Biographical Notes

Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (M.D., Pavia, 1944), started doing research on sex in bacteria and the origin of resistance to antibiotics. In the early 1950s he moved to research in human population genetics and evolution, showing the major role played by random genetic drift and how to take into account this evolutionary factor for a better reconstruction of the evolutionary origin of human populations. To this end, Cavalli-Sforza analyzed a great variety of genetic data, from blood groups and proteins to mitochondrial and Y-chromosome DNA. Later he investigated the variability of microsatellites, and SNP megachips. All these markers gave coherent conclusions about human history and corroborated the “out of Africa” model, which he largely developed.

Among Cavalli-Sforza’s major achievements are his investigations of human evolution using a multidisciplinary approach that includes genetics, demography, anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics. This approach led, among other things, to the establishment of important parallels between genetic and linguistic variability on a global scale.

Cavalli-Sforza contributed greatly to a worldwide collection of cell lines representing many aboriginal populations in what is known as the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP). The cell lines are maintained at the CEPH–Fondation Jean Dausset in Paris and are intended to provide a large amount of DNA for current genetic investigations; more than a hundred laboratories have used the cell lines. Using a similar approach, Cavalli-Sforza is currently generating an Italian Genome Project to aid in research in medical genetics.

Among other projects, Cavalli-Sforza is the general editor of La Cultura Italiana (Italian Culture), an ambitious encyclopedic work that he has conceived and that will consist of 12 volumes published by UTET (Turin, Italy). This work, almost completed, will hopefully be translated into English, as it is intended to provide Italian Americans with a historical and cultural background of their homeland.

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