

Commerce and morality in eighteenth-century Italian political thought

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This special issue presents a number of studies by young scholars in the history of eighteenth-century Italian political thought, a field that was put on the map in the second half of the twentieth century by the efforts of Franco Venturi. By taking up the theme of commerce and morality, the articles published here follow in the footsteps of Venturi, but take his project of construing a 'political history of ideas' in a new direction.

Already before his death in 1994, Franco Venturi's legacy drew considerable attention. In the English-speaking world as well as in Italy, former students (although Venturi is said never to have created a school)¹, as well as critics², praised Venturi's scholarship, while trying to trace the principles and personal motivations behind his historiographical framework. Since his death, biographical sketches admiring Venturi's achievements have become a more common feature in such accounts.³ From these writings emerge a number of different outlooks on Venturi's oeuvre – from his early works written in Paris and Russia, through the articles published in English as *Italy and the Enlightenment* and the Cambridge Trevelyan lectures entitled *Utopia and Reform*, to his generally impressive *magnum opus* *Settecento Riformatore*.⁴ Central to all these views of his legacy are the well-known themes,

¹ Giuseppe Ricuperati, 'The Enlightenment and the church in the work of Franco Venturi: the fertile legacy of a civil religion', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2005), 10(2), p. 168.

² *L'Età dei Lumi: Studi storici sul Settecento in onore di Franco Venturi* (2 vols., ed. R. Ajello, Naples, 1985) contains major reflections on Venturi's works. Among them J.G.A. Pocock, 'Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England', pp. 525-562, whose criticisms of Venturi's judgment of England are repeated in his 'Settecento protestante? L'illuminismo riconsiderato', *Quaderni Storici* (1997), 94(1), pp. 315-338, 'Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Revolution and Counter-Revolution: A Euro-Sceptical Inquiry', *History of Political Thought* (1999), 20(1), pp. 125-139, and *Barbarism and Enlightenment: The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon 1737-1764* (Cambridge, 1999). See further John Robertson, 'Franco Venturi's Enlightenment', *Past and Present* (1992), 137, pp. 183-206, which explores the limits of Venturi's approach in sympathetic way. See also Giuseppe Ricuperati, 'The historiographical legacy of Franco Venturi (1914 -1994)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (1997), 2(1), pp. 67-88, and the articles in the issue of June 2005 of the same journal. A special volume based on a conference held in 2004 at the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici* entitled *Il repubblicanesimo moderno: l'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi*, edited by Manuela Albertone is forthcoming.

³ Maria-Luisa Pesante, 'Influire in un mondo ostile: Franco Venturi e il discorso sull'utopia', *Quaderni Storici* (1997), 94(1), pp. 269-278 and the contributions to *Il coraggio della ragione: Franco Venturi intellettuale e storico cosmopolita* (eds. Luciano Guerci & Giuseppe Ricuperati, Turin, 1998), which contains an enormous amount of detail about Venturi's activities as well as reflection on the way in his personal motives entered his works. Also about Venturi's life, see Bruno Bongiovanni, 'Note su Franco Venturi e la Russia', *Quaderni Storici* (1997), 94(1), pp. 279-314, and Edoardo Tortarolo, 'Historians in exile: Franco Venturi in Paris in the 1930s', *TransAtlantic Encounters: Public uses and Misuses of History in Europe and the United States* (eds. David K. Adams & Maurizio Vaudagna, Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 89-118.

⁴ For example Giarrizzo and Ricuperati disagree about the nature of Venturi's utopianism towards the end of his life, see Ricuperati, 'The Enlightenment and the church in the work of Franco Venturi', pp. 169-170, 174.

made famous by Venturi, of utopia, reform and revolution, cosmopolitanism and patriotism and the crisis of the *ancien régime*. By means of these concepts, commentators agree, Venturi shaped an idea of eighteenth-century political thought that was as meaningful in the post-war era of the twentieth century in which Venturi lived.⁵

