



MULTIPLE INTERVIEW: ERASMUS AND PHILOSOPHY: UNIVERSITIES COMPARED

Martina Rovelli

INTRODUCTION. The Erasmus programme (Lifelong Learning Programme, Erasmus) is an important tool that the European Union offers in support of student mobility. With Erasmus, students have the opportunity to live a complete experience of study abroad: attending courses, taking exams, preparing and writing their final dissertation, but also challenging themselves with different methods of teaching and learning. The interview was born from the idea that comparison with other universities is fundamental in order to understand merits and demerits of one's own. The purpose of the interview was not only to look at similarities and differences in the way Philosophy is taught and studied abroad and in Italy, but also to think about pros and cons of the respective systems. The interview was conducted with some colleagues of the University of Milan, which was taken as a sample, due to its relevance among Italian universities. Our specific interest in analytic philosophy then determined the selection, as samples from abroad, of universities notoriously belonging to this tradition: *King's College London, Universitat de Barcelona, Universiteit van Amsterdam, University of Oslo.*

1 Interview with a Giada Fratantonio

King's College, London

Giada took part in the Erasmus programme during the first year of her MA in Philosophy at the University of Milan. She spent her Erasmus at *King's College London*, in London (United Kingdom), where she stayed 10 months, from September 2012 to June 2013. She took exams in *General Philosophy, Foundations of Analytic Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, 19th Century Continental Philosophy, Kant II: Ethics and Aesthetics.*

Let's start from the amount of work. I mean the amount of hours of classes per week, readings and, possibly, homework: things of this sort. All in all, would you judge your amount of work at King's more or less demanding than the one you

were used to in Italy? The amount of work is surely very high. In addition to lectures and seminars, which are highly recommended (if not compulsory), there is a high number of hours of study and research to do in the library. Exams are also very different. There are no notional exams. This makes sure that research and deep reading of critical literature take place instead of the study of whole books. In addition to the research necessary to write essays, there is the study and the work required for the preparation of presentations to be given in class.

Generally, in Italy, the lecture predominates and moments specifically dedicated to discussion and debate are rare. Probably, several factors, such as the number of students, timetables, the availability of rooms, play an important role in determining this tendency. Thus, it would be interesting to see whether and how universities abroad allow for a bigger exchange of ideas. What were classes in your abroad institution like? Classes were divided into a first part, the lecture, and a second part, the seminar, devoted to discussion of the topics talked about in the lecture. Surely, the second part, the seminar, was a big novelty for me. Generally, lectures are open to anyone and in common for graduates and undergraduates. By contrast, only students officially enrolled in the class are allowed to seminars. Therefore, the number of students taking part to the seminar is quite small: ten to twenty. I even had a seminar with only five people. Evidently, the small number of students makes the seminar the perfect occasion for a real debate between the professor and the students. An occasion to clarify doubts derived from what has been discussed during the lecture and to raise new doubts. I must confess I was very surprised and amazed when one of the professors, calling me by name (!!!), asked me: "*Giada, what do you think about it?*". The seminar is also the moment when students give a small presentation (10-15 minutes): they give a summary of an article and take a stand on it (or at least, try to).

Let's talk about writing. Notoriously, in Italy, Philosophy students do not write much during their studies. During your experience of study abroad, did you have to write philosophical essays? If so, did your previous studies, in Italy, adequately help you do it? The essay is the most common way to take exams at King's College. Typically, there are two deadlines: one at half term and one at the end of the term. By the first deadline, students must send a formative essay of around 2000 words. This is then resent to the students with comments. This formative essay is the initial draft, the starting point from which the summative essay, due to the end of the term, will be developed. The grade of the formative essay has no effective value; in fact, it is just indicative. The formative essay is, then, one of the most important occasions that students have to check their understanding of the issue and, what's more, to verify that their arguments have no contradiction. What is asked is rarely a descriptive-compilatory work. Generally, what is asked is to choose a specific issue, and to argue in favor or against a specific thesis. This approach has pros and cons. It is the moment when you learn to do philosophy, where for "doing philosophy" I mean sustain one's own thesis by presenting arguments for it. This is, surely, the positive aspect. The risk, however, is to lose the overview, the general context. You study a specific issue in detail, but at the expense of the rest. Although there are professors who opt for written exams, in Italy the majority of exams is notoriously oral (except for the final dissertation). Writing essays, therefore, has been a complete new experience for me.

