

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS DOMENICO SELLA

Domenico Sella, professor emeritus of economic history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, died on Thursday, March 8, 2012. He was born November 16, 1926 in Milan and took his Laurea at the University of Milan in 1949. He grew up speaking French and German as well as Italian, so he studied English. English would first take him on a fellowship to De Pauw University, then to the University of Notre Dame (Indiana), where he was invited to take a master's degree in history (1951). His facility in English led his doctoral advisor to suggest the oeuvre of the American historian of Christianity, Kenneth Latourette, as the focus of his dissertation, for which he received his doctorate from the University of Milan in 1954. Before moving permanently, as it turned out, to the United States in 1960, he was a Rockefeller Fellow (1957-59) and a British Council Fellow at the London School of Economics (1959-60). Although Italian remained his most beloved language—the language he spoke with his family to the very end of his life—English set early steps in his career.

While at Notre Dame, Sella decided to become a historian. The year after completing his dissertation, he was called to Venice to work as a postdoctoral fellow under the direction of Carlo Cipolla. With support from the Fondazione Ca' Foscari, he began research in the Archivio di Stato that was far removed from his dissertation: on the early modern Venetian economy. This became his second book, *Commerci e industrie a Venezia nel secolo XVII* (1961), which qualified the then-beloved notion of a “rise of the Atlantic economies” by proving that the Mediterranean basin did not necessarily decline. It proved to be the first of a series of works, grounded in meticulous and original research in the archives of northern Italy, that would reshape the history of early modern Italy and the economic history of early modern Europe.

He arrived in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1960 to take up a newly created probationary position, a joint appointment in both history and economics at the University of Wisconsin. Three years later in 1963, he was tenured, and in 1967 was promoted to full professor. He remained at Wisconsin for his entire career, retiring in 1995. One of his favorite stories was of a Lutheran undergraduate who thought that Sella, a Catholic, had offered a “pretty good lecture on Luther.”

In 1966-67, Sella was a visiting professor at the Università L. Bocconi in Milan, on a fellowship from the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche. Seven years after his study of Venetian commerce and industry, he published his study of labor in the Po Valley, *Salari e lavoro nell'edilizia Lombarda nel secolo XVII* (1968). Explaining in terms of corporative organizations, labor recruitment and by-employments the divergent movements of nominal and real wages, the former holding steady, the latter falling steadily in the seventeenth century, he demonstrated the need to embed economic life in social relations and institutions. Once again, Sella plumbed little used archival collections and asked questions far ahead of the field: in his study of Venice about commercial competition for eastern goods, and in this study about wages in early modern Italy.

When Cipolla took over the *Fontana Economic History of Europe* (1974), he asked Sella to write the article, “European Industries, 1500–1700.” The volume remains a foundation for economic history; the article remains unsurpassed in its clarity and in its mastery of labor, production, raw materials and commerce.

He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in 1971-72 and the Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Professor at the University of Pittsburgh in 1977. In 1979, he published *Crisis and Continuity: The Economy of Spanish Lombardy in the Seventeenth Century*, for which he won the Howard R. Marraro Prize

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of the American Historical Association. As the title suggests, Sella took up the then-prevalent model of “general crisis” for the seventeenth century and, through research into the countryside—which had hardly figured in either seventeenth-century history or Italian early modern history—raised fundamental questions about it. While the fiscal policies of Spanish authorities and urban guilds contributed to an undeniable decline of urban economies in Northern Italy, the rural economy—both industrial and agricultural—remained undeniably vigorous. Even Spanish attempts at “refeudalization” failed to weaken growth but reinvigorated the economy. The crisis was by no means general.

In 1997, he published for Longman, *Italy in the Seventeenth Century*, now in its sixth edition. Intended as a textbook, it remains a key work for anyone wishing to study the topic.

In 2009, Sella published a collection of some of his articles, *Trade and Industry in Early Modern Italy*. These are gems of concision, the kind of mastery of historiography and sources that allows precise, clear statements. And they demonstrate the breadth of his knowledge of “economy”: international trade, the wool, silk, paper, and iron industries—each of which had different raw materials, different organizations of labor, different processes of production—spinning wheels and energy, wages for artisanal and agricultural labor, land tenure, famine and war.

In the course of his long and productive career, Sella shed light on a hitherto little studied region of early modern Europe, the Lombard and Venetian countrysides of the seventeenth century. He belongs to an extraordinary generation of historians—Carlo Cipolla, Richard Goldthwaite, Roberto Lopez and Harry Miskimin—who together so transformed our understanding of the economy and society of early modern Europe.

His wife, Annamaria, died in 2002. He is survived by his older brother, Francesco, in Lausanne, and his sister, Cristiana, in Milan; his four children, Barbara, Monica, Antonio and Roberto; and ten grandchildren.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
Lee Palmer Wandel