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# Research evaluation and academic freedom: an Italian debate

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The *Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica* is submitting to an [open peer review](#) a couple of articles meant for the debate on the theoretical and practical justification of the Italian research assessment system, which entrusts an academic *élite* nominated by the government with a huge, unbalanced power. In the opinion of Andrea Bonaccorsi, a former member of the Italian [National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Institutes](#) board of directors, the governmental evaluation of scientific research can be justified on the basis of his - peculiar - reading of R.K. Merton's normative sociology of science.

The articles written, respectively, by Roberto Caso and Maria Chiara Pievatolo, scrutinize Bonaccorsi's claims both from a legal and from a philosophical point of view.

Roberto Caso, in [Una valutazione \(della ricerca\) dal volto umano: la missione impossibile di Andrea Bonaccorsi](#) [*The Human Face of Evaluation of Science: the Mission Impossible of Andrea Bonaccorsi*], challenges the main argument of Bonaccorsi, according to which the governmental evaluation of scientific research is an expression of Mertonian norms of science (communism, universalism, disinterestedness, organized skepticism). Such an interpretation, in Roberto Caso's opinion, is untenable for two main reasons:

- it rests on a remarkable misrepresentation of Merton's thought;
- it neglects the difference between fixed, formal legal rules and fluid, informal norms; hence, it underestimates the effects of a transformation from the former to the latter.

Maria Chiara Pievatolo's [La bilancia e la spada: scienza di stato e valutazione della ricerca](#) [*The scale and the sword: science, government and research evaluation*] goal is showing that the research assessment system resulting from Bonaccorsi's misinterpretation of Merton would be both practically despotic and theoretically retrograde even if, at the very moment of the evaluation, the sociological description of the state of the research were true and we lived in a faultless Mertonian world.

The resulting system would be despotic because it would transform an informal *ethos* into a rigid set of administrative laws outside the researchers' control; and it would be retrograde because such a set would also freeze the evolution of the ways in which scientists publish, discuss and assess their works, in a kind of enchanted Sleeping Beauty castle.

Both articles are in Italian: [nostra res agitur](#). You may review them on [SJScience.org](#), [here](#) and [here](#).