Recognising Venturi's achievement here does however not entail an unconditional endorsement of his views. According to John Robertson, Venturi's 'distinctively Italian perspective'⁶ served his design for breathing new life into the history of ideas and enabled him to sustain the extraordinarily wide scope of inquiry that made *Settecento riformatore* a genuine European history of the Enlightenment. In the latter decades of the twentieth century this aspect, Robertson judged, made the work truly a 'tract for our times'.⁷ At the same time, Robertson added, Venturi's enterprise was grounded in 'particular – we may even want to say limited – foundations'.⁸ The image of the Enlightenment which ruled Venturi's works was restricted to that of a rational and secular movement of *philosophes* whose ideas were aimed at reforming the world of dynastic absolutism.⁹ Venturi focussed on these 'reformers' and their political ideas, not on institutions and the pressures that were exerted onto them which made reforms necessary.¹⁰ Another price that Venturi paid for the width of his scope, it seems, was that he narrowed down the time frame of the processes of intellectual history from which enlightened political thought emerged. Venturi's Enlightenment did not take him back earlier than the 1730s.

Yet, rather than to see these shortcomings as a basis for rejecting Venturi's Enlightenment, most commentators have insisted on preserving his legacy. By explaining the limitations of Venturi's enterprise through personal motives they created a platform for extending his original framework: it is possible to recognise a longer trajectory of development of enlightened political thought, provide details of more dimensions of processes of reform than Venturi did, and to widen the limits of the idea of the Enlightenment

⁵ Venturi's way of using the eighteenth century to illuminate the problems of his own time also seem to have been a way of escaping the Italian political imagination of the time. Therefore, Venturi the historian was decisively not a Gramscian (*ibid.*, p. 178).

⁶ Robertson, 'Franco Venturi's Enlightenment', p. 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁹ Venturi saw the shift by Antonio Genovesi from philosophy to reform-minded political economy as the embodiment of Enlightenment (F. Venturi, *Italy and the Enlightenment: Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century* (London, 1972), p. 201 on Genovesi's accession to the chair of '*commercio e meccanica*' in 1754 and *Riformatori napoletani* (Illuministi Italiani, vol V, Milan-Naples, 1962), pp. 17-8, on Genovesi's manifesto of his reform programme.

¹⁰ See Anna Maria Rao, 'Enlightenment and reform: an overview of culture and politics in Enlightenment Italy', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2005), 10(2), pp. 148-149, for a neat impression of the differences between Carlo Capra's approach and Venturi's.

by offering subtler pictures of internal variations within particular debates. Stripped off any ambition to pin down the nature of the Enlightenment, this, indeed, can be said to be the approach of the articles in this volume. Followers of Venturi believe that amending his framework in such a way prevents having to replace his scheme of Enlightenment with another meta-view of the determinants of political change in the eighteenth century.

Against this background, John Pocock's critique of Venturi's cosmopolitan idea of *the* Enlightenment (to justify its replacement with a series of Enlightenments) stands out and recently has gained profile.¹¹ Pocock's repeated citing of Venturi's famous phrase that in England 'the rhythm was different' was used in the first instalment of his own formidable history of Enlightenment culture (which was dedicated to Venturi) to present a differentiated view of enlightened political thought, based on a host of national historiographic attitudes towards religion and state and empire formation.¹² It seems, however, that the difference between Venturi's Enlightenment and Pocock's Enlightenments is not really determined by whether the Enlightenment was one coherent movement, but concerns their respective outlooks on the dominant moral-ideological character of eighteenth-century political thought.

The articles collected here – written by scholars who never met Venturi – stay far from these debates about Enlightenment historiography. Also (not unrelated to this), they do not discuss the nature of republicanism in the eighteenth-century. Instead, the contributions to this volume revive an element from the preface of the first volume of *Settecento riformatore*, of 1969, where Venturi sketched Italy as a possible 'promised land' for every historian who wanted to study the history of political change. Confronting the cultural barriers that he felt kept Italian historians from entering this 'promised land' head on, Venturi revealed his fresh approach: 'I have studied only and exclusively revolts, reforms, conquests, borders, markets and streets, money and laws, political and economic ideas, cadastres and contracts, all very different things from the products of the second Arcadia'. Venturi's authentic sentiment of discomfort with the decadence of Italian historiography reflected his conviction that looking at eighteenth-century debates on economic issues was instructive for making sense of twentieth-century politics.¹³

¹¹ See the references to Pocock's works in note 2.