In Philosophy courses, in Italy, exams are generally oral and this seems to play an important role in determining methods and standards of evaluation: it seems that, in an oral exam, it is much more difficult for a student to make sure that her theses are original, her arguments cogent, her vocabulary accurate. In many cases, this seems to lead to exams that only test for knowledge. Did you have to take written exams abroad? Which criteria were used for their evaluation? Exams are all written at King's College. The majority of them, as I said before, are essays. Essays are uploaded on an internet platform anonymously. A specific application is used in the search for plagiarism (every correspondence between the essay and published material, if not adequately quoted, is considered plagiarism). Beyond a certain percentage of plagiarism, the essay is invalid. Therefore, the evaluation system is very strict.

Is there any other factor, not strictly related to teaching (such as societies, associations, or other non-curricular activities), that has influenced, motivated, enriched your studies? At King's College, as in any other British-like university I think, there are societies of any kind: sport, music, theatre, and, obviously, academic societies. Every Wednesday, the *Philosophy Society* used to organize seminars given by Master and PhD students. Discussion with my classmates has influenced a lot my studies. Even just sharing interest for the topics has been fundamentally important. In Italy I have always missed this aspect of university life, but I guess it was due to my being from a different town and travelling to and back from Uni every day. Moreover, the small number of students in each course in British universities allows for the formation of a real group, which is unlikely to happen in Milan.

It's time to conclude: what do you think Italian Philosophy courses should learn from British ones and vice versa? What I found amazing at King's College is how much importance is attributed to the development of critical reasoning. You are continuously asked to say what you think, not merely by appeal to *auctoritates* but by arguing for your theses. At the same time, you must be ready to challenge your own ideas and respect others'. Italian courses, in my opinion, should do more to promote the development of critical reasoning. However, this is evidently prevented by several factors which sadly make it difficult, if not impossible, to adopt a British approach. On the other hand, I reckon that Italian universities have much to teach to the ones abroad. If it is true that the mere study of ideas and facts of the history of philosophy is sterile, it is also true that it represents an important basis from which to start. As I said above, taking written exams allows to develop critical reasoning. This, however, can be at the expense of a broader overview.

2 Interview with Martina Rosola

Universitat de Barcelona

Martina is spending her Erasmus at the *Universitat de Barcelona*, in Barcelona (Spain), during her third year of bachelor at the University of Milan. Her Erasmus lasts 9 months and, as Martina left for Barcelona in September 2013, her stay has not yet come to an end. Together with a Spanish class for Erasmus students, Martina has taken *Filosofia de la ciencia*, *Filosofia del lenguaje*, *Filosofia del lenguaje y de la mente*, *Problemes filosofics 1 y 2*, *Questiones de historia de filosofia contemporanea 3*, *Questiones de filosofia politica 2*.

Let's start from the amount of work. I mean the amount of hours of classes per week, readings and, possibly, homework: things of this sort. All in all, would you judge your amount of work at King's more or less demanding than the one you were used to in Italy? All in all, I reckon that the amount of work is lower than the one I used to have at UNIMI. Even if it is structured very differently: the amount of hours of classes per credit is the same. But classes last 15 weeks instead of 10; exams are divided into parts and include works to do at home or in groups, rather than being big final exams as in Milan. During classes, you have much more to do, but then the exams are all in one week and about what has been discussed in class.

Generally, in Italy, the *lecture* predominates and moments specifically dedicated to discussion and debate are rare. Probably, several factors, such as the number of students, timetables, the availability of rooms, play an important role in determining this tendency. Thus, it would be interesting to see whether and how universities abroad allow for a bigger exchange of ideas. What were classes in your abroad institution like? Classes are much more interactive. Classrooms are smaller and not very crowded, and this allows professors to ask questions and expect students to answer. Moreover, for every class there is some time when you work in groups, so the number of students is even lower. These moments resemble our "*laboratories*" in that they are dedicated to analyzing texts more than attending a lecture.

