

## ***Carlo M. Cipolla (1922-2000)***

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In 1943, while still a student at the University of Pavia, Carlo Cipolla, then twenty-one, made his mark with the publication of an essay, firmly grounded on archival sources, on the demographic history of Pavia. This, as it turned out, was going to prove the first step in a long, prodigiously productive career - 25 books and nearly three times as many essays - a career in the course of which he would rise to be one of the most distinguished and internationally acclaimed economic historians of the twentieth century. The recognitions and honours he received along the way speak for themselves: at various times he held the chair of economic history at Venice, Turin, Pavia, the European University Institute in Florence, the University of California at Berkeley; he was also a member of such prestigious institutions as the Accademia dei Lincei, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, the Royal Historical Society, and was awarded honorary doctorates by the Federal University of Zurich and the Medical School of the University of Pavia. His recent death at age seventy-eight has thus brought to an end a long and brilliant scholarly trajectory with few parallels on either side of the Atlantic.

Trying to retrace his enormous contributions to economic history is no easy task, given the sheer number of his publications and the broad spectrum of topics he addressed, ranging from the late Middle Ages to the XXth century. All one can hope to do within a few pages is to recall and highlight the major themes to which he devoted his research.

Historical demography was a subject to which Carlo Cipolla returned more than once after his youthful essay on Pavia, progressively broadening the scope of his investigations: in 1949 he retraced the demographic development of Spanish-ruled Lombardy in the XVIth century; in 1962, in a small, but ambitious book, *The Economic History of World Population*, he provided a global view of the subject from prehistory to the present set against the background of "the two revolutions" that transformed living conditions world wide, namely the Agricultural Revolution of the Neolithic age and the Industrial Revolution of the XVIIIth century; and three years later he produced a synthesis of Italian demographic trends from the XVIth to the XXth century.

In roughly the same years Cipolla addressed two other topics: in several essays he focused on the social structure, income distribution, and labour conditions in various preindustrial communities from the XIIth to XVIth century, and in the process exhibited a growing interest in social history; but he also engaged in research on medieval and early modern monetary history, leaving behind an impressive legacy indeed. After an early book on currency fluctuations in late medieval Italy, published in 1948, he came out only four years later with one on the monetary history of Lombardy in the XVIIth century and in that same year in a gem of a book, *Money, Prices and Civilization*, he provided a masterful analysis of the two-tiered medieval monetary system with its full-bodied coins characterized by long-term stability and its fractional coins that were subject to periodical debasement, and on debasement he took what he liked to call "the heretical point of view," namely that, far from being, as had generally been maintained, an evil caused by royal profligacy or exorbitant military expenses, debasement did, in fact, do more good than harm to the economy in that it made for an elastic money supply and thus prevented the more dynamic economies of the time from sinking into a prolonged deflationary spiral that might have cost them their prosperity. Two other books were to follow that dealt with Florentine currency in the XIIIth and XVIth centuries. In all of them one finds much more than a wealth of new data methodically culled from

archival sources and likely to be of special interest to the numismatist and the economist; in Cipolla's hands monetary history also serves as a window into the history of prices, wages and profits - and ultimately sheds new light on economic development.

Economic development itself was soon to take centre-stage in Cipolla's investigations, notably the long debated question of why Europe achieved it sooner and more successfully than the rest of the world; and on why, within Europe, Italy, after forging ahead of the rest of the Continent in Medieval and Renaissance times, fell behind after about 1600. On the latter question he wrote a pioneering essay in 1952 that literally transformed our views on the subject: discarding the conventional wisdom that had variously blamed either foreign domination, changes in mentality away from a robust work ethic, or the shift from the counting house to the repose of absentee landownership, he focused on the loss of competitiveness of Italian manufactured goods on international markets where they had once held pride of place, and he ascribed that loss primarily to the higher labour costs and the conservatism typical of a "fully matured economy" such as that of late Renaissance Italy. Although his interpretation has been refined and somewhat modified in subsequent years by several scholars, the fact remains that Cipolla had gone to the heart of the matter and that even after fifty years his essay is still the indispensable reference point for anyone interested in the problem of Italy's loss of economic supremacy.

In subsequent years Cipolla continued to focus on economic development (or lack thereof), but did so on a world rather than just on an Italian scale. In the 1960s three books of his approached the subject from different angles: in *Guns and Sails* he retraced the history of Europe's mastery of two strategic sources of energy; in *Clocks and Culture* he argued that the introduction of precision technology as a decisive, and yet all too often ignored, first step on the road to the machine age; in *Literacy and Development in the West* he explored the reasons why, and the extent to which, literacy spread faster in Europe than in the rest of the world. A few years later in *Storia economica dell'età preindustriale* (1974) he produced a magisterial synthesis on the question of European economic development.

A common feature of these four books is the emphasis given to cultural factors in determining the path of economic growth. But culture also looms large in another line of inquiry Carlo Cipolla actively pursued in the sixties and seventies, namely the history of epidemic disease, a subject that had earlier attracted his attention as a historical demographer, but that he now approached also from a cultural perspective in the sense that he wanted to find out how contemporaries, whether magistrates, clerics, physicians, or commoners, reacted in the face of a terrifying "invisible enemy". And what his penetrating research revealed was that their response was often far more rational, sensible, and less totally ineffective than had generally been assumed.

In his last book, *Conquistadores, Pirati, Mercatanti. La saga dell'argento spagnuolo* (1996), Cipolla returned one more time to monetary history, a field to which, over the years he had contributed so much and so well. The story of the massive influx of silver from the New World in the XVIth century was nothing new, but Cipolla's interpretation most certainly is. Challenging the time-honoured view that its main impact had been to trigger the so-called Price Revolution, he pointed out that on average the annual rise in prices over a century had been of the order of merely 2% and, as such, could hardly be viewed as "revolutionary"; rather, he focused on the role American silver played in providing Europe with the liquidity it badly needed if it was to expand the importation of silk, spices and other luxuries from the East, thus fueling intercontinental trade on an unprecedented scale.

In all his works Cipolla admirably combined economic theory with historical narrative. His mastery of theory as well as of documentary evidence; his attention to the telling anecdote; the clarity and, indeed, the elegance of his style that make his writings accessible to readers even outside the walls of academia - these are all hallmarks of his written work, just as they were of his performance as a teacher and lecturer. Behind it all was a man of great personal charm, integrity and generosity who will long be remembered with fondness by all those who had the good fortune of knowing him as mentor, colleague, fellow historian, or friend.