

## Ida Ruberti



I happen to use on occasion, as I'm sure do many others, the expression: "that's a lovely person". The living embodiment of what I mean by that expression, without need for further descriptions or definitions, was Ida Ruberti, who passed away last Saturday. I would not be able to speak about Ida as a researcher at the very frontier of the fields of biochemistry and molecular biology, even if I am indirectly familiar with her work: she studied the regulatory gene mechanisms, and growth and developmental processes of plants and carried out research in the field of plant functional genomics and systems biology. I can, however, say something about her as a scientist driven by a strong sense of civic duty and a person with a immense intellectual curiosity, a trait she had inherited from her father – a notion of science as culture, more than a mere profession or means of forging a career.

I met her relatively late in her career, in 2007, at a conference on public perception and policies regarding plant biotechnology. From then on, with her and Giorgio, our discussion became a constant one, above all on the reasons for delays or weaknesses in Italy's research policies. In particular, we often commented on the tragic mistakes made by politicians and governments that failed to understand – one after the other and regardless of the political party in power – the opportunity that plant biotechnologies represented for the research system and the agricultural sector of the country's economy. I will never forget the discomfort her eyes conveyed and that ironically commiserating smile, often while sitting in a café with an espresso set before her, as we discussed why such stupidities in the field of science and scientific method, as well as in that of culture more generally, circulated in the media or in parliament. And even in universities and public research bodies.

Ida personified both an incredible tenacity in pursuing the goals she believed to be strategic, as well as the natural disposition of an educator. She was very patient and knew how to listen. She had a

strong interest in scientific dissemination and the transmission of scientific culture in schools. When Unistem Day was launched by Senator for life Elena Cattaneo to disseminate knowledge in secondary schools about the basics and methods of stem cell research, she asked me to see whether the Antonio Ruberti Foundation could help in organizing it. And, over the years, the Foundation has been involved. A topic that was particularly important to her was the possibility of endowing a Science Museum in Rome, an idea her father had already worked as one among those being considered under the Rutelli municipal administration. In fact, in 2010, we decided to invite Jorge Wagensberg to deliver the 9th Antonio Ruberti Lecture. One of the most brilliant science museologists, he was the creator and director of the CosmoCaxia, in Barcelona, a highly original and intelligent science museum that combines science, technology, culture and entertainment in superb ways.

Ida was proud of the Antonio Ruberti Foundation's activities, which she wanted to see involved in the popular discourse on the politics of science, or rather, committed to bringing to Italy the themes at the cutting edge of public communication about science, and stimulating an interdisciplinary discussion on all this. She also believed that the Foundation's activities directed at studying and enhancing historic-scientific culture were those that truly characterized it.

I've known hundreds of scientists, but only a few with the so very targeted and outstanding specialized skills that Ida had, and who, with interest, took a truly open-minded approach (as scientists always should) towards research and analyses of the communication and dissemination produced by spheres that are not strictly scientific. Ida was intrigued, when I told her about the studies and discoveries made about the psychological and social dynamics of scientific communication, whereas scientists usually presumptuously believe they already know everything, because they are scientists.

Up until mid-May she had personally taken care of filming the 11th Antonio Ruberti Lecture, which she had helped organize. The speaker, on computational linguistics, was the Dutch Professor Rens Bod who had written a formidable book on the history of the humanities, already translated into some dozen languages. This choice of speaker was one we had decided on together. We had discussed about a year before what should be the topic of interest and reference to address, and we agreed that the Antonio Ruberti Foundation, in promoting the conferences, should strive to propose topics that are not predictable or obvious, but to do with interdisciplinary research and aimed at improving cultural and social perceptions of research. What topic could be more interesting than a vast study that shows and explains, contrary to persisting platitudes, the strong historic-cognitive ties between humanistic disciplines and experimental science?

I will miss her phone calls and messages that regularly started with: “Hi, how are you? Can we meet for a coffee and a chat sometime soon?” We have done interesting things together and had many chats. One topic we discussed several times over a number of months was about organizing an event about the evolution, over time, of the idea of “immaterial capital”, which Antonio Ruberti had written about and that has come back in various forms in works by economists and social psychologists. It pains me that this intellectual chat, among other things, has ended.

Through her research, teaching and management activities in the field of experimental sciences, Ida has left an important example of the fact that “doing science” implies dimension like civic engagement and moral integrity that are inseparable from the quality of the results produced. The intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness that characterized her abilities to create networks of cultural and personal relations are equally significant traits, from which those who conversed with her over the years will always be able to draw lessons.

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