Luxury and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Italy: Intellectual History, Methodological Ideas and Interdisciplinary Research Practice

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Summary
This article has two aims. In the first part I will present some methodological considerations on intellectual history, particularly in relation to other disciplines considered similar yet different, such as the history of ideas, the history of concepts and the history of discourse. I will then seek to clarify what it means, in terms of research practice, to write intellectual history, taking as a starting point the subject of my own research, namely the political implications of economic thinking on luxury and consumption in Italy during the second half of the eighteenth century. More specifically, I intend to highlight the unique characteristics of intellectual history, understood as global history, which requires the reconstruction of the different contexts in which its underlying ideas and objectives developed, concentrating on its highly interdisciplinary nature. In particular, I will focus on a specific type of interdisciplinarity that characterised the methodology of my research, namely the attempt to hold together political thought and economic analysis. Eighteenth-century Italy was in fact marked by a strong, multifaceted political evaluation of economic thinking on luxury and consumption, which led me to examine the discussion of the subject through two lenses, those of economic analysis and political thinking. This specificity shows how the reconstruction of economic thought constitutes a fertile course for the investigation of the political culture and social projects of Italian authors in the eighteenth century, at a time when economic science was taking shape as a separate discipline.

Keywords: Intellectual history; history of ideas; luxury; consumption; eighteenth century; Italy; political economy.

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1. Introduction: Intellectual History, History of Discourse, Conceptual History and History of Ideas

Trying to define what intellectual history is and on what research methodology it is based is far from easy. Although intellectual history has in fact been widely practised for over forty years and is now recognised as a fully autonomous discipline, so far few clear-cut methodological interventions have been made on it. The scholars engaged in intellectual history appear in fact to share a reluctance to define the methodology of their research and a refusal to appertain to a school with its own orthodoxy, favouring instead an open and eclectic standpoint. Emblematic in this perspective is the introduction to the volume *Economy, Polity, and Society* published in Cambridge in 2000, in which Stefan Collini has decisively emphasised how intellectual history does not comply with any of the methodological programmes that have been proposed in more or less recent times, beginning with the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ of the definition given by Richard Rorty in the 1967 volume *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, at the same time highlighting the importance of letting the work of historical research speak for itself in order to clarify the special methodology of the discipline.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the studies carried out from a declared standpoint of intellectual history, which have increased significantly in recent decades, especially in English, investigate subjects and apply research methodologies in quite different ways, which further complicates the attempt to focus in on a clear methodological definition.

Yet even under the difficulty of formulating a complete methodological definition, it is still possible to place the accent on two distinctive elements of intellectual history. First, it assumes as its object of analysis human reflection through the study and explication of written texts. The second is the attention it pays to the textual and linguistic dimension and to the context in which the language is developed. The central premise of intellectual history is in fact that ideas do not develop in isolation from the individuals who work them out and use them, and it is therefore necessary

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1 It should however be mentioned that there have been difficulties in gaining recognition for intellectual history as a fully autonomous discipline outside of the United States, the country in which it was first put forward. In an article on intellectual history and its methodology, published in 1971, Felix Gilbert in fact underlined how the term *histoire intellectuelle* was not used by French scholars and how the Oxford English Dictionary did not include an entry for *intellectual history*; see Felix Gilbert, ‘Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods’, *Daedalus*, 100(1) (1971), 80–97. In Italy in 1953 the term intellectual history was still treated as an unusual combination, placed between inverted commas, to clarify the meaning of the German *Geistesgeschichte*; see Delio Cantimori, *Studi di storia* (Turin, 1959), 495.


3 *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, edited by Richard Rorty (Chicago, IL, 1967).

to study the ideas not as abstract propositions but in terms of the culture and historical contexts that produced them, and in which they circulated.

