

## **The University of Florence, between Institutions and Culture**

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### ***GIUSEPPE PARENTI (1910-1994)***

Giuseppe Parenti was born in Florence on May 23, 1910, the youngest of six children, three brothers and three sisters. His large family was characterized by a profound religious faith (his father, business owner, was an active member of the “Azione Cattolica”) and, stemming from his maternal side, by an illustrious scientific tradition of research and teaching. Raphael, for instance, one of his brothers, a prominent figure in the Catholic Church, became a distinguished anthropologist, and a Professor in our University. The young Parenti, however, did not feel any particular inclination towards academic life. He thought he would be more fit for - in his own words – “some kind of practical occupation”: he did not imagine, at that time, that he would spend more than sixty years at the university. Giuseppe Parenti was a very bright, calm person, a lover of sports - mountain and glacier in particular - always open to - even eager for - new experiences, with a solid family behind him that let him make his own choices. Which he did, in fact. Consider that in the Florence in the 1930s, stimuli and opportunities were incomparably fewer than those that are available to the young of today. Besides, most of his classmates, at the Institute of Economic and Commercial Sciences, were basically interested in acquiring a solid technical preparation that would pave their way to a successful professional life and a solid socio-economic position. Giuseppe Parenti, however, was looking for something different. In 1932 he graduated with a thesis on the logistic growth of human populations, a subject

directly linked to the Malthusian theory on population growth, which had already attracted the interest of such illustrious biologists, mathematicians and demographers as Alfred Lotka, Raymond Pearl and Vito Volterra. “In preparing my thesis, I approached professor Marsili Libelli - writes Parenti - a man of rare human and theoretical value. From him, I learned much more than just statistics”. His thesis was highly appreciated by the evaluation commission, so much that he obtained a (temporary) position as an assistant professor at the University of Florence. This “lucky circumstance” (his words), allowed him to get to know two remarkable statisticians, whose influence would soon prove decisive for his life. The former was Livio Livi, from 1928 the Chair of Statistics at the Faculty of Law and later the director of the Faculty of Political Science “Cesare Alfieri”. Livio Livi reinforced Parenti's - how should I define it? - humanistic vision of social phenomena: statistics help scholars to understand the regularities, the basic laws of what we observe in a society, but there are so many things that evade formulae and mathematical explanations, and, above all, even the underlying regularities keep changing continuously. The latter was Carlo Emilio Bonferroni, who arrived in Florence in 1933: a refined mathematician who had studied with Peano. Bonferroni loved statistics, but he “refused to separate methods from applications: statistics is basically an applied science, because its algorithms are elaborated, at least initially, precisely with the aim of solving specific problems”. Parenti continues: “the inclusion of Bonferroni next to Livi and Marsili Libelli created a unique opportunity in Florence: each of them differed from the others by mentality and training, and this heterogeneity originated very fruitful intellectual interchanges. What a pity that - given the epoch and the political context - so few could directly exploit this opportunity”. It was a short but significant period, “a cycle that reached its climax in the years 1933 to 1940: this small group of young scholars worked seriously and very profitably, in an exciting and stimulating environment”. In 1942, Parenti

applied for the Chair of Statistics at the University of Genoa: not surprisingly, he won the prestigious place over several other competitors, and left, albeit only temporarily, the University of Florence. His contribution was to prove very original and lasting over the years, from several angles (scientific, methodological and substantive), for several epochs (the past and the present), and in several fields, especially demography and economics. I'd just like mention three of his books:

- 1) "The population of Tuscany under the Lorraine Regency" (1937),
- 2) "First research on the price revolution in Florence" (1939),
- 3) "Prices and the grain market in Siena, 1546-1765" (1942).

