



JAN HORST KEPPLER\*

## DOMENICO DA EMPOLI (1941-2016): ECONOMIST, HISTORIAN OF THOUGHT AND DIPLOMAT

**D**omenico da Empoli contacted me some time after the publication of my article on Luigi Amoroso in 1994, while I was already working at the OECD in Paris. Since then, our shared interest in the history of Italian economic thought became the basis of a lasting intellectual friendship structured by long lunch conversations during his regular visits to Paris. Two international conferences in Bari and Reggio Calabria, which took those conversations to the next level, were remarkable both for their academic quality as well as for their sophisticated hospitality offering new experiences even to those who knew Italy well. Several academic publications would never have seen the light without his gentle insistence and I am grateful for a stay as invited professor at La Sapienza in Rome.

The most enduring memory of that visit revolves not around the intellectual discussions, their quality as high as ever, but the vision of Domenico da Empoli's large wood-panelled office, the fruit of ruthlessly applied dexterity in the academic jungle, a fact that he gave account of freely and with irony-tempered pride. The matter would be of no interest if the office had just been a musty trophy. What impressed itself in my memory is how Domenico made it *work*. Coordinating collaborators, several of whom shared small work spaces in his office, counselling doctoral students, conversing with colleagues coming to pay compliments or negotiate faculty matters, all took place in the same room packed with books modern and ancient, piles of journals, draft articles, notes, a large crucifix and uncounted memorabilia. I hold dear this picture of Domenico at the centre of gravity of a sizeable slice of active university life. It is an effective antidote to the reduction of academia to ever more spurious bibliometric comparisons.

Others are better placed than me to render homage of Domenico da Empoli's work in the theory of public choice and fiscal policy. Let me just say that collaborating in the way, his *Journal of Public Economics and Public Choice* was always a great pleasure. I was struck by the minute attention that a man of such numerous activities and obligations continued to pay to each single article.

---

\* Professor of economics – Université Paris-Dauphine and OECD.

As a historian of ideas, I would like to concentrate on Domenico da Empoli's contribution to the history of economic thought. Deeply animated by the liberal ethos that ultimately underlies all economics, at least as long as it understood as an autonomous endeavour of research, and close to the thinking of the Austrian School, Domenico da Empoli shared the latter's general interest in the history of its own profession. However, what really shaped his interest in the specific area of Italian economic thought was his stubborn determination to rehabilitate, or rather to establish, the intellectual legacy of his father, the economist Attilio da Empoli, who died prematurely in 1948, when Domenico was only seven years old. Attilio da Empoli had been something of a boy wonder when he had published at the tender age of 22 his well-received *Teoria dell'incidenza delle imposte* in 1926. Any debates around or even criticisms of his book by Pantaleoni and others were so many tributes to the young man's perspicacity.

Domenico da Empoli's overriding concern was that Attilio's second major book, the *Theory of Economic Equilibrium*, which was published five years later in Chicago at the end of a one-year sojourn as an Einaudi fellow, had not received the exposure and the impact that it deserved. It would be easy to wave away with polite sympathy Domenico's efforts as the labour of love of a heartbroken son forever trying to resurrect a prematurely deceased father. The truth is more complicated. *The Theory of Economic Equilibrium* is indeed a highly ambitious, both thoughtful and radical, contribution to the then dominant issue in theoretical economics, the decomposition of Marshall's theory of the firm. It was published one year after Amoroso's contribution on the static supply curve and the legendary Cambridge symposium on the theory of the firm, curated by another Italian, Piero Sraffa, and two, respectively three years before the books by Robinson, Chamberlin and Stackelberg. In his book, Attilio da Empoli not only shows himself fully at the height of the contemporary discussions, but proposes a new theory of the firm based on the shortest of the short runs, where all adjustments are necessarily discontinuous, which leads, in fact, to a particular form of monopolistic competition.

Domenico da Empoli was right that his father's work, most of whose copies unfortunately never reached their readers due to problems of transatlantic logistics, would have further enriched the "years of high theory" as G.B.S. Shackle referred to them in retrospect. That his father's work on the incessant adaptations of the individual entrepreneur integrating and reacting to constantly arriving new information stood in natural opposition to the long-run mechanics of Sraffa's later focus of stable economic equilibrium with standardised commodities, each vision consistent with equally contrasting political preferences, could only reinforce Domenico da Empoli's determination.

Today the world knows not only the name of Giovanni da Empoli, the renaissance explorer and family totem, of Domenico da Empoli, whose memory we hold dear, but also of Attilio da Empoli. That a significant number of articles today attest to the latter's contribution to the theory of the firm is largely the work of his son. We may hear of other da Empolis in the future.

Any rendering of the vast portfolio of Domenico da Empoli's activities, testimony to his energy, acuity and force of persuasion, would not be complete without mentioning his work as a diplomat. He thus participated for many years as the representative of the Italian government in the negotiations of the International Seabed Authority. This meant regularly spending several weeks at time in Kingston, Jamaica. His accounts of this experience vividly mixed the bright colours of life in the Caribbean with the more sombre arcana of diplomatic negotiations. And, of course, our friendship was paced by his twice-yearly visits to Paris as Vice-Chairman of the OECD Committee on Competition Law. With admirable consequence he imposed his rhythm also on those visits, always staying at the withdrawn, yet ideally located, *Mon Hotel* with its quiet charm and spending his rare free time browsing for ancient books.

Over the years, like many others, I benefitted from Domenico's frequent invitations to participate in various academic endeavours. I like to think that I was able to render some of that generosity even if such reciprocity always remains somewhat incommensurate. The important thing is that these exchanges take place at all and allow everyone to advance on his journey. What originated them and what propelled them forward was Domenico da Empoli's warm energy, his incessant intellectual curiosity and his admirable skilfulness in all matters human, social and institutional. In complete coherence with his convictions, there was something of an entrepreneur about him. And if Domenico da Empoli was the quintessence of the urbane, international diplomat, his demeanour of an old-school gentleman of the Italian South in his three-piece suit and with impeccable manners gave him an added charm that made his numerous entreaties all the more difficult to resist.

Yet despite the admirable diversity of his worldly endeavours, we miss and remember Domenico da Empoli primarily because whatever he undertook he was of one piece, a rare, unmistakable personality. That uniqueness sprang from his natural rootedness in his origins in Reggio Calabria and his life as an accomplished academic *baron* in Rome, one with his office and his work. It also sprang from his well justified pride in the da Empoli name, the matter-of-factness with which he established the intellectual heritage of his father and his ever present attachment to his wife and sons. Ultimately, attesting every single moment to the essential importance of combining a clear-headed worldliness with steadfast truthfulness to one's heritage is the most remarkable and most precious lesson that Domenico da Empoli leaves us with.