

IN MEMORY OF EUGENIO SONNINO
(1938 – 2012)

Professor Eugenio Sonnino died on March 15, 2012. He has been member of *Genus*' Scientific-Editorial Board since 1976. His academic career has fully developed at the University of Rome "La Sapienza", in the Department of Demographic Sciences (formerly, Institute of Demography) and the Faculty of Statistical, Demographical and Actuarial Sciences, where he had been assistant at the first chair of Demography held by Nora Federici and, since 1981, full professor of Demography. He headed the Institute of Demography from 1981 to 1984. His wide scientific production mainly deals with historical and social demography, migration, regional and urban studies. Formerly president of the Italian Society of Historical Demography (SIDeS), director of the Inter-dipartimental Centre for Rome-city Studies (CISR), honorary president of the International Committee for Historical Demography (ICHHD).

Eugenio Sonnino, 1938-2012

*«Er tempo, fijja, è peggio d'una lima.
Rosica sordo sordo e tt'assottijja,
Che ggnisun giorno sei quella de prima.»*

«Time, my child, is worse than a file.
It wears away silently and wears you down,
For you're never what you were the day before.»¹

As I remember him, Enio - that was how he signed his name and what he wanted his friends to call him - always spoke a polished Italian, though with the lightest Roman cadence, but when the occasion presented itself, perhaps encouraged by his friends, he would recite a few lines or part of a sonnet by Belli. He seemed to know Belli's complete works by heart, bringing the words and their music alive, and reciting them with an actor's skill. Every time someone had to leave and the meeting broke up (because at demographers' meetings everything happened as they were ending) we all promised to devote the next meeting exclusively to listening to Enio reciting Belli. Every opportunity was seized to mention one of Belli's sonnets (even when the connections to one of the subjects under discussion, such as demography, were sometimes a little strained). Belli lived in a period - the nineteenth century with its contradictions and changes - whose social, demographic and, therefore, political connotations were often the subject of those meetings - and so a line or two of Belli was able to bring to life the sense that had been emerging in the discussion. And Enio was always able to do that.

All my recollections of Enio (like any recollection of a longstanding friendship founded on admiration and affection), whether they are connected with reading something he had written or some other thought or comment made in a discussion with colleagues, always brings me back to his voice. And that is why, in trying to retrieve his personality from my memory, I have started from the sound of his voice and have found no more logical thread than going back to Belli, Enio's favourite poet. In any case, Belli's sonnets give us an excellent impression of the sense of life: a life that, in the great mosaic of the Roman people, takes in both Carnival and Lent (but then again, doesn't demography also move between Carnival and Lent, in Belli's sense, in seeking to unveil the mysteries of life?).

I first met Enio in 1965, in what was then the Institute of Demography in the Faculty of Statistics at Rome University, where I had gone to meet Nora Federici, who was the director of the Institute. Enio showed me around and

then, to talk over our ideas and impressions about the discipline in which we were taking our first steps, we sat down in the room he shared with Antonio Golini. With one of his typical quips he said, «Ah yes, everyone has his own Antonio», as if to say that the two of us had something in common, our working proximity with someone of the same name - I too shared a room in Florence with an Antonio, Antonio Santini.

One of the purposes of the meeting in Rome was to prepare some sort of agenda for a seminar on internal migrations that was to be held in Florence in 1966, at the Institute of Statistics, where Massimo Livi Bacci lectured in Demography. Enio held his seminar in March 1966 on *The socio-demographic characteristics of immigrants and their contribution to the development of a large city: the case of Rome*².

Internal migration and urbanization was a field of enquiry that concerned him throughout his academic career: his contributions opening up new lines of investigation and suggesting fresh interpretations. We might mention the early *Structure and directions of migratory movements concerning the City of Rome*³, of 1966, not forgetting his long and engrossing experience as coordinator for *Research on depopulation in Italy: 1871-1971*, which, with a contribution from the CNR (National Research Council) was sponsored by the Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems and the Institute of Demography at Rome University⁴. But more time would be required to review all of Enio's activity in this wide-ranging field of research, and to re-read his work, so as to bring out fully the originality of his reflections and the contribution he made to our knowledge of the questions involved in migrations and urbanization. All of these subjects involve different approaches, from demography to sociology, from town planning to health statistics - subjects that, in the end, needed to be viewed from a historical perspective.

It was a wide-ranging field of research indeed, and Enio did much of the groundwork, from his earliest writings in 1966 to the important volume containing the papers delivered at the international conference held in Rome in September 1999, *Living in the city*⁵, whose proceedings set out a sort of ground-plan of the intricate themes that we need to bear in mind when studying a city down the centuries, and also described the results that had been achieved. Enio organized the conference in collaboration with the International Committee for Historical Demography (ICHHD), part of the International Congress of Historical Sciences, of which he was later elected Honorary President.