And let me note, in passing, that the last two publications have been reprinted several times over the years, and are by now a classic in the history of prices. The first of these monographs throws light, with rigor and originality, on the history of the Tuscan population between 1737, the death of Gian Gastone, and 1765, when Pietro Leopoldo became Grand Duke of Tuscany. His analysis, based on the *Stati animarum*,<sup>1</sup> and remarkably careful in evaluating the quality of the data themselves, is important because it challenged the prevalent view of the time, namely that the demographic vitality of the Grand Duchy in the 18th Century was attributable to certain reforms of the Regency and to the opening of the markets. With regard to the measures intended to relax the constraints on the housing market, I deem that the writers and politicians of the time - and, as a consequence, later writers - may have exaggerated their short-term impact, probably influenced by their long-term effects. Enlightenment was becoming increasingly popular in Italy, by then, and all the intellectuals of this movement sort of assumed that population was "naturally" destined to increase, except if hindered by a series of obstacles. Among these obstacles, two were always listed, although with differences in raking, depending on the personal inclination of each author: the exorbitant

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<sup>1</sup> Population registers, held under the responsibility of priests [Note of the translator].

wealth in the hands of the clergy and the laws governing inheritance (especially “Primogeniture” and “Fideicommissum”), which favored a great concentration of property and wealth in the hands of but a few people. It was thought, then, that removing these obstacles would permit population growth to resume, and since this is what did in fact happen (first, laws intended to combat this concentration of wealth; then, population growth), the relation of cause and effect was easily, perhaps too hastily, established. But the truth was likely different: population growth in Tuscany depended much more on other causes, namely on a few natural and social conditions not directly linked to political action - as in other parts of Europe, by the way.

His two books on the history of prices and inflation, in Florence and Siena, are the result of a very patient collection of archival data - his hands protected from the cold by his fingerless, wool gloves, as he remembered merrily: thousands of elementary prices of transactions between 1520 and 1620, at the monastery of Santa Maria Regina Coeli in Florence, which did not produce enough for its 60 nuns, and needed to purchase goods and services on the market. And there are also thousands of prices of grain, registered, between 1544 and 1756, by the “Esecutori di gabella”, the magistrates of Siena in charge of collecting the revenues of indirect taxes. Both were painstaking collections, with pencil or pen, without the help of research assistants; lengthy and repetitive calculations, without a computer; hand-drawn graphs. All this helped the birth of ideas in Parenti's mind, curiosity, hypotheses, tests: everything formed little by little, and, elaborated by Parenti's outstanding intelligence, slowly evolved into the masterpieces that we admire today. In those years the “Comité International de l'Histoire des Prix”, funded by the Foundation Rockefeller, launched a program of comparative research that, among other things, produced the famous works of Beveridge for England and Earl Hamilton for Spain (American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain): we can say, today, that Parenti's work

compares favorably with both, if we take into account the differences in terms of resources - a whole research team against a single man! As for Florence, thanks to Parenti we learn that prices started to increase later than elsewhere in Europe, real wages remained relatively stable, and profits low: and this is probably why the Florentine textile industry started its decline. The work on Siena, which extends for over more than two centuries, gave Parenti the opportunity to study price cycles and their causes. Incidentally, he questioned the validity of the so called “law of King Gregory”, by which prices should be more elastic than quantities, and therefore oscillate more around their mean. In the case of Siena, the opposite was true: quantities varied proportionally more than prices - which was up to then considered theoretically impossible.

Other works by Parenti are probably as interesting as these three: indeed, Parenti did not lack talent, balance, keen critical sense, and clarity, and whatever he did, became interesting. But I am not here to present you with his scientific biography - I would lack both time and competence for this: I am here to recall the person. And these three books tell us that Parenti was a very good researcher, but he could also go well beyond that. His growing family - four children: Vanni, Bona, Neri, and Chiara - the war, the challenge of reconstruction: all this gave him the opportunity to engage in those “practical occupations” that had initially, and perhaps always, attracted him. He himself confessed that the most important decisions he had ever taken in his life were in part due to the suggestions and advice of his teachers, in part deriving directly from the several, often binding, obligations and duties that his official roles demanded, but in part they were also inspired by occasional circumstances: almost by chance. Parenti was not a restless man (not from my point of view, at least) but he felt obliged to lend his talents where he felt they were most needed, and in this attitude lays his strength. It is not by chance that, in the exquisite introduction to the reprint of the two aforementioned books on prices, that the “Maison des Sciences de l'Homme” itself had

requested, Fernand Braudel writes “Il a donc été disposé pour une série d’entreprises dont il n’avait pas cherché – un seul instant – à s’ouvrir l’accès” (“He happened to be involved in several enterprises, but he himself never volunteered for them - not once”).