Dominick LaCapra, in his introductory essay to *Rethinking Intellectual History*, one of the few contributions of a methodological nature made in relation to intellectual history, showed how it is based on the interpretation of texts and on the relationship between the historian, the questions that he poses and the texts he uses.\(^5\) He located the key to intellectual history and the component that distinguishes it from other fields of historical research in the author's objective, in the choice of problem that he intends to address, from which is derived the means to interpret and analyse particular texts and to recreate the different contexts in which they appeared. Intellectual history is therefore characterised by two aspects. The first is the nature of the text as a historical product, elaborated in a given period and the result of a specific extra-textual context. The second is the relevance of the text in relation to a given historical problem and the way in which it is interpreted in the context of the problem being addressed.

One way to better clarify the characteristics of intellectual history and to reflect on the discipline is to compare it with methodologies traditionally considered similar yet different. Indeed, it is through the comparison and differentiation with respect to such disciplines that the definition of intellectual history has been attempted.

A clear methodological affinity can be traced through the study that takes discourse or lexicon as its object. This is the contribution made by the Cambridge school, which investigated the effects of different political languages on the perception and consequently the action of those who adopt them. Two names stand out, those of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Pocock has produced historical reviews of political languages in English during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and no small part of his approach was to identify, outline and present accounts of alternative discourses in competition with each other, each of which combined concepts in distinct and diverse configurations of meanings.\(^6\) Skinner, using a different approach, has drawn attention to the treatment of political theories within historical contexts and linguistic conventions, placing emphasis on the description of ideologies as intentional linguistic acts, designed to facilitate ways of legitimising political systems.\(^7\)

Intellectual history shares its interest in the linguistic dimension—and the context in which language is used—with authors such as Pocock and Skinner. In addition, as an analysis of discourse, it also accommodates the role of the human actors who react to the linguistic context.

Seen in such a way, intellectual history, as well as the history of discourse, differs from the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*), which is mainly associated with the German school, whose exponents stretch from Otto Brunner to Reinhart Koselleck and which had its fundamental expression in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* set out

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by Koselleck, Brunner and Conze. This history of concepts aimed to analyse the variations in the meaning of concepts in relation to the change in the semantic structures in which they were from time to time used historically. The history of concepts is thus chiefly concerned with the overlaps, permutations and new coordinations that are produced between concepts, which cannot be precisely defined but instead need to be interpreted by means of a detailed study of the sources.

What intellectual history, as well as the history of discourse, criticises are the theoretical propositions of the history of concepts. In particular, it has been observed how the dynamics that lead to the emergence of concepts cannot be grasped simply within an ahistorical vacuum, but require a reconciliation with the contexts that influenced their emergence.

Although the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, unlike the traditional history of concepts—which investigated concepts by studying their internal development without regard to the social, political and economic conditions that determined their history—pays a more careful attention to the implications that link social and material changes to theoretical and conceptual ones, it must be underlined that intellectual history and the history of discourse are not aimed only at the reconstruction of the historic-constitutional and socio-economic setting. Rather, they are based on the need to reassemble additional different contexts, especially to reconcile the effects that the concepts intended to produce and with the context that influenced the emergence. Moreover, while conceptual history, founded on the Heideggerian articulation of the continuity between past, present and future, attributes clear importance to the diachronic perspective, the research work of intellectual history and the history of discourse privilege the synchronic and short-term dimension, focusing the investigation on individual actors and their intentions.

It nevertheless seems important to note that Melvin Richter proposed a contamination of the models used by the history of concepts and the history of discourse of the Cambridge school—and therefore to a certain extent also of intellectual history—when he underlined how a discourse requires fundamental concepts in order to express whatever it is talking about. A convergence of methods could, it may be said, produce more satisfying historiographic descriptions of thought and the sociopolitical language. At the same time, an adequate linguistic synthesis of the concepts might require both Pocock’s strategy of finding the overall formation of political languages used in certain times and places, and also the attention given by Skinner to the kinds of legitimisation made possible by the linguistic conventions and political intentions of the authors.

