A Preamble

‘O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.’
Romeo and Juliet, Act2, Sc.1

Fifty years ago, Jean-Paul Fitoussi was living near Tunis in Tunisia; I was living in Colombo in what was then called Ceylon. About forty years ago, he was in Paris; I was in Tokyo. Thirty years ago, he was in Paris; I was in Cambridge. Twenty years ago we were both together in Florence! Ten years ago, he was back in Paris, on his way to becoming an uncrowned King; I was on the fringes of Los Angeles. Now, here we are, together in Trento! Such are the Serendipitous effects of a kind of globalisation that is common to people of different kinds of diaspora.

Serendip is an old name for Ceylon, from which Walpole coined the word that has its modern significance as ‘the faculty of discovering pleasing things by chance’, in his book: The Three Princes of Serendip.

I want to tell you a story about a name.

Many years ago, as a young boy in old Colombo, I saw a wonderful film, without understanding anything about its significance as a social commentary on a dying epoch and a disappearing order. It was Luchino Visconti’s rendering of Il Gattopardo, as The Leopard. Many will recall Burt Lancaster as Fabrizio, Alain Delon as Tancredi and Claudia Cardinale as Angelica. I, of course, promptly forgot all about it and went about life and living with other interests.

Some years ago, my friend and colleague Elisabetta De Antoni, rekindled my interest in the subject matter of Il Gattopardo by insisting, almost relentlessly, that I should read it. As is usual when I read books of such subtle themes, I decided to make myself acquainted with the background – social, intellectual, etc., - for the author of the book, Tomasi di Lampedusa. In reading about his life, in the book by David Gilmour, my thoughts also went back to other readings of Sicilian themes of Anglo-Saxon origin, particularly Raleigh Trevelyan’s wonderful book titled Princes Under the Volcano.

More recently, when I began to wonder about the origin of the word Fitoussi my fading memory cells were rekindled in a most unusual way. I recalled Raleigh Trevelyan referring to Tina Whitaker1, in her diary, calling Tomasi di Lampedusa’s grandfather, also called

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1 As a preliminary to the preamble itself, it may be useful if readers recall a conversation between the Knight and Alice in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass:

“The Knight: ‘…The name of the song is called “Haddocks’ Eyes”’. Alice: ‘Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?’
Knight: ‘No, you don’t understand. That’s what the name is called’. The name really is “The Aged Aged Man”’.
Alice: ‘Then I ought to have said “That’s what the song is called”?’
Knight: ‘No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The song is called “Ways and Means”: but that’s only what it’s called, you know!’.
Alice: ‘Well, what is the song, then?’
Knight: ‘I was coming to that. The song really is “A-sitting On A Gate”; and the tune’s my own invention.’

The entire subject matter, particularly the conclusion, in this ‘preamble’, is my own invention.

2 Tina Whitaker, née Scalia, was the wife of Giuseppe (Joseph) Whitaker. They built what is today known as the Villa Malfitano. There is also a ‘Violet’ (flower) named after Tina Whitaker, who found
Giuseppe, a *piedifitusi*. This was requoted in the biography of Tomasi di Lampedusa by Gilmour which I had read very recently. I tracked down the reference in Raleigh Trevelyman and began to try to find out how the suffix ‘*fitusi*’ originated.

Now, before I continue with my adventures in tracking down the origins of the word ‘*fitoussi*’, I want to sidetrack you for a moment.

Bob Solow, in his ‘*Reminiscences and Ruminations*’ on having Richard Goodwin as a teacher, recalled a couple of interesting precepts that he had learned from that *maestro*.

The first was on what it was that characterised a ‘theorist’s frame of mind’:

‘…I seem to recall that he –Goodwin– sometimes suggested that, well, one could not actually believe this or that, but it was an ingenious line of thought, perhaps worth following just to see where it came out. One could always reject it later, and then one would have a better idea of what one was rejecting.’

The second was about a particular form of ‘intellectual style’:

‘The unspoken message was that if a thing was worth doing it is worth doing playfully. Do not misunderstand me: ‘playful’ does not mean ‘frivolous’ or ‘unserious’. It means, rather, that one should follow a trail the way a puppy does, snuffing the ground, wagging one’s tail, and barking a lot, because it smells interesting and it would be fun to see where it goes.’ (italics added)

I want to assure you that I followed, almost religiously, these two precepts in my pursuit of the origins of the word ‘*fitoussi*’ – and, in particular, ‘rejected’ one particular find, because it did not ‘smell’ interesting!

To return to my main story, the result of my speculative search for the origins of the word ‘*fitoussi*’ led me, naturally, to Sicilian dialects! There are two possibilities: either from the singular form of the noun, *fituso*, and its plural, *fitusi*, in usage in ‘Sicilian dialects’, and these, in turn, related to the Italian word ‘*fetore*’; or, my own preference, coming from the subjunctive form of the verb ‘*fiutare*’ – *fiutassi*.

Take your pick! I know what I prefer.

Why does it seem more interesting to opt for this last alternative? Again, let me substantiate my own preference with an allegory and an analogy. Many of you will recall the famous episode when Colin Clarke, one of the pioneers of National Income Accounting, spent years collecting data and estimating the marginal propensity to consume for the English economy. After years of toil he went with his results to Keynes – who simply glanced at the values and told him that they could not be right and advised him to go back to the drawing boards. Keynes had a feel or a sense for what could be plausible numbers for the kind of economy England was, at that time.

Fitoussi is a modern Keynes or Wicksell in that same sense – and more. Not only, like Keynes and Wicksell, is Fitoussi a supreme pamphleteer and a consultant administrator in the noble Schumpeterian sense; he also has that ‘good sense’ [*avere buon fiuto per la macroeconomia*] to intuit the relevant numbers that characterise a complex aggregate economy. Without this
'good sense’ or a ‘feel’, one can only theorise in a vacuum. Hence, FIUTARE -> FIUTASSI -> FITOSSI

You can either believe Patinkin’s sophisticated conjecture about the origins of the word in the distant Jabal Nefusa mountain ranges in Libya; or you can look at a school geography map or atlas and figure out for yourself how close Sicily and Lampedusa are to Tunisia and wonder about social intercourse between communities in the two societies. The Goodwin precepts, recalled above by Solow, point clearly to accepting the ‘interesting conjecture’ – whether it is true or not is quite another matter!