¹² Pocock, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon 1737-1764*.

¹³ F. Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 99, also notes how Eastern European historians, inspired by a sense of urgency in their work, often held clearer ideas of the principles of Enlightenment and utopia than western European scholars, who felt it necessary to study 'mental structures of remote peoples' to find intellectual excitement.

Inspired by this original spirit of Venturi's project, the articles published here adopt his Italian perspective, but shift the focus of Venturi's work. By concentrating specifically on ideas about the nature of commerce and sociability held by Italian thinkers in different eighteenth-century contexts, the contributors to this volume bring out previously unrecognised dividing lines in the Italian (and arguably in the wider European) debate on economic reform. This approach takes the emphasis away from Venturi's image of the Enlightenment and places it on a vast range of notions of how trade and morality might be aligned in states that find themselves engaged in international economic competition. These notions also include views by Italian scholars, merchants and politicians who were not recognised by Venturi as 'reformers' in the sense in which he applied the term and allowed it to determine his idea of the Enlightenment. Besides transgressing the borders of Venturi's Enlightenment in this way, the thematic scope of the articles presented here also allows them to distinguish between more varieties of positions in debates on economic issues and policy affairs.¹⁴

Finally, this specific approach even acts as a guide to detecting controversies that remained unnoticed by Venturi. In the chapter on the Italian debate on money around 1750 in the first volume of *Settecento riformatore*, Venturi explained that Pompeo Neri's *Osservazioni sopra il prezzo legale delle monete* (1751) was a crucial statement in the context of a series of negotiations with the court of Turin to form a 'monetary union' with Lombardy and Tuscany.¹⁵ Venturi also signalled that Giovanni Francesco Pagnini, in his introduction to the 1751 Florentine edition of John Locke's writings on money held different views from Neri about trade in antiquity.¹⁶ Yet, Venturi overlooked Pagnini's message to Neri that commerce did not actually unite humankind into a single republic, but created a world in which governments were 'obliged to compete with others for the society of commerce, in order to attain their own conservation, their wealth and power'. Whereas strategy used to be crucial in warfare, Pagnini argued, now 'one watches with the same eyes at those citizens who by means of arts and manufactures, no less than soldiers, contribute to' the conservation of the state.¹⁷ Pagnini agreed with Neri that people's interests were linked through trade, but

¹⁴ One major study that treats eighteenth-century debates on their own terms in a similar is Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge MA, 2005).

¹⁵ F. Venturi, 'Il dibattito sulle monete', *Da Muratori a Beccaria* (Settecento riformatore, vol. I, Turin, 1969), pp. 468-77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 478-9.

¹⁷ See John Locke, *Ragionamenti sopra la moneta, l'interesse del danaro, le finanze e il commercio*, (Vol. I, Florence, 1751), pp. 96-8; see also K. Stapelbroek, 'The devaluation controversy in eighteenth-century Italy', *History of Economic Ideas* (2005), 13(3).

felt that Neri had been mistaken about the moral foundations as well as the political consequences of commercial society and that this affected the realism of his design of a monetary union. When Pagnini – a Florentine government minister responsible for financial affairs – wrote about Locke and antiquity, the message to Neri (who also had involved Locke’s ideas in support of his monetary union) was that Tuscan officials held different ideas of the nature of commerce and were not going to support Neri’s plan.

The potential of following in the footsteps of Franco Venturi while amending his approach is reflected by the studies presented here. Rather than to offer a mere series of snapshots, taken together these articles should give some idea of the development of the Italian debate on commerce, morality and economic reform in the course of the eighteenth century and provide an image of how local discussions across Italy at the time were interconnected and how they related to the wider European debate.

The first two essays discuss issues within moral philosophy, in particular ways in which Italian scholars received French and English debates on self-interest and the sociable nature of man and how they responded to them. Chiara Continisio argues that Ludovico Antonio Muratori, who is usually seen – following Venturi’s characterisation – as a representative of a Catholic pre-Enlightenment, was much more in tune with recent developments in the field of moral philosophy than one tends to believe. Muratori’s ideas about the origins of the state, virtue and luxury, were a genuinely original contribution to the European debate.