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10 It should nevertheless be mentioned how in recent years there has emerged a tendency to practise an intellectual history of longue durée, according to the expression recently used by David Armitage, in other words, a reconstruction of diachronic histories that assume as their object key concepts used within the contemporary political, ethical and scientific vocabulary; see David Armitage, ‘What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and Longue Durée’, History of European Ideas, 38 (2012), 493–507.
While making a comparison between intellectual history, the history of discourse and the history of concepts it is essential also to reflect upon the history of ideas and the areas of similarity and methodological deviations between the disciplines. The history of ideas, as it was formulated by Arthur Lovejoy in the introduction to *The Great Chain of Being*, is based on two principal notions: the conception of ideas as unit-ideas and the strongly interdisciplinary character of research.\(^{12}\) In his interpretation, unit-ideas are relatively simple components of more complex wholes, which can enter into and become part of conceptual constructions that are different and distant in time from each other. Having isolated and identified it, one must trace a unit-idea through different fields of knowledge, recreating its passage through all the spheres of history in which it appears to a significant degree, be it that of philosophy, or of science, literature, art, religion or politics.\(^{13}\)

Different positions about the relationship between intellectual history and the history of ideas coexist in the current methodological debate. These range in fact from a position that propounds a de facto overlap between the history of ideas and intellectual history, made mainly but not only by critics of the two disciplines, to one—pre-eminent among practitioners of intellectual history—that strives to point up their diversity in an attempt to define the specific methods of intellectual history and to reflect on its disciplinary autonomy.\(^{14}\)

The points of greater proximity between the two methodological approaches are without doubt the centrality of the written text, taken as a historical product, and the strong interdisciplinary nature of the research, which marks both disciplines. The most important aspects of differentiation can instead be seen in the assumption, inherent in intellectual history, of a non-textual reality in which the works under analysis are situated, and in the prioritisation of the attempt to comprehend the links between the development of ideas and the respective linguistic and discursive, social, political, institutional, cultural and intellectual context.\(^{15}\)

The lack of attention given to the contextual dimension is, on the other hand, one of the main criticisms levelled against the history of ideas à la Lovejoy. In fact it has been noted how the history of ideas, conceived in that way, studied ideas as a world apart, regardless of the social conditioning that makes them what they are, isolating them from their historical and social substrata. From a similar standpoint, strong criticism has emanated from the German school of concepts, despite its sharing the history of ideas’ intention to develop a fundamental map of concepts, albeit one which takes into account their historical variations. The German school has rejected the history of ideas’ tendency towards abstraction and reserved its strongest criticism for the belief that ideas can be considered to be relatively static components—a conception that disregards the continuous transformations that concepts undergo and which make it impossible to speak of static units when in fact there are only dynamic complexes in constant flux—and has also denounced the history of ideas’ correlated aim of showing the changes that concepts undergo in history. The task of implying and presupposing the unity of concepts which are subjected to change, and


therefore the permanence retained even through the transformations of a core unit, has been interpreted as having been a factor leading towards the development of continuistic history.\textsuperscript{16}

On the other hand, it should be noted how subsequent developments in the discipline have, for one thing, partly abandoned the rigidity of Lovejoy's suppositions, and, for another, how one can now describe as 'history of ideas' studies which do not stem directly from the methodology of its founder but make use of other, sometimes more subtle, conceptual tools. Lovejoy's metaphor of unit-ideas as chemical compounds and the belief that the history of an idea may be written from the perspective of a strong continuity and temporal identity are no longer the methodological assumptions that substantiate current research in the history of ideas. What has emerged, rather, is a new history of ideas that appeared straight after the profound criticisms made of Lovejoy after his death and which gives increasing attention to linguistic influences. Furthermore, the need to bring the history of ideas into relationship with cultural and social history has resulted in an effort\textsuperscript{17} to produce a social history of ideas and an increasing awareness of the need to piece together the history of ideas in a fuller, more comprehensive intellectual history, in the attempt to suppress the conception of ideas as autonomous entities and to link them to the broader cultural context in which they arise.\textsuperscript{18}

