

Luigi De Rosa: in memoriam

(Naples, 1922 – Burgos, 2004)

In setting my hand to this brief remembrance of the life and work of Luigi De Rosa, a passage from Tolstoy's "Death of Ivan Ilyich" came unexpectedly to mind, for like the main character in that story, in his heart Luigi De Rosa knew that death was drawing ever nearer but simply refused to accept it mentally, basically fending the concept off. This is perfectly evidenced by his active engagement, a commitment extending far beyond the day-to-day, often requiring continuing action over the long term, which he undertook with an enthusiasm that it is not going too far to call "youthful", without the typical fear of the aged of not having time enough to conclude. Luigi De Rosa never enjoyed idleness, and with the passage of the years his activities and duties had expanded exponentially. And he was delighted, exalted by the need to discharge them, as if he sought to show doubters that that hallmark phrase of his, "work is what I like", was no more than the literal truth.

The work ethic? Yes, at least partly. But mostly, what drove De Rosa was the irresistible urge to do, to be active. Not only did he give himself joyfully over to work, but you could say he propagated it: involving other people, urging them on, prodding them, getting them actively into things. He was happy when he managed to get other people moving; sad – and even more, irritated – when he did not get results. In these cases he drew away from those who were resistant to his prompting; what is more, personal relationships themselves not infrequently suffered, as he considered that his trust had been not merely misplaced but betrayed.

In reality, De Rosa could not comprehend, and could never have regarded benevolently, a man who out of indolence missed opportunities that he could have grasped; and opportunities, moreover, offered disinterestedly, not laboriously constructed as he himself had done. For Luigi De Rosa was a self-made man. Not of affluent birth, from his boyhood he had had to fight to open up his chosen path in life, the one he would embark upon and follow with success: study and scholarship.

Without being over-proud, he never concealed the sacrifices he had had to make to get his high school degree and go on to university. What is more, his university years in Naples were hard ones, war years that aggravated the economic hardships of an already difficult life, and one that was increasingly threatened, to boot, by the bombing of the city as the front neared.

De Rosa got his degree in business and economics, *summa cum laude*, in 1945, under Professor Corrado Barbagallo, who held the chair in economic history. However, his dissertation – which the examining panel, after a brilliant presentation, judged worthy of publication – was not in economic history strictly speaking but in the history of economic doctrines. The thesis was an intellectual biography of the eminent Swiss historian, economist and man of letters Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi; it would be published two years later in Milan as *Gian Carlo Sismondi e la sua opera*, with a preface by Professor Barbagallo. Barbagallo asked “Was Sismondi just an economist, or was he not, as almost no one remembers, one of the greatest historians to write in the nineteenth century and to this day still the finest historian of the Italian Middle Ages?” The answer was self-evident. Nor did Barbagallo hide his displeasure over what should have been done but had not been done: “study, truly learn the work of Sismondi the economist, Sismondi the socialist, Sismondi the historian; these are the three important tasks that contemporary critics should have set themselves but that they neglected.” It was his own student, he maintained, who had learned this lesson and set matters right. “The young author of this essay,” he noted, “took a different road: he wanted a first-hand look, in detail, at Sismondi’s entire thought and writings; in describing Sismondi’s work, he made use of an uncommon command of economics and economic history.”

The foundations of this economic and economic-historical culture were laid thanks above all to the knowing guidance of Professor Barbagallo, in Naples and then in Turin. De Rosa reinforced these foundations first at Benedetto Croce’s recently founded Istituto Italiano per gli studi storici (Italian Institute for Historical Studies) in Naples in 1947 and then with post-graduate research at the London School of Economics from 1948 to 1951. On these solid foundations Luigi De Rosa would erect an intellectual edifice that, over the years and decades, rose steadily skywards.

In London, where his living conditions were actually worse than he had had to endure in Naples and Turin (as he liked to recall, food rationing was still in force), he studied economic history under T.S. Ashton and enjoyed the counsel of the lecturer H.C. Beales. Both did no little to facilitate a research project that Barbagallo had suggested to his promising young protégé: a revisitation of the Chartist movement that animated political life in Britain from 1837 to 1848.

In the study, published in 1953 as *Storia del cartismo*, De Rosa did not merely recount the course of events, as previous historians had generally done; rather, he framed the movement against the economic and social milieu in which it arose, developed and expired and sought to clarify the relationships between it and the other social movements in English society between 1830 and 1860. It is this broader perspective that shows how well De Rosa had learned what is a crucial lesson for any historian worthy of the name: you have to do more than just pile fact upon fact, in the illusion that they speak for themselves. To get them to tell their story, you must first select your facts with care and then interpret them with intelligence.

Fine historian that he was, De Rosa had a special knack for rendering the facts "loquacious". He knew how to winnow out the facts and events that counted and so to avoid drowning in chronicle, and at the same time he had the ability to interpret them with subtlety thanks to an uncommon intuition honed by his vaunted knowledge of economic theory. An instructive example, certainly, is his steady attention to foreign exchange, which he repeatedly used as a skeleton key for gaining entry into the economic and social situation of a country under study, and in particular of the South of Italy. This was a hallmark of his work, from the 1955 volume *I cambi esteri del Regno di Napoli dal 1591 al 1707* [Foreign exchanges in the Kingdom of Naples from 1591 to 1707] to his very substantial introduction to the collection *Il Mezzogiorno agli inizi del '600* [The South of Italy in the early 1600s] in 1994.

