

# Beyond the scandal

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On February 2016 Italian media (and the rumor mill) debated the story of my relationship with the Politecnico di Torino, that developed between October 2015 and January 2016, and ended in bad terms. As it is often the case, the first article (on the Italian national newspaper La Stampa) was balanced and cautious, but the news spread in a simplified, partial and twisted way, with the intent of enraging people, and therefore confusing the people who wanted to know what really happened. In this document I will therefore describe the story in all its details. Of course it's going to be a description from my point of view, but I will try to be as fair as possible, and to put myself in the shoes of all the people involved. As this is not an accusation, I will avoid to name anybody I do not have the permission to. Everything quoted is a translation of mine, done at the best of my possibilities. For the original Italian written quotes, everthing is documented.

## 1 The program for young researchers “Rita Levi Montalcini”

The program for young researchers “Rita Levi Montalcini” involves “the activation of 24 contracts, with the aim of attracting in Italy young students and Italian and foreign experts, that are researching or teaching in a foreing country”. It is basically a measure against the brain drain, that in Italy has reached worrying levels. This is how it works: all the young researchers, with the right age and enough years of activity in a foreign country, can apply, submitting a research project of the duration of 3 years (therefore the program is open to all branches, from Science to Humanities). These projects are collected by a commission of 6 highly qualified people (Italians,

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nominated by the Ministry). They assign to each project 3 international referees that evaluate the project following standard criteria (CV, originality of the project, objectives and methods, adequacy between CV and project). The referees send their evaluations to the commission. The commission reads the evaluations of the referees and grades each project. A list in descending order is built, and the first 24 projects are awarded the contracts.

The contract awarded is “RTD-B”, a kind of tenure-track contract. The researcher spends three years in a university doing research, totally supported by the Ministry (therefore without any costs for the university). After three years, if the researcher managed to obtain the national scientific habilitation (similar to the German Habilitation, but less strict and only CV-based), the Department must evaluate if the researcher is worth to be a professor. If it is the case, then the researcher is appointed “professore associato”, and the Ministry continues to pay for the same salary for the rest of the career of the professor. The university must pay only the remainder of the salary.

The researcher chooses three Italian universities, in order of preference. The chosen university must provide two documents:

- the approval from the Board of Administrators;
- the declaration from the Department of the commitment in providing the researcher the adequate facilities.

They have 45 days to provide this, or a document of rejection. In case of rejection, the second university must provide the same documents, and so on.

My first choice was the Politecnico di Torino, and the Department involved was the Department of Mathematical Sciences, Disma in short.

## 2 My visit at Disma

On **10 September 2015** I received the news that I was awarded the grant. On **25 September 2015** the program officially started. On **2-5 October 2015** I introduced myself, via e-mail, to the Dean of Disma and the Rector of the Politecnico, attaching my CV. The Dean answered that he had still no official notice, but that “our department is always very happy to welcome brilliant young mathematicians, and that is the direction of our policies in the last years”. The Rector assured that the remainder of my salary would be on university’s balance, and not on Disma’s one.

On **27 October 2015** the Dean invites me to visit Disma, to introduce myself to the Department and participate in various private talks with the

most important people in Disma. The visit happened from **10 to 14 November 2015**, and the Dean was very hospitable, since travel, accomodation and lunches were at the expense of Disma.

The talks touched several points:

**Why did I choose the Politecnico?** Because it's one of the best universities in Italy, with active research in set theory (my current branch of research) but not saturated with set theorists (there is only one), with many international relationships. Moreover, in its strategic plan there is the will to acquire young talents, especially if they have been awarded prestigious grants. I met Riccardo Camerlo (the set theorist there), and he suggested me to try there.

**My exposure** In this moment at the Politecnico there is no mathematical logic course. For this reason they asked me if I could be set in another area. I made them notice that my publications were only in mathematical logic, therefore it would be impossible for me to pass the abilitation for another area. Someone notice that setting me in another area could be detrimental for the interests of such area. Even after I asked many times, I did not get an answer on what "exposure" really means.

**Teaching** In the last six years I worked only in research centers, therefore I did my teaching only when I was a student. There were no comments about that, but it was a recurrent theme.

On **12 November 2015** I gave a seminar, in a full room, titled "Large cardinals in mathematics and infinite combinatorics". I had the impression that the seminar was successful, there were many inquiring questions (even the day after, in the corridors). In my opinion, the following private talks were less tense. They asked me if I was willing to attract research funds, and I answered positevely, referring to my CV, where there were indicated 541.302,16 euros of funds collected in the last three years. I received some compliments "I liked the way you conducted your seminar, while you were talking I was already envisioning you teaching to 200 engineering students". Meanwhile in the Department, people were writing this in circular e-mails: "He gave me a really good impression, and now I would be favorable to hire him", "I propose everybody to give a positive answer". "I agree on [omissis]'s evaluation on the validity of the person. I am also of the opinion that it would be extremely stupid for all the Department's areas to give away new free resources, as the Rector has guaranteed extra funds for his hiring".

### 3 The first decision of the Disma

On **25 November 2015** the Disma Work Group “Development and planning” met to discuss my hiring. They gave a negative opinion. I never had official informations on such a decision, but I managed to get them indirectly. Before listing their motivations, let me notice that the only thing that was asked to the Department was the commitment in providing the adequate facilities, therefore many motivations seems out of place. Such motivations would be relevant to the following decision, when after three years they have to decide if I’m worthy to a professorship. Maybe there was the (non-explicit) will to decide immediately for both cases. It is surely fair to evaluate the potential I have to be a professor before hiring me, but it is less fair if such a judgement is on me, as I am presently, without taking into consideration the next three years. Between parenthesis not a full defense, but possible short answers.