The list of his scientific, organizational, consultative responsibilities is impressive: it may even convey the impression of an ambitious man, whereas the plain truth is simply that everyone sought his help and his advice, and that he was too well-mannered to refuse both. He worked for international, national, and even local organizations; with scientific and policy purposes; he was both a top rank, government consultant and a promoter of local, but always high-level, initiatives. He was both a *grand* and a ... *petit commis*: the expression does not exist, yet it depicts his disposition well. Indeed, his sense of duty always led him to be in the front line, working hard, and never for himself. Besides, he had several distinguished abilities: he could easily grasp the essentials of everything, he knew how to be both clear and tactful at the same time, and ironic without being cynical. This explains why, in addition to being a member of almost all the major scientific societies of his time - including, later, the *Accademia dei Lincei* - we also find him in Washington working on the Marshall Plan; in Paris, at the OECD and at the UNESCO, and in Geneva, at the ILO. But his greatest commitment, between 1949 and 1963 was the *Comitato di Attuazione del Piano d’Incremento dell’Occupazione Operaia INA-Casa* - (Committee for the Implementation of the Plan to Increase Employment, Housing and Construction), of which he was Deputy first, and President later. A huge task, indeed: this was the only serious investment programme in housing and urbanization that our country ever attempted, with long lasting consequences on occupational and economic growth. We owe him the part of Florence that we now call “Isolotto”, which is an attractive example of post-war social housing and which, incidentally, is much better than the type of social housing (or, sometimes, simply housing)

that we have come to know later, and that still sullies the suburbs of virtually all our cities today.

How did Parent ever come to be involved in this Committee? Almost by chance. In the post-war years, Parenti was frequently in Rome, and he stayed at the “Chiesa Nuova”, a small hotel run by two very picturesque ladies - Aldo Palazzeschi himself (who, incidentally, lived nearby), couldn't have imagined more vivid literary characters. That modest hotel had, among its guests, Dossetti, Guala, Fanfani, La Pira, Lazzati, and other prominent Catholics. Parenti got to know them, and eventually became their friend - but these were both fine intellectuals and experienced policy makers: a combination that can lay latent in Parenti himself, and that would soon emerge. Don't get me wrong, now. Parenti would never confuse a political party with the state, or a religious affiliation with a public institution. But I believe that the deeply religious character of some of these men attracted and intrigued him. As I said, he came from a religious family, but he himself did not appear to be a believer. Or, better, he probably was, but, although he never spoke about this, not even to his close friends, I think that he also had doubts, especially when religious faith and reason seemed to be in contrast. I tend to interpret certain reactions of his as due to his incapability of fully reconciling the two (faith and reason), and to his admiration - envy, maybe? - for those who could. But I am conjecturing, here: I may have misinterpreted his feelings, or just have a poor recollection.

Back to hard facts, then. As the experience at INA-Casa came to an end, Parenti resisted the lure of the innumerable calls that he received in those years, from Rome and elsewhere: not surprisingly, he was highly requested, so as to exploit his capabilities and advice. But Parenti preferred to get back to the University, full-time, in Florence. In the '50s, he founded the Institute of Statistics, which attracted a number of young and promising scholars. What kept things going was their enthusiasm, together with a few small research

projects founded by the European Coal and Steel Community, the INA-Casa, and the Archivio Storico dell'Unificazione Italiana (Historical Archive for the Italian Unification). In the '60s, however, with more resources now accruing to the University, stable jobs could be created. This small nucleus of persons could therefore be consolidated, and the Scuola di Statistica (School of Statistics) was re-opened: it had been created in 1930, and then closed, at the outbreak of World War II. This school attracted several students: after the first two years, with a Diploma, most of them went to work, but others, the most talented, decided to stay on for two more years, and get a full University Degree. The '60s were years when new interests were forming, with studies and research projects that Parenti knew how to encourage, support, make flourish - but also bring to a close. Several colleagues of my generation were successfully trained at the Scuola di Statistica in those vital years, in a warm atmosphere where informal discussion and constant debate were the rule, under the calm and intelligent leadership of Parenti. It was inevitable that his qualities would lead him to take on Academic responsibilities: he became Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics from 1968 to 1973, then Rector between 1973 and 1976. The difficult period of '68 and subsequent years was surely less harsh than it could have been, thanks to Parenti, who knew how to combine dialogue with firm decisions, understanding and leadership. Students and colleagues respected him, because, despite the turmoil of those years, he always knew how to extract the best from both the new ideas and the old structures, resisting the several unreasonable, and frequently arrogant, pressures of the times. The election of the Rector, in 1973, is worth remembering. In those years, all the tenured professors of the University would meet in the Aula Magna (the Great Hall), in a picturesque disorder, which had nonetheless some merits: professors of different faculties would get to know each other and have the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss projects. Parenti was not a candidate, nor had he any ambition to be.



