

In Memory of Bianca Beccalli

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Bianca Beccalli, a founding mother of Italian sociology and pioneer of gender studies in Italy, passed away on the 17th of October 2024, at the age of 86. Her trajectory was unique, but also instructive about the evolution of labour sociology within Italian social development, and her legacy has the potential to remain a continuing source of inspiration for new generations of sociologists.

In post-war Italy, there was no academic field of sociology – it had been banned by fascism, and it was then treated with caution by conservatives and communists alike. Bianca Beccalli's studies started with philosophy, in her natal Pavia, an austere university town 50km away from Milan. She immediately became a point of reference for the secular and increasingly leftwing students' organisation *Unione Goliardica Italiana*, taking part in the first frissons that would turn into large youth tumults a decade later. Thirty years before the Erasmus program, Beccalli made the then highly unusual step of spending two years in Paris, where she met academic sociology, in particular in the person of Alain Touraine, then a still-emerging figure of the new French sociology of work, and went on to write her dissertation on Durkheim. While functionalist sociology was soon afterwards marginalised in Europe as inherently conservative, Beccalli had of Durkheim's works a direct knowledge, unmediated by Talcott Parsons's translation, which allowed her to grasp the most fertile aspects of his thought on solidarity, integration, and corporatism. Those insights were still shining forty years later in her *virtuoso* theoretical duet performances with Gianfranco Poggi (the best Italian scholar of Durkheim) in a seminar at the European University Institute devoted to the author of *De la division du travail social*.

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In the increasingly vibrant 1960s Bianca Beccalli was an active part of two of the most innovative intellectual enterprises in the Italian Left. She sat first on the editorial board of *Quaderni Rossi*, the Turin journal led by Raniero Panzieri that was the cradle of Italian workerism and of participatory working-class research – approaches that are currently experiencing an international revival. And soon afterwards on that of *Quaderni Piacentini*, a journal based in Piacenza (a town close to Pavia) that fostered neo-Marxist and neo-Gramscian theory and inspired the new social movements of the 1970s, allowing to separate Marxism from the orthodoxy of communist parties. Beccalli was never a member of the Italian Communist Party, preferring to define herself as socialist *and* (conjunction not to be confused with a hyphen) democratic. In the same decade, she went abroad again: to Cambridge for three years, to study sociology under the tutoring of David Lockwood, accompanied by her newly married husband and *Quaderni Piacentini* comrade Michele Salvati, who studied economics. The Cambridge years were intellectually enriching (she was friend, among others, with Germaine Greer) and probably the most “organised” in Bianca Beccalli’s life, but Salvati and she decided against continuing their promising UK careers (a number of opportunities were emerging in the many social sciences departments that were being created in the new universities) to return to Italy, where the 1968 movement and “hot autumn” workers’ unrest were a much more tantalising proposition. An article they wrote together in *Quaderni Piacentini* in 1970, titled “Divisione del lavoro: Capitalismo, socialismo, utopia”, is typical of that period: a theoretically informed piece that engages with practical questions of how to divide unwanted labour in a hypothetical, but then apparently possible, egalitarian society. The topic of working time would remain a constant interest for Beccalli. She wrote another article with Salvati on the same topic 28 years later in *Il Mulino* to argue for the 30-hour week, as a more radical but also more realistic and more gender-equal solution than the 35-hour week then introduced in France and proposed in Italy – an intuition that has new cogency today, in the post-pandemic labour market.

Upon returning to Italy Bianca Beccalli joined the Scuola Superiore di Sociologia, a postgraduate institution founded by Alessandro Pizzorno that would constitute a crucial step in the consolidation of Italian sociology (in the whole country there was then only one faculty of sociology, founded in 1962 in the new, remote provincial university of Trento). While still very young, in recognition of her Cambridge education, Beccalli was appointed as instructor of *borsisti* (bursary students), a group that included many of those who would constitute the “golden generation” of Italian sociology of

work. With that group she took part in the extensive research directed by Pizzorno on the new labour struggles. Her specific contribution was conducting a case study in the steel sector. She co-authored the fifth of the six-volume work resulting from that research (*Lotte operaie e sindacato: il ciclo 1968-1972 in Italia*): a work that became a milestone of labour studies, the foundation upon which Crouch and Pizzorno led their comparative research soon after and the whole new field of comparative industrial relations emerged. None less than Alain Touraine, in his *Le Mouvement ouvrier* book of 1984, hailed that research as the unmatched gold standard in the field.

As the cycle of Italian strikes started to dwindle, Italian universities started to expand and sociology began to affirm itself. Bianca Beccalli had her first teaching position at the University of Salerno in Southern Italy, where she met another young generation of sociologists interested in the social problems of the *Mezzogiorno* – while also juggling motherhood and a long-distance train commute up and down a country where female employment was still under 30%. A position at the University of Milan followed in 1976 and although Milan would remain her place of employment until retirement, it did not stop her movements: visiting positions in USA, Argentina, Germany, Australia and the UK again made her one of the Italian sociologists most at ease with the international scene of the discipline.