- My field of research is not optimal in the interaction with engineering. [It is normal that in a university there are different fields with different visions (for example, I worked for two years at the Technische Universität in Vienna). Anyway, I showed in my seminar applications of my field of research in quantum mechanics, combinatorics and measure theory (therefore probability), all with some importance in mathematics for engineering. Moreover, there is already at Disma a person that works in set theory.]
- My teaching experience. [My first three years should have been of research, so this is not a well-founded motivation. In this case, they anticipated my judgement of three years. The reactions to my seminar anyway show that someone thought I had potential.]
- I was not willing to be set in another section. [As before, that was just not possible, and they dissuaded me.]
- I did not warned the Dean when I applied for the grant. [I warned him when the program started. It would have made no sense to warn him one year before, when it was not even certain.]
- They were doubtful that the university really would have paid the part of my salary not covered by the Ministry. [This is a matter of trust between Rector and Department.]
- In the development plan of the Department there is no mathematical logic. [The plan was written before my arrival, so it cannot be a

strong motivation. Moreover, in the development plan it is written “the Department believe it necessary that, taking into account the allocated resources, every area should have guaranteed at least one position RTD-A or RTD-B” and “The Department believe it fundamental that in the next future there will be an opening also for the other areas at Disma”.]

- They notice that, with all these doubts, there are no strong motivations for hiring. [I do not know if being able to hire, for free, someone who passed a strong selection and who proved to be able to attract research funding, can be considered a weak motivation.]

The same day the Disma voted against my hiring: 14 people against, 3 for and 6 did not vote.

On **29 November 2015** the Dean sends me two lines “I am sorry to inform you that our department is not favorable to your hiring. Even if we evaluate that your CV has high scientific value, and notwithstanding the appreciation of everybody for your interesting seminar, your academic profile is not coherent with the development objectives of our department.”

I asked for more informations (“If you happen to have a document with a more detailed descriptions of your motivations, I would be grateful if I could read it. As I am going to have talks in other universities, I would like to understand better what happened.”), but I received no answer. That was the last official communication from the Politecnico.

## 4 Reactions

According to the rules of the Montalcini program, only the BoA was meant to approve the hiring, the Department had only to assure its support. Therefore, now it was the turn of the BoA to decide what to do.

Meanwhile the news about Disma rejection spreaded, in Italy and in Europe. Both the European Set Theory Society and the Associazione Italiana di Logica e sue Applicazioni (Italian Association of Logic and its Applications) felt to write to the Politecnico to support my case. There were also personal initiatives of eminent international researchers.

On **21 December 2015** the BoA met and took the decision of letting the Disma vote again, as in the first vote there was a low number of voters. The Board also expressed some recommendations to the Department, that were sent to them on **11 January 2016**:

- “the initiatives of the Departments should be coherent with the aims of the Strategic Plan“, ”in which is clear the will of the university to

proceed to the acquisition of talented researchers, especially if they have been awarded prestigious prizes“;

- ”it should be noted - while respecting the scientific autonomy and the motivations expressed by the Disma - that the salary of Dr. Di Monte would not be payed by the university, and he could be used to teach in the courses of basic mathematics, that in our universities have a urgent need of teachers“.

## 5 The second decision of the Disma

On **26 January 2016**, two days before the Department’s meeting, the Dean has sent an e-mail to the whole Department, that ”states the unanimous position of the dean, the deputy dean and the (limited) WG Development and Planning on the matter“. The document invited everybody to reject the hiring, with such motivations:

- Scientific non-excellence, as I have few publications. [Before 26th January 2016, as it can be read above in the comments by Disma members and the Dean, nobody called into question my scientific value. Moreover, while the discussion on which is the best way to evaluate an academic candidate is still open, it is a shared point of view that the evaluation by international referees is more reliable than bibliographical criteria, as different topics have different output pace (see e.g. *Citation Statistics* by Adler, Ewing and Taylor). The only set theorist in the Disma, therefore the only one with enough knowledge of my work, was very supportive.]
- The Department has decided not to support logic, after a ”regretful“ past experience, and feels that I am not the right person to develop interactions with computer engineers. [There is no description on why I would be not the right person, so I cannot answer. Anyway, as my position would be long-term, this seems an a priori refusal (maybe due to the regretful past experience). Moreover, again, there is research in logic at Disma.]
- It’s true that there are not enough teachers in basic courses at the Politecnico, but I ”did not show specific skills of interaction, useful for the relationship with students in the crowded basic courses of our university“. [This is the exact opposite of what they told me after the seminar.]

Such motivations are completely different from the ones before, and go in the opposite direction of what I was told in November (and I wrote above). On the first motivation, it is fair to observe that the Dean knew about the support I had from the scientific community, but such support was never communicated to the rest of the Department. I don't know if the other people that signed the document knew about that. Two of the motivations, moreover, were never discussed in the personal talks in November (even if the document says the opposite), so I could never defend myself on that.

On **28th January 2016** the Disma votes against my hiring, 30 to 6.

On **29th January 2016** the BoA was not convinced in accepting the motivations, but acknowledged the decision. In their words: "the debate highlights the great embarrassment of the Rector and the Board of Administration for the decision of the Disma. The Rector states he is in disagreement with the position of the Department and does not share the motivations on which, the remarks stated by the BoA notwithstanding, it decided not to receive the winner of a prestigious national award, selected by a most distinguished Commission, chaired by the President of the Conference of the Rectors and composed by scientists of indisputable international prestige." This was therefore ca 90 days after their formal notice, when the deadline was 45 days.

I hope that this document can help the interested reader to see more clearly what happened, so that she or he could judge the situation in independence.