Let's talk about writing. Notoriously, in Italy, Philosophy students do not write much during their studies. During your experience of study abroad, did you have to write philosophical essays? If so, did your previous studies, in Italy, adequately help you do it? In Spain everything is written. They do not take exams orally as we do. The fact that everything is written does not refer just to essays, but also to tests to be taken in class. As for essays, even if I had to get used to writing again (that I hadn't done since the high school exams) I didn't feel unprepared. In fact, my studies made me used to read texts and organize what I want to say in a way that allowed me to write without too much difficulty. Something much more difficult has been to get used again to take exams with a limit of time and to interpret questions, which are formulated in a way that is very different from ours.

In Philosophy courses, in Italy, exams are generally oral and this seems to play an important role in determining methods and standards of evaluation: it seems that, in an oral exam, it is much more difficult for a student to make sure that her theses are original, her arguments cogent, her vocabulary accurate. In many cases, this seems to lead to exams that only test for knowledge. Did you have to take written exams abroad? Which criteria were used for their evaluation? I had to take written exams. These exams, however, did not ask for originality, but tested for knowledge of the subject. Essays, on the other hand, are designed to get something new out of the student. As for the vocabulary, this is very relevant in written exams.

Is there any other factor, not strictly related to teaching (such as societies, associations, or other non-curricular activities), that has influenced, motivated, enriched your studies? Personally, I joined conferences, workshops and reading groups organized

by a research group, but I have not taken part in any association, although there were some (but not at all more than in our university in Milan).

It's time to conclude: what do you think Italian Philosophy courses should learn from British ones and vice versa? I reckon that we should learn to have adequate buildings, which allow students to attend classes in good conditions, not as in Milan. I also reckon that we should supplement oral exams with written essays. I am not sure, however, that written exams could do in a course like ours. Another amazing thing has been to see that professors listen to critiques and proposals truly interested in what students say. Therefore, I think that we should motivate students to be original before the PhD. The fact of being asked to give their own contribute helps students think of being able to say something truly new, and understand more the meaning of doing philosophy, in my opinion. Among the more interesting things concerning methodology that I have learnt here, there is the practice of dividing the class into two groups asking each group to defend a thesis and reply to the other, trying to be as original as they can, with the idea of simulating what really happens during workshops, where one raises objections without having time to think of all the possible consequences of what he is defending. I think it would be interesting to try and organize a *laboratory* like this. Spanish should learn from us to manage bigger programmes and challenge themselves with entire books. And also they should learn to take oral exams, which is useful because you have to be quick.

3 Interview with Margherita Isella

Universiteit van Amsterdam

Margherita spent her Erasmus, 10 months (from September 2012 to June 2013), at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam*, in Amsterdam (Netherlands). She took part in Erasmus during the second year of her Master: for this reason, during her second term in Amsterdam, she worked on her final dissertation. She took exams in *Philosophy of Language: an Extensive Introduction, Meaning, Reference and Modality, Logic and Conversation, Mind, Meaning and Representation*.

Let's start from the amount of work. I mean the amount of hours of classes per week, readings and, possibly, homework: things of this sort. All in all, would you judge your amount of work at King's more or less demanding than the one you were used to in Italy? As for the hours of classes, each class had 4 hours of lectures per week, two less than classes in Milan. As for the homework, in at least two classes, it was much more demanding than what I was used to in Italy: in *Logic and Conversation* (6 CFU), each week we had an assignment consisting of 5 or 6 Logic exercises. I dedicated four or five days of work to each assignment. I wasn't the most logical in the group, but I saw everyone struggling. At the end of the class, we had to write a paper of around 8 pages. I can say something similar of *Meaning, Reference and Modality* (6 CFU). As for the other two classes (6 and 12 CFU), the amount of work has been similar to what I was used to for a class of 9 CFU. The fact that the class of 12 CFU didn't require a bigger amount of work than the others is due to the fact that it was for undergraduates, so generally the amount of work was higher than what I was used to in two cases and equivalent in the other two cases. What changes, anyway, is the way exams are taken and, thus, their preparation: instead of a final

exam on which everything depends, there are several tests, of different kinds and in different moments: typically, weekly homework plus a final paper, or one or two presentations plus a final paper.