The theme of the South, with its entrenched, seemingly eternal problems, is a constant one in De Rosa's writings. His works include *Il Mezzogiorno spagnolo fra crescita e decadenza* [The Italian South under Spanish rule: Growth and decadence], 1987; *Iniziativa e capitale straniero*

nell'industria metalmeccanica del Mezzogiorno fra il 1861 e il 1904 [Foreign capital and foreign initiative in the mechanical engineering industry in the South of Italy from 1861 to 1904], 1968; *Emigranti, capitale e banche nel decennio 1896-1906* [Emigrants, capital and banks from 1896 to 1906], 1980, which recounts the sorrowful epic of the emigration of Southern farm labourers and peasants; and his last book, *La provincia subordinata. Saggio sulla questione meridionale* [The subaltern province. An essay on the Southern question], 2004, published just before his death.

These and other studies of his marked him as a Southern advocate, always ready with a polemical defence of his theses but also always careful to back them with original source material. His argument was reasoned, not emotional, and this won him attention and respect reflected in a series of awards: the "Nuovo Mezzogiorno" prize (1968 and 1982), the "Sila" prize (1974), the "Iglesias-Villa di Chiesa" prize (1974), the "Città di Amantea" prize (1988), the "Sebetia-ter per l'economia" prize (1990), the "Sperlonga" prize (2001) and the "Basilicata" prize (2004).

His interests ranged much more widely, however, with contributions that were the fruit of his success in combining the training of the economist with that of the historian. In the decades in which De Rosa was publishing such works as *La crisi economica del 1929* [The crash of 1929], 1974, and *Lo sviluppo economico dell'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* [Italian Economic Development since the Second World War], 1997, this was no common combination, the trench separating economic theory from economic history being still deep and wide. Hence the need for reflection upon the discipline of economic history, to determine what it was and what it should be; and hence the publication of such books as *L'avventura della storia economica in Italia* [The adventure of economic history in Italy] or *Orientamenti e problemi in storia economica* [Orientations and problems in economic history], both appearing in 1990.

Nor must we neglect a series of studies on the history of Italian banks that had played a major role in the economic history of Italy. De Rosa produced histories of Banco di Napoli, Banco di Roma, the public works credit consortium Crediop, and the mutual savings banks. These inquiries represented a constant, day-to-day engagement that resulted in a scientific output as abundant as it was prestigious. The praise for this work naturally

translated into the formal awards, advancement and recognition that marked his career, of which only the highlights can be given here: his qualification for university teaching in economic history (1956), a chair in economic history at Bari (1962) and then at the Istituto Universitario Navale in Naples, and then appointment as Dean of the Faculty of Economics at that institution from 1976 to 1991, President of the Italian Historical Society from 1977 to 1992, Chairman of the National Research Council's Committee for Economic, Sociological and Statistical Sciences from 1981 to 1994, Chairman of the Technical-Scientific Planning Committee at the Ministry for Budget and Economic Planning from 1987 to 1989, Chairman of the Scientific Board of the Istituto di ricerche sull'economia mediterranea (Institute of Mediterranean Economic Studies) from 1984 to 1996, Chairman of the Scientific Board of the Istituto di storia economica del Mezzogiorno in età moderna (Institute for Modern Economic History of Southern Italy) from 1988 to 1998.

One of the main traits of Luigi De Rosa's character, moreover, was his unfailing awareness that scholarship demands openness, not closure. Whenever you come up against frontiers and barriers, the only thing to do is to break them down. He accordingly always viewed with interest and respect the activities (still carried on today) of the Francesco Datini International Institute for Economic History in Prato. And for a year he taught modern and contemporary European economic history as visiting professor at Columbia University in New York. He returned intellectually enriched, having flourished in that highly stimulating environment. It may well have been just then, during his American experience, that Luigi De Rosa developed the intention to create a journal that could serve as meeting ground for scholars in the discipline, access to be accorded not to those with the "right passport" but to original scholarship worthy of publication in the new academic *lingua franca*, English.

Naturally it is not up to us to say what that periodical, *The Journal of European Economic History*, has represented over the years. The sole judges of this are its numerous readers around the world. What they do ask of us, of course, is to try to come up to the standards of the exceptional editor that Luigi De Rosa was. We are only too well aware that this will be anything but easy; yet this is the pledge that, with the

generous support of Capitalia, we make in taking – not without some emotion – his place. We are taking leave of a man who, despite his years, had no intention of resting his oars. A man, it pleases us to think, who died as he would have wanted: still active, still pressing onward. For he collapsed after reading his paper at an international conference at the Universidad de consules of Burgos, in Spain. His colleagues, appalled to suddenly confront his lifeless corpse, exclaimed “ha muerto con las botas puestas”, he died with his boots on. In a word, right to the very end Luigi De Rosa had kept the faith, stayed true to the task he had set himself in his youth when he decided to consecrate his life to scholarship.

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