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Obituary

Stefano Fenoaltea (1943-2020)

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Abstract:

Obituary of Stefano Fenoaltea (1943-2020), economic historian and longtime collaborator of this journal. The author recalls her personal encounter with Stefano Fenoaltea and shortly but vividly summarizes his character and their friendship over the decades.

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Stefano was a *Doktorbruder* of mine—we came to Harvard for graduate school in economics in the same year, 1964. Stefano I believe planned on working with Gerschenkron, whom I also worked with—if Gerschenkron's extremely hands-off style of supervision can be called 'working with'. Mainly we students just looked at his person and his work, astonished, and tried to imitate them. On both counts, person and work, Stefano was a Gerschenkronian. But Gerschenkron, who like Stefano himself was inclined to stirring up academic disputes (Gerschdenkron sicced me and Dick Sylla, for example, on Landes), refused to work with him when Stefano questioned The Master's views on the rate and sources of Italian industrialization. Doubtless Stefano was less than diplomatic about the disagreement. The orphaned student shifted to John Meyer as supervisor (he of 'econometric' studies of slavery, and who was also a mentor of mine; again our careers touched). Then Stefano went off to his various academic appointments.

Everyone who knew him knows that Stefano was difficult, proud, *aristocratico*. Though notably undiplomatic, he was the son of the Italian ambassador to the United States, which is why his later education was in the USA. (Yet he told me once that his high culture—novels, poetry, and so forth—was French, not either as one might have expected English or Italian). His aristocratic hauteur was especially surprising I think to Americans, unaccustomed to such behavior. His American English was completely unaccented, so we naïfs thought of him as a

regular *americano*. No such thing. For a long time after we first met I called him the informal, democratic "Steve," until he said that he preferred the full dignity of Stefano. Oh, well, all right.

Stefano never pulled his punches in scientific disagreements. I speak as someone with similar habits, but Stefano was even tougher. The last email I got from him was two weeks before his death: "Carissima," he wrote (note the gender: he was easy and gracious, as was his wife, about my gender change, another sign of an essentially aristocratic nature: he was no worried bourgeois), "Following up on [his essay] Choler, just had [Prof. X] turn down an article [his last methodological piece, expressing his 'spleen and choler' concerning tendencies in economic history; note the sophisticated choice of English words]: two referees [were] much in favor, the third demanded I not criticize living authors. *Quel monde*! I must say I really enjoyed writing Spleen and Choler. I am at heart a pamphleteer, born in the wrong century."

Oh, I don't know. He insisted on doing very careful industrial accounting quite far from pamphleteering, even against his gifts or his academic self-interest. The one scientific disagreement he and I had was about whether an insurance motive explained scattering of plots in medieval open fields. He argued that other sorts of insurance such as grain storage could achieve security without the inconvenience, and so McCloskey must be wrong about diversifying plots across the face of the village. He argued it so cleverly and eloquently (he wrote English like an angel) that I was driven to write with a student an elaborate paper calculating the (high) cost of storage in such villages. The episode was characteristic of his scientific impact. He forced you to reply. As I wrote to him at the end of August 2020, "I am so pleased to see that in 'scholarship as a contact sport' [his phrase] you have not (as they say in basketball) lost a step. If we do not criticize, *and answer the criticism*, science stagnates." Stefano was never going to let the pursuit of scientific truth show the slightest stagnation.

It's hard. An American rabbi used as the first line of an affecting poem the folk saying "It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch." I loved Stefano, 'difficult,' oppositional, choleric, sharp elbows, aristocratic but always brilliant and amusing as he was. My PhD generation is of an age to start losing brothers and sisters. Another *Doktorbruder* of mine, Richard Sutch, died last year, and I quoted then the last line of another affecting poem, by the Roman (as Stefano was, two millennia on) Catullus on the death of his own brother, "And forever, brother, hail and farewell."

Stefano in his scholarly way would have insisted on the original Latin (he would correct mine): *Atque in perpetuum frater ave atque vale*. Oh, the tears of things.