2. Luxury and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Italy from a Perspective of Intellectual History: The Contextualisation of Ideas

After outlining these preliminary methodological considerations, which enable only a partial clarification of the methodology of intellectual history and the elements that differentiate it from similar yet different disciplines, I now wish to fix attention on what it means to write intellectual history, taking my own research as a starting point. The subject of this has been a reconstruction of the reflection on luxury and consumption in Italy during the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{19} in the context of the stimuli that come from current studies on the intellectual implications of the changes in patterns of consumption that took shape, albeit with varying intensity and rhythm, in eighteenth-century Europe.\textsuperscript{20}

Since the final decades of the twentieth century, consumption has become a central theme of historiographical debate, as part of a more complex and more general rethinking of consumer culture.\textsuperscript{21} While the initial and strongest impulse to come from the evocative hypothesis of a consumer revolution, spotlighted by Neil

\textsuperscript{17} Robert Darnton, \textit{The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History} (New York, NY, 1989).
\textsuperscript{19} The ideas developed and the analysis of specific cases presented in this article are part of a forthcoming book on the political implications of economic thought on the subject of luxury and consumption in Italy during the second half of the eighteenth century and the revolutionary triennium (1796–1799), a subject I began working on with my doctoral thesis.
McKendrick in 1992 in the introductory essay of *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, was towards a study of new methods of consumption from the perspective of economic and social history, in more recent years the debate on the theme has also begun to have an impact on the sphere of intellectual history.  

Historiography is in fact currently focusing attention on the reconstruction of the intellectual implications of material transformations, especially in relation to eighteenth-century France and England. It has explained, on the one hand, how the discussion on the increase of consumption—evidenced both in the circulation of new goods and an unprecedented propensity to consume, impacting on all social levels—first emerged in the reflection on luxury, a crucial notion for grasping how elements of economics, politics and society interacted. If, thanks to the work of Forbonnais and then Steuart and Smith, the role of domestic consumption as a factor of national prosperity began to be examined in detail, there still lacked, at least until the final decades of the eighteenth century, an analytical definition of consumption, which had yet to be fully conceptualised as an economic category, as had those of investment and production. Despite the early distinction, influenced by Physiocracy, between productive and unproductive consumption, it was not until Jean-Baptiste Say’s contribution that there appeared, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an analytical economic definition.  

On the other hand, historiography has particularly shown how the reflection on luxury and consumption was not only an expression of a perception of changes in consumption which, albeit with varying degrees, occurred in Europe in the eighteenth century, but also eventually evolved into a discourse with radical implications, becoming a language used to legitimise commercial society and to define social identities and political action.  

Within this historiographical frame of reference, the objective of my research was the study of the reality of eighteenth-century Italy, long neglected by such inquiries, and in order to deduce the many meanings assumed by the Italian reflection on luxury and consumption—understood as growth in widespread well-being—my approach was that of intellectual history. This discussion acquired central importance from the middle of the eighteenth century, when luxury and consumption became key concepts both in economic thought, at the heart of development, and in politics, as a powerful language of reform, critique or social planning. More specifically, during the Old Regime the economic reflection on luxury formed the basis of a discourse of radical criticism of the traditional social structure and, in particular, the feudal nobility, which became central to the debates on political reform. From this there

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23 On the transformation of consumption which took place in Europe in the eighteenth century, see Consumotion and the World of Goods, edited by Brewer and Porter.  
emerged a phenomenon unique to Italy: that is, the use of the discourse on luxury and consumption as a means with which to undermine structural components of the existing regime. In the three years of revolution (1796–1799), consumption appropriated a multifaceted significance, being at the heart of both the reflection on equality between individuals, based on equality of opportunity, and of that relating to a new model of political economy representing the close connection between consumption, labour and public prosperity.