The 1970s were a key moment for further intellectual development, in which Bianca Beccalli's work and Italian social history are entangled: feminism. The encounter with feminism was through both urban and labour struggles, before being strengthened by close international friendships with leading figures such as Judy Wajcman and Ruth Milkman. Her first inquiries in this field were into the then topical issue of equal pay. In three milestone international articles published at near-precise 10-year intervals between 1984 (with Cynthia Cockburn, in *Feminist Review*), 1994 (in *New Left Review*) and 2002 (with me, in a book edited by Fiona Colgan and Sue Ledwith), she proposed an original analysis of the peculiar development of Italian unions' approach to gender equality, at the same time very egalitarian but alternating innovation with major blind spots. In another key article, published in *Stato e Mercato* in 1985, she expanded that line of argument to Italian gender equality policies in general. She challenged the explanations of the relative backwardness of policies for women in Italy based on structural factors such as economic development, to propose a more sophisticated actor-centred interpretation, looking into the paradox of a union movement that had endorsed equal pay before most of its counterparts, but had then not learnt much from a feminist movement that, seeing labour issues

as already covered, focussed on cultural issues and civil rights instead: a critical case of “missed encounter” (despite some experiences, especially in the CISL federation). In the meantime, Beccalli kept an active interest in all social movements – an interest that was never naïve or patronising, but genuinely thoughtful even when uneasy. There is a video recording of her at a roundtable meeting held in Milan in 1984 on the new ‘demonstrative youth subcultures’, during which some punk activists stripped in protest, cut their bare chests with razors and distributed blood-stained tracts: Bianca Beccalli calmly kept talking, holding the attention of the audience while acknowledging the protest.

In 1982, Bianca Beccalli was among the founders of the Italian Sociological Association, and she established, and later coordinated, its Economy, Work and Organisation (ELO) section. Later on, she also contributed to the establishment of the Gender Studies section. Being strongly involved in dialogue with different areas of sociology (theory, social movements, gender, urban studies), in 2015 she opposed the transformation of ELO into a separate association (the Italian Society of Economic Sociology, Sisec). And yet her strong collegial spirit and forgiving character made her a supporter also of Sisec activities once the new association was created.

In 1995, Bianca Beccalli founded the second (after a similar one in Turin, created three years earlier) university centre of gender studies, the *Centro Donne e Differenze di Genere*. It quickly established itself as a place of encounters and debate on gender politics and gender theory, with emerging young researchers and established figures of international feminism alike. An anecdote will give an idea of Bianca Beccalli’s type of leadership: in the late 1990s a friend from the *Libreria delle donne* (a historical centre of difference feminism in Milan) told me how she received a call from Bianca Beccalli, inviting the *Libreria* to send or suggest a participant for a debate on a then sensitive and disputed issue. My friend tried to delicately warn her that on that issue, the *Libreria* held deeply differing ideas, and might not be what was being looked for. Bianca’s reply pleasantly charmed her: “I know this, that’s exactly why I want to invite you!”. Today, as debates within and around feminism often become toxic, even to the point of opening the way to backlashes against women’s rights, an open and honest approach to dialogue with different views like Bianca Beccalli’s remains as needed as ever.

In subsequent years Beccalli contributed to important debates in the field, one among many being the issue of ‘quotas’, with a book of 1999 (*Donne in quota*) that inspired legislative proposals leading a few years later to changes

in Italian electoral law. She also introduced the teaching of equal opportunities in university, first with a course and then with a devoted Master.

In 2000 Beccalli was promoted to full professor, but her health started to deteriorate due to a rare heart condition. Her legendary physical mobility (including driving through Naples and Salerno traffic and cycling through Milan's) was seriously affected but never tamed. She retired in 2008 and yet kept travelling across all continents to participate in conferences, research projects, events, and political life. As for the latter of these activities, in 1990 she had been elected (as an independent on a ticket of the Italian Communist Party, in the last election that it contested) to the Milan city council, where she was appointed as representative for gender equality and contributed, in particular, to plans for rearranging working time policies. But it was the last moment of a political era: the left-wing administration collapsed in January 1992 and the whole council was swept away by corruption scandals the year after, opening the way for the far-right, racist Lega Nord to come to power in the city. While Bianca still tried to engage constructively with policy making, especially at the Ministry of Labour, institutional politics became too unpleasant for her to keep a direct involvement in it. Her role became a more indirect one, promoting and mentoring young activists, especially coming from the trade unions or from migrant women's associations. Her scholarly and civic commitment did not relent until the very end – as this Special Issue of *Sociologia del Lavoro*, conceived and edited under her guidance, shows.

As one of the very first women sociologists in Italy, one of the most international social scientists of her generation, and an original thinker on labour movements and gender equality, Bianca Beccalli accompanied the ups and downs of Italian political and intellectual history for almost seventy years. The apparent eclecticism of her theoretical inspirations – Durkheim, Touraine, Pizzorno, feminist theory – converged creatively in her sharp focus on the creative, if unresolved, tensions between solidarity and subjectivity and between equality and difference. She taught sociology in both Northern and Southern Italy, and she was able to explain the importance of gender to young students and to old male professors alike. Her legacy is in how very many have been influenced by her work, and in how important the issues she was among the first to raise have become.