

ON THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMIA CIVILE AND “FELICITAS PUBLICA”: A COMMENT ON FEDERICO D’ONOFRIO

BY
LUIGINO BRUNI

In “On the Concept of ‘Felicitas Publica’ in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy,” a recent paper in this journal, Federico D’Onofrio strongly criticizes the interpretation that Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni have offered of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan tradition of civil economy and public happiness, as articulated by Antonio Genovesi. D’Onofrio claims that Bruni and colleagues have not fully explored the political meaning of public happiness within eighteenth-century economics, and that Bruni unfairly criticized methodological individualism on the basis of the intrinsically social character of happiness. This paper is a reply to D’Onofrio.

Homo Homini Natura Amicus (Antonio Genovesi)

I. THE TRADITION OF CIVIL ECONOMY

In “On the Concept of ‘Felicitas Publica’ in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy,” a recent paper in this journal, Federico D’Onofrio strongly criticizes the interpretation that I and other Italian economists (especially Stefano Zamagni) have offered of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan tradition of civil economy and public happiness, as articulated by Antonio Genovesi. D’Onofrio claims that I (and my colleagues) have not fully explored the political meaning of “public happiness” within eighteenth-century economics, and that I unfairly criticize “methodological individualism on the basis of the intrinsically social character of happiness” (D’Onofrio 2015, p. 451).

D’Onofrio attempts to correct my misunderstanding with this clarification: “[B]y ‘public happiness,’ Muratori and Genovesi meant something very specific: namely,

Luigino Bruni, Lumsa University, Rome. l.bruni@lumsa.it.

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the goal of a good monarch. For Genovesi and Muratori, public happiness was a useful formula in asserting the rights of the prince and the government over and above the rigidity of the legal system” (2015, p. 452). Therefore, D’Onofrio maintains, “the difference between *economia civile* and *economia politica* is merely nominal, *civile* being the Italianization of the Latin *civilis*, from *civitas*, while *politica* derives instead from the Greek *polis*, usually translated as *civitas* in Latin” (p. 463). He creates a hermeneutic framework in which “[t]he examination of the *Lezioni di economia civile* that we carried out so far should suffice to show that public happiness had not much to do with the ‘happiness of others’ and relatively little even with the Aristotelian common goods” (p. 460). In particular, he claims that “Genovesi’s particular version of natural law was deeply influenced by Wolff’s” (p. 462). Therefore, in Genovesi’s Civil Economy, “wealth became an essential part of politics. . . . The *Economia civile* so defined went together with a somewhat interventionist conception of the tasks of the state that resembles very much the Cameralist tradition.” He continues, “It is not a coincidence, of course, since Muratori, Genovesi, and the Cameralists moved within the natural law tradition” (p. 464).

I maintain, however, that a valid interpretation of the Italian tradition of *Economia civile* and public happiness requires more subtlety than D’Onofrio’s reconstruction provides. Moreover, his perception that Genovesi was influenced by the German tradition is not justified and most probably wrong, as is his claim that the Italian vision of civil economy is essentially a top-down process in which the prince plays a key or unique role.

II. PUBLIC HAPPINESS, AND BEYOND

Non sibi, sed domino gravis est, quae servit egestas (A servant’s poverty is hard on the master, not the servant). This maxim of Jacques Lucan, the epigraph for *Lezioni di Economia Civile*, represents a good synthesis of Antonio Genovesi’s idea of both *economia civile* and *pubblica felicità*. Like any Enlightenment philosopher and reformer, he considered the sovereign as a privileged interlocutor. Even the founder of modern political economy, Adam Smith, says this in *Wealth of Nations* (the title of the book is also very telling):

Political œconomy, considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator, proposes two distinct objects: first, to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and secondly, to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the public services. It proposes to enrich both the people and the sovereign. (Smith [1776] 1981, IV.1)

From such a perspective, civil economy is very similar to political economy, but also to late mercantilism, physiocracy, and perhaps Cameralism. To acknowledge that moral philosophers and the first economists of the modern age aimed to be useful to the policymakers of their times so as to make their countries richer and most powerful is not a very interesting or useful observation. It merely restates what scholars of modern political and social ideas already know. Genovesi’s *Economia civile*, however, develops something more.

As many others have observed, Genovesi’s idea of public happiness was surely influenced by the Roman *felicitas publica* (see Bruni 2006, ch. 4; 2012; 2013). Despite D’Onofrio’s claim, Genovesi did not need to discover the basis of his theory in Roman and classic thought via a German thinker like Christian Wolff. *Lezioni di Commercio o sia di Economia Civile* contains hundreds of Greek and Latin sentences, languages that Genovesi knew well—he taught both in Latin and in Italian. The *Lezioni* includes ten or so quotations from Cicero, and the *Diceosina* (a title that is an Italianization of the Greek term meaning “on the Just and the Honest”) has forty-five. Plato is cited forty times in the *Lezioni* and fifty in the *Diceosina*, Aristotle is mentioned fifty times in the *Lezioni* and forty-two in *Diceosina*, and Homer is mentioned about thirty in both. In the *Diceosina* Genovesi cites Aquinas ten times and once even in the *Lezioni*. I could continue with tens of other Latin and Greek philosophers, poets, and historians Genovesi cites. Generally, counting the number of quotations is not the best vehicle for identifying the influences of one author over another. But since *Lezioni* and *Diceosina* include hundreds of direct quotations of Latin and Greek authors concerning *eudaimonia* and *felicitas publica*, yet none from Wolff, there seems to be little basis for asserting that “Genovesi’s particular version of natural law was deeply influenced by Wolff’s.”

