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GIACOMO BECATTINI, A GREAT CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ECONOMIST

Marco Bellandi (University of Florence)*

Giacomo Becattini (1927-2017) was a political economist, in the extended meaning of the term. Both the prominence and the peculiarity of his scholarly contribution come from the combination of four intellectual passions, enriched by his sharp intelligence and extraordinary eloquence.

The first intellectual passion was his concern to decipher and understand the inner connexions running between economy and society, and shaping the destiny of various forms of human organization in contemporary capitalism. He came across the work of Karl Marx early in his career, but the contributions of classical political economists – in particular Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill –, of Victorian economists, in particular Alfred Marshall, and a set of Italian economists and social thinkers from Carlo Cattaneo to Alberto Bertolino (his master at the University of Florence), Federico Caffè, Paolo Sylos-Labini and Giorgio Fuà, left a mark in his intellectual formation. Giacomo Becattini, who always maintained the left-wing inclination of his youth, found in Alfred Marshall an attention to the value of the human beings seen in the places and time of their economic and social life, with whom he shared. Giacomo Becattini was one of the most important scholars internationally of the thinking of Victorian economists and of Alfred Marshall specifically. His addresses at the Trinity Hall College of Cambridge were recalled by those who attended them for his insightful historical reconstruction of the fabric of social and intellectual relations that had been the lively basis for the original contributions of such economists. Some pieces illustrating a final appraisal by Becattini of his

* This scientific commemoration expands on an obituary published in *Economia e Politica Industriale – Journal of Industrial and Business Economics*, 1-2, 2017.

reflections on Marshall are included in Becattini, G., *The return of the “white elephant”*, in Arena R. and Queré M. (eds), *The Economics of Alfred Marshall. Revisiting Marshall’s Legacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, and in Raffaelli T., Becattini G., Dardi M. (eds) (2007), *The Elgar Companion to Alfred Marshall*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

The second passion qualifies the first: indeed Giacomo Becattini was never interested in tinkering with abstract and general models of economic system without any test on real-world contexts and without them addressing impellent problems. He was involved, from the beginning of his academic career in the 1950s, in debates and investigations concerning the roots of development and depression in places and regions in Italy. He was stimulated in particular by the rise of light industrialization in Tuscany after the Second World War and the following decades, largely unexpected in its rhythms and forms by the mainstream approaches of industrial economics. He saw, as early as the 1960s, the hidden strength of centres of industrial specialisation made of many small firms and embedded in socio-cultural local relations. He found a link with Marshall’s writings on industrial districts and external economies, that reinforced and shaped his life-long attachment to Marshall, as well as helped develop a solid theoretical foundation to the interpretation of the localized sources of development of the Italian industry at the time. He revived and renovated the use of such Marshallian concepts in various contributions during the 1970s. This raised the interest of many international scholars across various disciplines in the social sciences. They were looking for alternatives to mass production, urban gigantism, and globalised capitalism, and promoted an important array of other concepts and researches, like those on flexible specialization and post-fordism, innovative milieu and innovation poles, business clusters, new economic geography and regional innovation systems, social capital and human development, etc. A vast collection of contributions relating international research on industrial districts to such other streams has been written for and published in Becattini G., Bellandi M., De Propriis L. (eds), *The Handbook of Industrial Districts*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009. The written production of Becattini on industrial districts, local development, regional and national paths of industrialization is conspicuous. Some of the more important papers written by Becattini on such themes from the 1970s to the beginning of the 2000s have been re-published in English in Becattini, G., Bellandi M., Dei Ottati G. and Sforzi F., *From Industrial Districts to Local Development: An Itinerary of Research*, Cheltenham:

Edward Elgar, 2003, and in Becattini G., *Industrial Districts. A New Approach to Industrial Change*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004. A final assessment of his reflections on local development is given in Becattini G., *Beyond Geo-sectoriality: The Productive Chorality of Places*, *Investigaciones Regionales*, 32, 2015.

The third passion was his interest in political and civic debates, as well as in engagement to address concerns and find solutions related to the destiny of local societies. He cultivated such interest offering a variety of contributions under various roles; always trying to combine them with a distillation of his scientific advancements, starting from two cities dearest to his heart. Florence is the city of his mother University, where he was also full professor from 1968 to 1999. Prato is the core of the textile district that was his favourite socio-economic laboratory, and to which he dedicated a fundamental piece of research. This last one resulted in various publications, for example in English as Becattini G., *The Caterpillar and the Butterfly. An Exemplary Case of Development in the Italy of the Industrial Districts*, Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 2001.

Last but not least, as a passion, Giacomo Becattini taught many generations of students at the Faculty of Economics and Trade at the University of Florence, and was the mentor of many young researchers who then became colleagues and collaborators over the decades.

Many friends accompanied him in his intellectual journey; for example, besides his closest collaborators, Sebastiano Brusco, Arnaldo Bagnasco, Paolo Giovannini, Enzo Rullani, Carlo Trigilia, Werner Sengenberger, Joan Trullen, Sergio Vaccà, Stefano Zamagni, and of course many others. The intellectual exchanges were often hosted within research campaigns (for example with the *International Labour Office*), editorial collaborations (for example with the journals *Il Ponte*, *Economia e Politica Industriale*, and the *Rivista Italiana degli Economisti*), national and international conferences and publications.

The impact of his scholarly contributions was felt across academic and scientific circles, at national and international levels. He founded IRPET (*Istituto per la Programmazione Economica della Toscana*) at the beginning of the 1970s; promoted the *Incontri di Artimino sullo Sviluppo Locale* still running annually since 1991; was President of the Italian Society of Economists

between 1993 and 1995. Among the many acknowledgements for his contributions, I recall the *International prize of the Swedish Foundation for Small Business Research* in Stockholm.

He inspired generations of scholars, way beyond his beloved Tuscany. They shared with him the quest for a *capitalism with a human face*, that is for “rich contexts whereby the realisation of peoples’ capabilities and goals concur to a collective benefit, whilst rewarding the person not only in monetary terms but more importantly in terms of social recognition and ascent” (from the introduction to the *Handbook of Industrial Districts*). His thinking and contributions gave answers that were both intellectually rigorous and empirically grounded. He leaves a scientific contribution and a lesson in civic engagement that are of universal inspiration in the work of the economist.