My paper traces the moral foundations of Ferdinando Galiani’s and Antonio Genovesi’s political economy. According to Venturi, Galiani was an unenlightened Machiavellian, whereas Genovesi embodied the purest spirit of enlightened reform thinkable. I show that both thinkers were engaged in what was very much the same project of ultimately grounding the reform of Naples in a reconsideration of the nature of self-interest. This interpretation questions traditional views of the dividing lines within Neapolitan eighteenth-century politics.

Sophus Reinert looks at the fate of the ‘English model’ of political economy in eighteenth-century Italy. One case he discusses is the French and subsequent Neapolitan translation of John Cary’s *Essay on the State of England* (1695). In the hands of Antonio Genovesi, Cary’s interventionist strategies for the economic aggrandisement of the English empire eventually turned into a manifesto for repairing Italian underdevelopment by means of

free trade. Addressing the multiple ambiguities involved in blaming England as the source of Italian backwardness and seeing England as an example for escaping it, Reinert challenges the familiar opposite categories of mercantilism and cosmopolitanism.

Antonio Trampus discusses one of the most understudied authors of the Italian eighteenth century. Gianrinaldo Carli found himself at the absolute centre of the development of political debate in Milan. A friend and collaborator of Pompeo Neri, Carli became influential politically in his role of president of the *Supremo Consiglio di Economia* (in 1764) and contributed to *Il Caffè*, before he fell out with Pietro Verri. Venturi was the first to recognise Carli's importance. He brought out the originality of Verri's utility-based political and economic thought through a comparison with Carli.¹⁸ Rather than to see Carli as a stepping-stone to Verri, Trampus treats Carli as an original thinker in his own right and reveals the complexities of his natural history of the state, his critique of republican virtue and defence of absolutism. He also places Carli's major work on money, his relation to Forbonnais, and his review of Galiani's *Dialogues sur le commerce des bleds* in this context and considers the peculiar legacy of Carli's critique of Rousseau in his *Uomo libero*, which turned him into an icon of the Venetian republican revolution of 1797.

The next two contributions map the influence of French and English political economy on Italian reform debates. Niccolò Guasti takes us through the processes of diffusion in Tuscany of the works by Gournay's group, Cantillon and Hume. Showing how their ideas were received by the *Novelle letterarie*, one of the most important Italian journals of the time, Guasti corrects the impression that the French influence on the Tuscan debate was dominated by the physiocrats. He further highlights the concern of escaping economic underdevelopment. Insofar as French agriculturalist ideas were adopted in Tuscany, they were mostly stripped of their original moralising aspects.

Giorgio Monestarolo draws attention to the neglected figure of Ignazio Donaudi, a Piedmontese silk merchant whose thinking was influenced by Forbonnais and Gournay's works and who argued for implementing the 'English model' of political economy in Piedmonte. Against the background of a political culture that has often been denied to have anything to do with enlightened political thought, Monestarolo shows how Donaudi intervened in a discussion about the future of the Piedmontese economic competitiveness by

¹⁸ F. Venturi, 'Gli uomini delle riforme: la Lombardia', *L'Italia dei lumi (1764-1790)* (Settecento riformatore, vol. V/1, Turin, 1987), pp. 425-834.

opposing the traditional powers of the aristocracy, criticising the doctrine of the physiocrats and stressing the economic limits of agricultural development.

In the last article in this volume, Maria Teresa Silvestrini focuses on aspects of commerce and morality in the political thought of Gaetano Filangieri, whose *Scienza della Legislazione* (1780-5) has long been recognised as one of the great masterpieces of the Italian eighteenth century. Silvestrini sketches the general project of the work and brings out Filangieri's view of the history of European states as dominated by self-defeating politics. As the most recent instantiation of backfiring actions out of mistaken self-interest, Filangieri discussed the 'Jealousy of Trade' that possessed states like England and France. Filangieri criticised Colbert, financiers and was sympathetic to Mirabeau and the reform spirit of the physiocrats. Nonetheless, he accepted commercial society, luxury and inequality as foundations of modern societies. Silvestrini discusses Filangieri's account of the origin and nature of the state and identifies the moral principles that underpinned Filangieri's legislative reform project.