But in his research on the city he has always been linked to the context in which he lived and worked: Rome. So, from the earliest works, his aim was a conclusive stocktaking. He referred to methodological tools that seemed decisive for tackling the problems of handling a big and complex city like Rome) but this was impossible, because the constant flux of life, the inescapable changes of its components with the passage of time, could not be mastered. And this, essentially, is what Enio noted in the introduction to his

book *Population and demographic forecasts in the municipalities of Roma Capitale*⁶. Basing his work on current known facts - the structure and behaviour of the population - the demographic forecasts do not simply aim at judging how those structures and behaviours might develop in future, but they can also be an important political tool, simply because, if used, they provide guidelines for political decisions.

From the first, immediately after graduating with a thesis examined by Nora Federici, his research led him towards population history: it was, in any case, almost a natural consequence - Nora Federici herself had studied under Corrado Gini, who, as a scholar, was undoubtedly very responsive to the stimuli of historical research, since, to properly measure and understand current population events, one cannot dispense with the knowledge of the demographic dynamics of the past. Gini was behind the founding of the Faculty of Statistical and Demographic Sciences (a decisive innovation in the range of university teaching in Italy) and in 1926 created the Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems (CISP), and then in 1929 the Committee of Historical Demography. In 1931, for the International Conference for Population Studies, which he had organized in Rome, Gini presented the proofs of Volume I of *Archive Sources for the Study of Population Problems up to 1848* (the complete series was published between 1933 and 1941, in eight volumes and ten books): in short, inside the Institute of Demography at University in Rome, the words “history” and “historical demography” (albeit in a slightly different sense from the present one) clearly had the right of citizenship and were clearing the ground for genuinely important research in Demography as well as in the social sciences.

On Gini’s death in 1965, Nora Federici (who had been short-listed for the first Chair in Demography in 1962 together with Pierfrancesco Bandettini and Athos Bellettini) succeeded him as President of the CISP and the Committee of Historical Demography, so that the relations between demographers and historians became more and more solid. However, we need to bear in mind that in Italy, as in the world at large, there was now a widespread interest in setting population problems in a historical context⁷, or, at least, reconsidering the boundaries of Demography and other academic disciplines. The result, in Italy, was that in 1970 the Italian Committee for the Study of Historical Demography was set up, with a board consisting of Athos Bellettini, Domenico Demarco, Nora Federici, Massimo Livi Bacci and Pasquale Villani, with Enio as Secretary.

The board set out to work with a will, inviting research projects that brought financing from the CNR and set up new research centres in universities in Parma, Bari, Perugia, Pavia, as well as Rome, Naples, Florence, Bologna, Cagliari and Messina, Pisa, Turin and Genoa. A wide spectrum of projects covered much of the country, spanned various time periods (from the middle ages to the present), and united scholars from different disciplines (i.e.

demographers, geneticists, sociologists and geographers) and generated many different lines of enquiry.

To encourage the integration of the various approaches, the board decided it would be useful to organize some interdisciplinary seminars around different methods and forms of reading, using and interpreting the historical-demographic sources. The seminars were held over thirteen meetings during the period 1971-1974, involving various universities. The proceedings are collected in three volumes (in four books)⁸.

These seminars were very successful and helped establish the Italian Society of Historical Demography (SIDEs) in May 1977. The first advisory committee gathered Athos Bellettini, President, Carlo M. Cipolla, Domenico Demarco, Massimo Livi Bacci, Mario Mirri and Eugenio Sonnino, and Lorenzo Del Panta as Secretary.

The SIDEs revived the spirit (and ambitions) of the Committee for Historical Demography, organizing conferences and seminars, both nationally and internationally - in collaboration with the French Société de Démographie Historique and the Spanish Asociación de Demografía Histórica - but, in particular, with the organization of week-long residential study courses in historical demography, offering study grants to young researchers.

It is clear that Enio played an important part just from this short outline of the history of historical demography in Italy: one need only read the introductions and prefaces to the publications of the Committee for Historical Demography of the CISP since 1965 to realize this, just as a fresh glance at Enio's writings - whatever the period of their first publication - will suffice to understand his vision of the place of «historical demography» in the subject overall. And yet, it was a vision that was constantly subjected to “historical” verification: simply, it had its place in time, exposed to developments and modifications that I cannot dwell on here. It is, however, clear that Enio's commitment was even more vital after 1983, when - after the death of Bellettini in September 1973 - he was elected President of the SIDEs, a position he held from May 1984 until February 1991, when he stepped down and I, Carlo Corsini, took over the role.

It was also in 1984 that Enio repeated the experience of starting a journal, the *Bollettino di Demografia Storica*⁹, which he edited: the *Bollettino* appeared until 1999, being replaced in 2000 by the new journal *Popolazione e Storia*, edited by Carlo Corsini.