Generally, in Italy, the *lecture* predominates and moments specifically dedicated to discussion and debate are rare. Probably, several factors, such as the number of students, timetables, the availability of rooms, play an important role in determining this tendency. Thus, it would be interesting to see whether and how universities abroad allow for a bigger exchange of ideas. What were classes in your abroad institution like? Each class is for a limited number of students, generally 30 students (but in fact less, as it happens in any university, I think). This creates the ideal atmosphere for discussion, both between students and between student and professor. I must confess, however, that in my experience this didn't lead to positive results in at least two classes, because the interventions, too frequent and too little profitable, have impoverished rather than enriched the potentiality of the class. In particular, in *Mind, Meaning and Representation*, it often happened that we were just four students and that the professor didn't say a word, letting (more or less clever) students holding court.

Let's talk about writing. Notoriously, in Italy, Philosophy students do not write much during their studies. During your experience of study abroad, did you have to write philosophical essays? If so, did your previous studies, in Italy, adequately help you do it? During my Erasmus I had to write two philosophical articles, one of which was a simple report while the other required a critical approach. I felt quite prepared from a methodological point of view, I think, because of an article that I had to write for the exam *Teorie del Linguaggio e della Mente* in Milan. On that occasion, the professor had been wise in giving us indications and suggestions on the method to follow while writing. If it wasn't for that experience, however, I would have been totally unprepared. There were some problems anyway, in writing the essays, due to the language: I had never written in English before. Having written those two articles has proven essential both for my final dissertation and for further studies.

In Philosophy courses, in Italy, exams are generally oral and this seems to play an important role in determining methods and standards of evaluation: it seems that, in an oral exam, it is much more difficult for a student to make sure that her theses are original, her arguments cogent, her vocabulary accurate. In many cases, this seems to lead to exams that only test for knowledge. Did you have to take written exams abroad? Which criteria were used for their evaluation? Every exam I took had a written part, always to do at home. In particular (apart from the exercises, for which a different consideration is needed), I had to write two essays and to do a test more notional in character, with 4 questions to which answer in 15 lines and 2 questions to which give a more extended answer. The curious thing from my point of view is that the exam was not to be taken in class, as it usually is the case for written exams in Italy, but at home (in two days). Although it seems easy, it was not: the non-notional nature of the questions forced me to read the texts deeply and think of links between the different texts. As for the evaluation, the test consisting of questions did not contemplate a valuation of the style, while for the papers stylistic characteristics, both linguistic and structural ones, were very important.

Is there any other factor, not strictly related to teaching (such as societies, associations, or other non-curricular activities), that has influenced, motivated, enriched your studies? The talks and seminars that I joined gave me the impression that there really was something going on at the level of research, so they were surely exciting, even though in the majority of the cases they were not directly linked to my specific interests. A feature that I really appreciated is that these talks were about very recent research and, in fact, often research that is ongoing and the purpose seemed not to explain results already obtained, but rather to discuss intuitions and partial results so to improve them.

It's time to conclude: what do you think Italian Philosophy courses should learn from British ones and vice versa? What I think that Italy should learn from the Netherlands (or I'd better say the University of Milan should learn from the UvA) is to make students work in English, write and give small presentations. For what I can say from my own experience, having to write and explain, apart from improving writing and presenting skills, has a benefit at the level of learning. In fact, in contrast to what happens in an oral exam, the student has to organize the contents with clarity and, in order to do so, she must have understood the material. What I think the Netherlands should learn from Italy is much less, and just details that could be related to my experience but not to be generalized. The only point I can think about is the one I have already mentioned, that is the democratic extremism on the basis of which professors let students talk. But, to be honest, the lecture that we are used to in Italy doesn't seem a good approach either. Maybe there is a third country that can teach something to both Italy and the Netherlands from this point of view.

4 Interview with Giulio Gipsy Crespi

University of Oslo

Gipsy has been to the *University of Oslo* (Norway), during his third year of bachelor at the University of Milan, and for 4 months (August-December 2013). He took exams in *Ethics*, *History of Philosophy*, and *Microeconomics and Game Theory*.