Genovesi’s philosophy and his civil economy were surely influenced by the natural law tradition, but those who helped shape his thought are John Locke, Hugo Grotius, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, Johannes Althusius, and many modern philosophers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, and the French authors Jean-François Mélon, Henry Francis Cary, and Giambattista Vico. Genovesi surely knew the work of Wolff and maybe of the Cameralist tradition,¹ but there is scant evidence to claim that civil economy was nothing new in modern Europe, or that Genovesi was merely repeating or applying northern or even Cameralist authors (or was just a late mercantilist; see Eatwell, Milgate, and Newman 1987, II, p. 514).

Furthermore, *felicitas publica* is a typical Latin concept. The English term “happiness” (which comes from “hap-,” meaning “to happen”), as well as the German *glück*, refers to good luck or fortune. However, the prefix *fe-* in the word *felicitas*, the same as in *fecundus*, *femina*, *fetus*, or *ferax*, means “to produce,” or “to yield.” *Felicitas* then recalls the concept of fecundity, and hence the cultivation of humanity and virtues. It suggests the bringing of fruits, something very different from good fortune. Coins of the Roman republic commonly bore on their face the inscription *felicitas publica* (as D’Onofrio notes). The reverse of those coins bore icons of children, agriculture tools, women: life, generation, cultivation.

The Roman tradition of *felicitas publica* was maintained all through the European Middle Ages, with a new spring during the Italian civil humanism of the Quattrocento and later the Rinascimento, when Roman civilization regained its central role. And the concept was very present and central in Vico, Genovesi’s master. Genovesi and Ludovico Muratori thus had direct links to the Roman tradition, without a northern European intermediary. Concepts from the Middle Ages—*comuni* and *civiltà cittadina*—civil humanism, and the “invention” of *vita civile* and *vita activa* were alive and active in eighteenth-century Italy. *Felicitas publica* and *civitas* are in the DNA of modern Italian civilization, culture, and philosophy.

¹As Marcialis (1999) notes, Genovesi quotes Wolff in his Latin book on philosophy (in 1745).

The centrality of public happiness as an element of the identity of the Italian tradition of civil economy is demonstrated in the titles of many books written by Italian economists in the second half of the eighteenth century, figures like Giuseppe Palmieri, Isidoro Bianchi, Ferdinando Paoletti, and Pietro Verri, among others. Achille Loria, perhaps the most influential Italian economist of the end of the nineteenth century, wrote: “All our [Italian] economists, from whatever regional background, are dealing not so much, like Adam Smith, with the wealth of nations, but with Public Happiness” (1904, p. 85). *Della vita civile* (1710), by the Neapolitan philosopher Paolo Mattia Doria, a title that demonstrates a clear “civic humanist” orientation, influenced Genovesi’s thought and that of the Neapolitan School in general. The book begins with the following words: “Without a doubt, the first object of our desire is human happiness.” And Pietro Verri writes: “The discussion *on happiness* has as its object a very common argument upon which many have written” (Verri [1763] 1964, p. 3). Such a rich current of thought is obviously not merely imported or repeated from what the Cameralists were doing in Germany.

The idea of happiness in Genovesi is not only “public happiness” in Muratori’s sense. Parallel to Muratori’s conception of public happiness, which was present in all of Europe at least since the time of the Roman Empire, Genovesi conceives of another idea of happiness, one more “horizontal,” directly linked to his vision of the person as a relational entity and to the crucial role he assigned to interpersonal relationships in human well-being. Throughout the entire canon of Genovesi’s work, there is impressive attention to the Aristotelian idea of happiness related to interpersonal relationships, in which (despite D’Onofrio’s comments to the contrary) the “happiness of others” is essential to a person’s own: “The more you work for interest, the more you must be virtuous, unless you are a fool. It is a universal law that we cannot make ourselves happy without making others happy as well” (Genovesi 1962, p. 449).

III. THE ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The other main point in D’Onofrio’s criticism concerns the “political” nature of Civil Economy, which he presents as a “top-down” project, starting from the king and descending to the people. He reads the first pages of Genovesi’s *Economia Civile* as a demonstration of this “vertical” or governmental nature, imported mainly from Germany’s Cameralism. According to D’Onofrio, *Economia Civile* is about “the activity of the government to shelter the subjects from the evils of war (peace), violations of their fundamental rights (justice), and famine (economy)” (D’Onofrio 2015, p. 460). All interpreters of *Economia Civile* and Genovesi’s system have acknowledged this by connecting Genovesi to the French and the mercantilists, but not to the German Cameralists. D’Onofrio seems to overlook the ethical or ‘micro’ foundations of Genovesi’s entire moral (*Diocesina*) and economic (*Lezioni*) works.

