer felt he did not possess to the same extent and, perhaps, deep-down actually admired.

At the time of his graduation, the young Schiffer found himself having to choose between the humanist culture he loved so much and science, the call of which was to prevail over a myriad of material difficulties. However, even as his knowledge increased to the point of his becoming internationally renowned and the noble father of Italian neuropathology, he became increasingly aware that what he knew was only a small grain of what there was to know and that, however important it may be, his contribution would eventually prove to be fallacious because every discovery is destined to be nothing but an approximation of the Truth, and will therefore be punctually disproved or superseded. This pessimistic awareness is attenuated only by the conviction that he had always worked disinterestedly, with a dedication that was so absolute as to lead him to sacrifice his private life to his incessant search for knowing.

Although acknowledging its many extenuating circumstances, Schiffer acutely analyses and bitterly criticises the organisation of Italy's universities and health services and, consequently, stigmatises the limitations and errors of many of its protagonists – among whom he includes himself for having been more of a spectator than a player, and therefore incapable of overcoming the deficiencies of the system of which he was an integral part. By telling of his personal experiences, Schiffer encourages the reader to examine the harm caused by the post-1968 reforms, especially the virtual disappearance of any evaluation of merit and the fragmentation of decision-making responsibilities that lead to paralysis (as exemplified in the pages dedicated to the creation of the Neuropathology Laboratory in Turin, which was the largest in Europe). Schiffer reveals a certain pessimism not so much and not only concerning the cultural level of Italian society (which sometimes rewards appearances rather substance) and the struggle for a power which, once obtained, may be nothing but an empty simulacrum of itself, but above all in relation to the scientific relativism that leads to 'suspended life'. A limitation of this bitter analysis is the absence of a positive perspective, an indication of possible solutions to such lucidly delineated problems, or even a stimulus for the future improvement of Italian universities and the organisation of the national health service.

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