While acknowledging the stimuli that come from the historiography on the intellectual implications of the consumer revolution, my research is somewhat different from existing studies on the subject. It is characterised, on the one hand, by a specific interest in the political implications of the economic reflection on luxury and consumption, relating mainly to the transition from the Old Regime to the revolutionary phase, and, on the other hand, by a more specialised focus on the concepts of luxury and consumption. Indeed, it is important to make clear that while current works of intellectual history on the consumer revolution, in particular those of the English-speaking world, do recognise the centrality of the terms ‘luxury’ and ‘consumption’ as key concepts through which the reflection on material transformations evolved, they have not fixed attention on the diverse meanings that the two notions assumed in differing social, economic, political and cultural contexts.26 Nonetheless, the reconstruction of the idea of luxury and consumption is fundamental to the purpose of accounting not only for the continuity, but also, and above all, the discontinuities that manifested themselves in them and indicated a shift in terms of political, social and economic thought.

In the Europe of the second half of the eighteenth century, coinciding with real changes in consumption and the imposition of a new socio-economic model, the idea of luxury went from being a negative concept, grounded in moral and religious objections, to the use of goods not in keeping with one’s status, to being a positive idea linked to social development and national prosperity. This transition, which came about through the shift from the definition of luxury as excess, with respect to that set by social hierarchies, to that of luxury as superfluosity, seen as being relative from a historical point of view, was fuelled by profound changes in economic thinking. First of all, the revaluation of passions carried out principally by Scottish thinkers, from Shaftesbury to Hutcheson to Hume, brought about a new belief that the prosperity of society and the power of the state could not be measured by moralistic parameters alone, but rather that they benefited from the spread of the private well-being of individuals. However, it was above all the discussion, which developed in France from the 1740s onwards through the debate on the new science of commerce, that produced, thanks in the main to the ideas of Melon and Forbonnais, a decisively positive assessment of luxury as a stimulus to national prosperity.27

In Italy this new economic conceptualisation of luxury attained completion during the 1760s, as eighteenth-century encyclopaedias evidenced in the clearest possible way by reflecting, summarising and simplifying the terms of the broader and more complex debate on the issue. Beginning with the 1762 publication of the

**Dizionario del cittadino**, a faithful translation of the *Dictionnaire du citoyen* executed by Abbot Francesco Alberti di Villanuova, an authority of French language and culture who had already translated several works from French to Italian, a positive interpretation of luxury prevailed in Italian encyclopaedias and dictionaries.\(^{28}\) The author of the original *Dictionnaire*, published anonymously in Paris in 1761, was in fact Honoré Lacombe de Prezel, a lawyer, then bookseller, and the author of the *Dictionnaire iconologique, ou Introduction à la connaissance des peintures, sculptures, médailles, estampes* and of *Les Progrès du Commerce chez les anciens et les modernes* (1759), in which he expressed confidence in the economic literature strongly influenced by Forbonnais’ *Eléments du commerce*\(^{29}\).

In the *Dizionario del cittadino*, which set out ideas free from moral judgements and concerns associated with the maintenance of social hierarchies of the Old Regime and heavily influenced, albeit not with explicit references, by considerations expressed on the subject in the *Eléments du commerce*, luxury was in fact openly acknowledged as a factor in public prosperity. In particular, luxury, taken as proof of the progress of society, was depicted as the principal incentive for trade and, echoing an argumentation already clearly set out in Melon’s *Essai politique*, as a means of distributing wealth.\(^{30}\)

However, the preponderance of this positive evaluation of luxury and the emphasis on the close link between luxury and commerce, and the concomitant link between luxury and the more general increase of wealth and economic prosperity, also led to the development of a peculiarity in Italian encyclopaedias that distinguished them from the French ones, because the latter continued to be dominated for the whole of the eighteenth century by a negative portrayal of luxury of a religious and moral kind, disclosing an effort to maintain and legitimise traditional hierarchies.\(^{31}\)

