

evolved only gradually: though some people thought this a century ago, it was established only in the 1960s.

Khakhina is loth to make historical judgements, writing that Elenkin's view that Famintsin conceived symbiogenesis long before his discovery of the dual nature of lichens, and P. Borodin's totally contradictory view that the lichen discovery led to the idea of symbiogenesis, both "seem just": clearly at least one must be wrong. A reluctance to take sides or to be critical of dogma is perhaps understandable for someone writing in the Soviet Union of the 1970s. Equally understandable is her praise of symbiogenesis as approaching "a truly dialectical understanding of the factors of organic evolution" and her nationalistic conclusion that "Russian scientists played a leading role in developing the concept of symbiogenesis, particularly in the early stages"; this exaggeration appears plausible only because the book largely ignores non-Russians, except for Margulis, whose contributions are overstated.

One day, there will be a decent history of research on the origin of cell organelles by symbiogenesis. This one, I am afraid, is too distorted by propaganda. □

*T. Cavalier-Smith is in the Department of Botany, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z4.*

## La dolce vita?

Giovanni F. Bignami

**L'università dei Tre Tradimenti.** By Raffaele Simone. Laterza: 1993. Pp. 151. L13,000.

FULL professors in Italian universities, some of them unfondly known as *baroni*, all lust for power. Some have it but none of them really control the powers that rule over their own university and which could (if properly directed) make it work. But how does one become a full professor in Italy? Easy, just follow the few written and many unwritten rules clearly given in the chapter "How to get in". You'll learn about the laws of "primordial affiliation", of "exchange of academic gifts", of "rewarded loyalty" and more. And if you think that these are self-explanatory, beware: Italian academia has more facets than you or I can hope to fathom. Even in his courageous and brilliant pamphlet, Simone, lest he bore the reader, shies away from describing precisely how to get a chair in an Italian university. You actually get it by winning a *concorso*, a national competition judged by ministerially appointed committees where the needs of individual universities are diluted if not lost to academic bargaining at best.

Some time ago, D. Burr explained the process (*Nature* 357, 273; 1992); he used a whole page and still only covered part of the subject. He also gave up on translating the Italian word *concorso*, the heart of the professorship procedure. (It is actually best grasped from its obvious Latin origin: *cum correre*, to run together ....) That exposé was indeed necessary in the wake of a flurry of letters, obscure, I suspect, to the average *Nature* reader, from Italian academics unhappy about the outcome of the last round of *concorsi*. By necessity, most of those letters were grouped together under 'academic promotion'. To an Italian ear, however, 'promotion' sounds a totally inadequate rendering for the radical change in official and social status that comes with winning a *concorso*.

It will be a challenging, and very useful, task to translate into English this book by Simone, himself a linguist. At the mo-

Dei. (Simone, however, makes a point in his opening quotation of Karl Kraus, that "it is not always appropriate to name names ....") J. LaPalombara, a student of things Italian and a personal friend of a former prime minister (also, of course, a full professor), calls the system one "of strict cooptation" (*Democracy Italian Style*, Yale University Press; 1987).

The professors' *nòstos* is bad for the students, towards whom the most important of the three treasons is directed. It may, by contrast, be negligible, considering Simone's postulate on indifference towards students: "no one cares about students in Italian universities". A concept that does no justice to many a hard-working and available colleague, but which is, on average, sadly true, and especially so in the small, "provincial" universities. And it is not just the professors who are at fault. The whole ministerial machinery wastes human and practical resources in local mini-campuses, underdeveloped and underattended, frequently only created for local, quasi-political interests. This blatant waste of limited state resources is the second of the three treasons, not always easy to appreciate for outsiders, and one which escaped the poignant analysis, now a few years old, of B. R. Clark (*Academic Power in Italy*, Chicago University Press; 1977).

Now for the third treason: that towards research, by law one of the *raisons d'être* of the Italian university system. It may, in selected cases, be of some relevance, but it is more frequently "irrelevant" and, paradoxically, is by and large impossible, owing to lack of funds and the abundance of red tape. Simone, a humanist bordering on science, draws here a

fine line between humanities and science. In the former, irrelevant research is more frequent than in the latter, and not just because of the keen international competitiveness of science. Physicists in particular and scientists in general, we learn, are "more attached to their trade", for reasons which, Simone says, defy explanation. (How about "because it's there"?)

A delightful and important book, not about corruption but about reality in the Italian university system. It is easy to predict that it will become a bestseller at least in Italy though, of course, not among our students, the logical target for the book. Rather among professors, keenly bent on discovering the various treacheries of their own colleagues. □

*Giovanni F. Bignami is in the Istituto per Ricerche in Fisica Cosmica e Tecnologie Relative, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Via E. Bassini 15, 20133 Milano, Italy.*

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### The 'old-boy network' can come in handy.

ment, you not only need to be proficient in Italian, but also be conversant with classical Greek, for example to appreciate the concept of "*nòstos*", one of the plagues, according to Simone, of our universities. Heroes in classical mythology had to spend a large part of their life wandering in desolate and hostile places doing, by definition, heroic deeds. Eventually they felt they had earned their right to and started longing for, their *nòstos*, a triumphal and touching homecoming. Not that Italian university professors have much in common with Greek heroes but, after winning their *concorso* and serving out their prescribed time in a small university, they all want to come back to their parent institution, usually one of the big ten, out of the 60 or so in the country. But positions in big universities are few and coveted, so here is where the 'old-boy' network comes in handy, or better still, membership of the freemasons or Opus