Enio's research and study in the field of historical demography certainly did not end after he stepped down from SIDEs. Quite the contrary.

To conclude, I would like to refer to his own words, in his *Bibliographical Essay* on historical demography in Italy, which dates from 1997, but is as fresh and relevant as ever: «Research in historical demography [...] has developed in the direction of increasing attention to methodology and neighbouring disciplines, to read and understand which requires a combination of knowledge

from various disciplines; this seems a significant manifestation of the willingness of demographers to consider more seriously the characteristics of the populations of the past and the problems raised by analysing them, as well as growing attention from other researchers - historians, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers - in population studies.»¹⁰

The basic aspiration of Demography is essentially that of succeeding in unveiling the mysteries of life in the incessant flux of events that condition it: and this, at any rate, was Enio's passionately held ambition in his research work, not only as it emerges from the pages he wrote, but also from the thoughts and reflections he expressed when talking to friends and colleagues. And, once again, the sense of the helplessness of us all to fully measure this incessant flux of the events of life and block their flow, is well described by Belli:

*«E ggnisuno po' ddi: ddomani ancora
Sentirò bbatte er mezzogiorno d'oggi.»*

«And no one can say: tomorrow I will still
Hear midday striking like today»¹¹

CARLO A. CORSINI

Professor Emeritus of Demography
University of Florence

Notes

¹ These three lines are taken from the sonnet *La monizzazione* by Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, included in the collection *Sonetti erotici e meditativi*, edited by Pietro Gibellini (Adelphi, 2012). The sonnet is on p. 279. (They are the words with which an old woman reminds an ambitious young girl of the speed with which time flies and the transience of all things human).

² The contribution is published in *Le migrazioni interne in Italia. Atti del Seminario di Demografia tenuto nell'anno accademico 1965-66* ed. Massimo Livi Bacci, Florence, School of Statistics of Florence University, n.d. (but 1967), pp. 9-35.

³ This paper can be found in Facoltà di Scienze Statistiche Demografiche ed Attuariali, Istituto di Demografia, Università di Roma, *Miscellanea di Studi Demografici*, (ed. A. Golini, E. Sonnino, F. Tassinari), Stabilimento Tipografico Fausto Favilli, Rome, 1966, pp. 27-100.

⁴ See the final report in Comitato Italiano per lo Studio dei Problemi della Popolazione e Istituto di Demografia dell'Università di Roma, *Ricerche sullo spopolamento in Italia: 1871-1971*, (ed. Eugenio Sonnino), Rome, 1979. The research programme (the title was: *Le determinanti e le implicazioni demografiche, economiche e sociali dello spopolamento in Italia dopo l'unificazione*) began in 1972 and in the following years produced notable results from the fine group of authors. Enio had the opportunity to present the main features and the first results in a series of works published on various occasions: briefly, we might mention his first writings on *Problemi di metodo e primi risultati di una ricerca sullo spopolamento dei comuni italiani dopo l'Unità*, in *Demografia storica*, (ed. E. Sori), Bologna, Il Mulino, 1975; as well as his essay *Le aree di spopolamento*, in *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 6, *Atlante*, Turin, Einaudi, 1976.

⁵ The volume, which contains the *Proceedings of the International Conference held by the International Commission for Historical Demography*, appeared in 2004, published by the Casa Editrice Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza.

⁶ *Popolazione e previsioni demografiche nei Municipi di Roma Capitale. Dinamiche attuali e prospettive fino al 2024*, Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza e Centro di ricerche su Roma – CSR, Rome, Gangemi Editore, 2011.

⁷ For some general considerations on this, see my *Demografia e Storia*, in the volume *Demografia* (ed. M. Livi Bacci, G. C. Blangiardo, A. Golini), Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Guide agli studi di scienze sociali in Italia, Turin, 1994, pp. 139-183.

⁸ Comitato italiano per lo studio della demografia storica, *Le fonti della demografia storica in Italia*, 2 vols, CISP, Rome, n.d. (but 1974); Id., *Problemi di utilizzazione delle fonti di demografia storica*, CISP, Rome, 1977; Id., *Demografia storica e condizioni economico-sociali*, CISP, Rome, 1976.

⁹ Enio had prepared the publication of a *Bollettino di Demografia Storica* of the Centre of Documentation for the Study of Historical Demography (CEDODEST), which appeared for just two issues, in 1979 and 1981 respectively.

¹⁰ *La Demografia Storica Italiana 1940-1980 con integrazione 1981-1993. Saggio bibliografico*, ed. Eugenio Sonnino, in *Bollettino di Demografia Storica*, no. 26/27, 1997.

¹¹ Two lines from *La golaccia*, p. 315 from the *Sonetti erotici e meditativi*, cit.