Let's start from the amount of work. I mean the amount of hours of classes per week, readings and, possibly, homework: things of this sort. All in all, would you judge your amount of work at King's more or less demanding than the one you were used to in Italy? It is important to make distinct considerations for the philosophical classes and the Economics class. As for the first ones, the amount of work was equivalent to the average amount of work for classes at the University of Milan, but with different proportions of hours (just two per week for a total of fourteen weeks), and of readings to do time by time (a higher amount compared to the one I was used to). The Economics class, quite specific in content, consisted of two hours of lecture per week and two of seminar, during which there were exercises related to the theoretic parts discussed in the lectures. Compared to classes of Political Science at the University of Milan, the amount of work was a bit lower, both in terms of theoretical insights and in terms of extension of the programme. Homework, even in this case, required more than the hours of classes. The presence of only one session of exams does not allow students to refute their grades or to delay their exams, and this means that students do not procrastinate their studies, but at the same time that the sessions of

exams are highly stressful. In this sense, I believe the course at Oslo is more demanding than the one in Milan.

Generally, in Italy, the *lecture* predominates and moments specifically dedicated to discussion and debate are rare. Probably, several factors, such as the number of students, timetables, the availability of rooms, play an important role in determining this tendency. Thus, it would be interesting to see whether and how universities abroad allow for a bigger exchange of ideas. What were classes in your abroad institution like? Each class allows students to take the corresponding exam, as far as students make an application which has to be validated by a commission on the basis of pre-requirements and anyway until there are places available. For this reason the number of students is always commensurate to the modality of teaching (in the case of lectures a hundred students, in the case of seminars no more than twenty-five), and there are not too many students in each class. In particular, the philosophical classes I took, which were structured like a seminar, didn't have more than ten students, which made the interaction with the professor effective. Moreover, in the majority of the classes a half term oral presentation is required.

Let's talk about writing. Notoriously, in Italy, Philosophy students do not write much during their studies. During your experience of study abroad, did you have to write philosophical essays? If so, did your previous studies, in Italy, adequately help you do it? Two exams of my timetable consisted in writing a ten pages essay per semester. It was something completely new for me, and it brought some difficulties, so that by the deadline I managed to finish just one out of two. Professors had always been at disposition for comments on drafts and bibliographical suggestions, but, unlike what happens in other universities, there was no tutor. Although my work was not brilliant, I am quite satisfied for having challenged myself with a new way of working.

In Philosophy courses, in Italy, exams are generally oral and this seems to play an important role in determining methods and standards of evaluation: it seems that, in an oral exam, it is much more difficult for a student to make sure that her theses are original, her arguments cogent, her vocabulary accurate. In many cases, this seems to lead to exams that only test for knowledge. Did you have to take written exams abroad? Which criteria were used for their evaluation? As I have already mentioned, exams were written and consisted in handing a 20-25000 characters essay, as opposed to the economics one, consisting in a test with both theoretical questions and exercises. Writing an essay forces you to use good arguments and adequate references in support of your thesis: in general, it requires a leap compared to the preparation of an oral exam, as well as specific insights starting from secondary literature. The evaluation criteria take into account the capacity of structure a thesis, originality is encouraged. At the same time, the study of a small issue allows to ignore big parts of the programme, when out of topic.

Is there any other factor, not strictly related to teaching (such as societies, associations, or other non-curricular activities), that has influenced, motivated, enriched your studies? The University of Oslo has many societies. The presence of a board of student societies makes the participation to the campus very lively. In particular, I took part

in the training sessions of the debate society (Norway Debate – Debating Students Society), through which I joined a competition in Lund (Sweden) as a debater and thank to which I got in touch with an International net of students.

It's time to conclude: what do you think Italian Philosophy courses should learn from British ones and vice versa? Norway is, academically speaking, linked to the Anglo-Saxon tradition: this is evident in the contents and the structure of classes, as well as in the selection of secondary literature and in the International vocation. I do not think, however, that the cultural distance between Humanities in Italy and in Sweden will prevent future contaminations: there are multiple potential thematic tangential points, where both systems have valuable competences (surprisingly, also in the History of Philosophy, where Italy has, in my opinion, a primacy that must be reconsidered). In this sense, the University of Oslo can reasonably be taken as a model for some merits already mentioned, such as the interactive character of classes, the openness to International academic environments, both for what concerns Exchange programmes (for students and professors) and in terms of its relevance in the contemporary debate on the topics that are object of research and didactic. Eventually, I am convinced that the 60 hours classes of our system constitute an occasion for a deeper insight, because they allow for taking adequately into account big portions of literature, and that oral exams are not to be sacrificed but integrated in the global evaluation, as it happens in several courses of other faculties in our university.