Since 1998, Robert Sugden and I have written a series of papers (Bruni and Sugden 2000, 2008, 2013) that explain that Genovesi’s theory is basically an attempt to understand the motivations driving the growth of commercial societies in his time. Genovesi attempts to construct a theory of commercial society based on the idea of “mutual assistance.” The core of his idea concerning both market and civil society is this concept of “mutual assistance,” the horizontal interactions among people in order to

create the possibility of mutual advantages. His economy is civil in the same sense in which society is considered “civil” prior (or parallel) to being political (intended as the action of the government). This horizontal, reciprocal, relational idea at the basis of civil economy emerges very clearly in the last sentence of his *Lezioni*. Having demonstrated how a commercial society works, he concludes his book with the following statement: “Here is the idea of the present work. If we fix our eyes at such beautiful and useful truths, we will study [civil economy] . . . to go along with the law of the moderator of the world, which commands us to do our best to be useful to one another.”

To understand civil economy and public happiness in late eighteenth-century Naples, it is essential to keep in mind that the center of Genovesi’s cultural project was the anti-feudal battle: i.e., to free people from feudal bonds. Therefore, his emphasis on civil virtues and their rewards was fundamental to his notion of civil economy (Bruni 2013; Bruni and Zamagni 2016; Bruni and Porta 2003).

For this reason, the pivotal concept of *fede pubblica* is something different from the “science of government.” Genovesi argues that the most important precondition for commerce is trust. For the economic and social development of a nation, “nothing is more necessary than public trust [*fede pubblica*] in a wide and easy circulation. . . . Trust is for civil bodies what the law of gravity is for natural bodies. . . . From the life of primitive people it is possible to realize how important it is to keep increasing trade. There, because of lack of trust, there is no reciprocal reliability, no society, no industry and no trade among peoples” ([1768] 2013, II, ch. X, §1). Genovesi devotes a chapter of the *Lezioni* to the topic of public trust, which he subdivides into ethical trust, economic trust, and political trust. Ethical trust is “the reciprocal confidence that every citizen has in the probity and justice of the other, that is, simple conventions and promises.” Economic trust is “the security which springs from the certainty of funds on which to ground debts.” And, “Finally [there is the trust which] comes from conventions and promises sustained by the civil law . . . [and] by the wisdom and strength of the state; it is called political” ([1768] 2013, II, ch. X, §3). All three components of public trust are essential for the development of commerce and hence for the creation of wealth. However, Genovesi states several times that *ethical trust is the foundation of all kinds of trust*: “All these forms of trust have to be cultivated . . . as fundamental for civic society, for the arts, industry and the spirit of the nation, for commerce, public peace and opulence. But most importantly the ethical form, since it is the basis of both” ([1768] 2013, II, ch. X, §3).

D’Onofrio’s ideas differ most significantly from Genovesi’s in regard to ethical trust. In the *Wealth of Nations*, as we have shown, even Smith writes about the administration of justice as if it were a top-down process in which justice is supplied by government. Genovesi, in contrast, argues that justice (that is, formal justice, justice as administered by judges) is not something that can be imposed on people who do not trust one another in their informal relations. No political power can sustain the state when its people distrust one another. Suggesting that Genovesi’s *economia civile* and *pubblica felicità* are merely “a useful formula in asserting the rights of the prince and the government over and above the rigidity of the legal system” does not acknowledge one of his central ideas, that trust among private individuals is an essential precondition for economic development.

To cure the “Neapolitan disease,” Genovesi recommends the cultivation of ethical trust. The main tool for this task is the civil and religious education of the people,

children as well as adults, by the church and in public schools ([1768] 2013, II, ch. X, §7). As a true Enlightenment thinker, Genovesi believes that authentic virtue is developed through correct reason. Thus, people can be made virtuous by giving them a rational education. Genovesi's concern is that an economically backward society may lack the *ethical trust* that is a precondition for commerce (Pagden 1987).

IV. CONCLUSION

All traditions in the history of facts and ideas have multiple roots, many branches, budding and flourishing leaves. Any historical reconstruction and hermeneutics that aim to offer a new reading of an old and rich tradition must acknowledge fully the plural nature of such a tradition:

The habitual thought categories used to address the development of economic discourse throughout the eighteenth century (mercantilism, Cameralism, physiocracy, political economy, etc.) do not always convey an helpful framework for the definition and comprehension of the work produced by authors who seem not to belong to, or cannot be identified with a single category. The work of Genovesi serves perfectly to illustrate that difficulty of adopting a conventional classification system. (Cardoso 2013, n.p.)

D'Onofrio does not seem to recognize the complexity of the Civil Economy tradition. He has identified one element surely present in the Civil Economy tradition and in the eighteenth-century European culture, but unfortunately has interpreted it as the only legitimate and all-embracing explanation of eighteenth-century Italian and Neapolitan thought.

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