But in the initial polls none of the official candidates could get the required majority, while a small but increasing group of professors (including myself) gave their vote to Parenti. It soon became clear to almost everybody that his candidacy was the most reasonable and the most natural: in short, the best. With Parenti, the role of the Rector started to change: it used to be a merely representative institution, almost a remnant of the 19th century, but it slowly evolved into the managerial role it is today. Lorenzo Federico Signorini, a Deputy Rector of Parenti, later said: “Those were very difficult years. Under the impulse of the student protests of 1968, the Italian University was undergoing a painful change, towards new, but still unclear guidelines and management criteria. Parenti just knew how to ride and lead the change: he was a manager, had insight, ductility, ability, strong will, balance - and, not to be forgotten - style and elegance. The right man at the right time.”. Under his leadership, the University re-emerged from several years of fear and confusion. For instance, he resumed the tradition of an official inauguration of academic year in the Palazzo Vecchio: a public ceremony in a public building, open to everybody. His leadership was innovative, far-looking, independent: we could once again be proud of being University Professors in Florence!

Regretfully, in 1976, he declined the offers he received to run for a second mandate as a Rector, and very simply got back to his ordinary life as a professor: not many can leave very prominent positions with such a style, and without regret. He was also well known at Istat, because from the early 50's until his death, he served this institution in several roles: as a member of the Board of Governors, for instance, as a counselor and as the promoter and organizer of several new initiatives. The modernization of the official Italian statistics owes much to his contribution. After the famous La Malfa's “additional notes”<sup>2</sup>, in the early 60s, Parenti found himself involved in a lot of

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<sup>2</sup> A document, where the then Minister of the Budget, Ugo La Malfa, introduced the basic ideas of a new line of political economy. Among these, that the relative shares of income accruing to labor and capital were to be arrived at by common agreement [Note of the translator].

research and analyses linked to the government's political economy. From 1967 to 1974 he chaired the Technical and Scientific Committee for Economic Planning, gathering the most prominent economists of the time. In 1977 he became President of the ISPE (Institute for Studies and Economic Planning - ancestor of the ISAE), but resigned in 1978: I think that this was perhaps the only time he failed, which caused him great sorrow. Irreconcilable personal and labor conflicts, bureaucracy, and political interests proved stronger than him and his extraordinary capacity to smooth difficulties and reconcile opposing interests. In his late years, he had reason to be very proud of what he had accomplished during his life, but pride was not a word of his dictionary.

He was simply, and constantly, there, ready to offer his advice to whoever needed it. And, indeed, the needy were many: in difficult times, in tangled situations, before some difficult decisions who wouldn't have gone to Parenti for some advice? I myself knocked on his door on a few occasions. His responses were never abstract, or moralizing, or, even less, opportunist. Parenti would simply say "You should do this, because it suits you, and because this is useful to yourself and society". I was not "his student", if by student we mean someone who makes his studies and decisive steps towards scientific research under his guidance. But I was "his student" in the truest sense of the word, because I shared his vision of the world, his conception of what culture and science are and how they relate to society at large. I did not *happen* to be his student: I deliberately *chose* to be.

Giuseppe Parenti had a long and full life: with a large and solid family, a love for nature, a serene fortitude, even in the very last days of his life. And he remained a handsome man right to the end - why shouldn't we mention this? - even charming, with his frank smile, and his bright, slightly ironical eyes. I thank the organizers of this conference: remembering Parenti is an honor for me. In a month - on November 14, 2004 - it will be exactly 10 years since his

death: all those who knew him will surely join me in this grateful and affectionate remembrance.

(Massimo Livi Bacci)