

Antonio Genovesi and Civil Economy: a vision focused on public happiness

"It is the law of the universe that we cannot make our happiness without doing that of others." This is what was claimed by Antonio Genovesi, Italian philosopher and economist who, in 1754, was entrusted, in Napoli, with the first chair of economics in the world, for which he will impart "Lessons of civil economy".

Unlike Adam Smith, Genovesi indicates the market as a place of mutual assistance and reciprocity: the peculiarity of his approach consists in conveying an idea of economics linked to the concepts of public happiness. The cornerstone of his reflection is represented by the principle of relationality as constitutive of the person: "no human state is to be considered more unhappy than it is to be alone, that is, disconnected from any trade of our fellow men. It is a beautiful and true saying of Aristotle, which is the strength that the lonely and contented man alone is either divinity or a beast".

Civil economy, alternative to classical economic, places the person at the center and considers the market, the business and the economy itself places of friendship and mutual benefit.

Civil economy is presented as an attempt to reform against an economy that excludes, an uncivilized economy that destroys common life. Genovesi's lesson becomes crucial in order to rethink about link between economics and philosophy and in order to reconsider the link existing between economy, personal relationships and happiness, seen in the Aristotelian sense as eudaimonia.

Antonio Genovesi bases his economic visions on Greek philosophy

Social relations are the basis of the civil economy and represent the hinge between economy and happiness. As Aristotle already pointed out, the great peculiarity of the human being is relationality: "Without friends, no one would choose to live, even if he owned all the other assets" (Nicomachean Ethics, VIII, I).

Recent studies confirm that the level of subjective happiness is not linked to the increase in income or material well-being (see "paradox of happiness in economics"). In 1974, the American economist Richard Easterlin published a famous article in which he stressed that, although the average income per inhabitant had had an extraordinary growth between 1945 and 1970 in his country, the proportion of people who declared themselves happy had not changed: this study became known as the paradox of happiness and demonstrates the weak link between income and happiness, above a certain wealth threshold, thus contradicting a belief which was the basis of classical economics. Relational good allows to deal with Easterlin's paradox in economics.

EUROPOLIS

Being based on people's concrete experience, Behavioral Economics of the Nobel prizes Daniel Kahneman (2002) and Richard Thaler (2017) seems to be not too close from the "made in Napoli" Civil Economy.

Genovesi also studied how intelligence, temperament, climate, education and customs do have an impact on behavior and economic action at different latitudes.

"The bottom of human nature ... is pity. It manifests itself by certain sympathetic motions, rather than by reflection; rather the reflection ... extinguishes it, if it becomes overwhelming. But nevertheless, in order for this piety to be virtue and not an inconsiderate movement, or a weakness, it needs to be regulated with wisdom and prudence" ("Della Dicosina, o sia della Filosofia del Giusto e dell'Onesto"; 1766, Antonio Genovesi)

Experience shows a lot of applications of the principles of the civil economy. "Can the industry set itself goals? Are they simply found in the profit index? Is there not beyond the apparent rhythm something more fascinating, a destination, a vocation even in the life of a factory? » This is the ideal of Adriano Olivetti (1926-1960), whose goal was to translate the results of the production process into a better quality of life.

Each Italian industrial district can also be seen as a successful, unique, human-centered combination of economic and social factors.

Considering the importance attached to the labour dimension, the German model of industrial relations presents interesting characteristics in this regard.

Assuming that we are willing to notice experiences that are intrinsically similar even if they come in different forms, Antonio Genovesi provides us with interesting research and cooperation tools and maybe draws a path for new and perhaps unexpected synergies.

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