The dictionaries and encyclopaedias in themselves also constitute a valuable resource through which to follow the fundamental changes that the concept of consumption underwent in the eighteenth century. The term ‘consumption’, a derivation of two Latin words: *consumere*, meaning annihilation and exhaustion, and *consummare*, meaning to bring to perfection, had retained negative connotations for centuries, bringing to mind images of destruction and waste, only beginning to evolve, albeit still not completely, in the eighteenth century into an idea of enjoyment and fulfilment through the shift of the notion of luxury to that of ‘comfort’ and ‘convenience’.

Throughout the century Italian lexicography lacked an entry dedicated to ‘consumption’, and ‘consumare’ was defined in reference to the act of destroying and dissipating.\(^{32}\) Indeed, it was not until the fifth edition of della Crusca’s

\(^{28}\) Francesco Alberti di Villanuova, *Dizionario del cittadino o sia ristretto istorico, teorico e pratico del commercio* (Nice, 1762); Honoré Lacombe de Prezel, *Dictionnaire du citoyen, ou Abrégé historique, théorique et pratique du Commerce […]* (Paris, 1761).

\(^{29}\) Honoré Lacombe de Prezel, *Les progrès du commerce chez les anciens et les modernes* (Amsterdam, 1760).


Vocabolario, published in the second half of the nineteenth century, that a novel definition of consumption was given, through the combination of producer/consumer, production/consumption, in the context of the new market economy and with the precision of economic science. Even so, the aforementioned Dizionario del cittadino makes it possible to trace a fundamental conceptual shift and new thinking about the economic value of consumption under the entry ‘consumazione’. For the first time the Dizionario gave a definition devoid of negative connotations, in which the term was interpreted in the sense of ‘use of goods’ and taken to be a key factor in the growth of wealth in that it increased the demand for domestic production. The assimilation of Forbonnais’ thinking was apparently crucial to this maturation since, as has been pointed out, he was the source of the economic definitions on which Lacombe relied. Indeed, it was Forbonnais who, under the entry ‘commerce’ of the Encyclopédie, introduced the economic concept of consumption, linking it for the first time to the notion of enjoying goods. The Dizionario del cittadino thus acknowledged, by reflecting it, the new value attributed to the consumption of surplus goods, perceived as the driving force of the national economy, a stimulant of production and a means of producing and passing on wealth, all of which would be revisited and investigated in greater depth by Pietro Verri in the Meditazioni sull’economia politica of 1771.

The attention paid to the notions of luxury and consumption and to their conceptual shifts, which reflected important movements in economic and political thought and a new conception of society based on economic dynamics, is thus of fundamental and preliminary importance when seeking to describe historical ideas on the subject. My research, however, is not a history of the idea of luxury and consumption. Its primary objective has not in fact been to uncover the modifications made to the two concepts historically and to follow them through their various stages of transformation, but rather to understand how the reflection on luxury and consumption was used by authors, and which economic and political concepts underlay it. My aim therefore was not to reconstruct the ideas of luxury and consumption, which from time to time were expressed in the works of various authors, but rather to show how the discussion of these subjects originated, and to identify the channels of their reception and dissemination, the objectives underlying the discussions of those ideas, the economic assumptions, and the religious and cultural conditioning. Even in the context of a much-needed attention to ideas—which implies seeking to bring the history of ideas into a wider intellectual history, without which one runs the risk of using a given idea as indication of a debate only to then disregard it—it is vital not to think of ideas as independent with respect to extra-textual reality. Considered from this view it also appears necessary to connect the ideas to the diverse interconnected contexts to which they can be placed in relation.

While conceding the impossibility of recreating all the different contexts that may be related to the reflection on luxury and consumption in Italy during the second half

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34 Villanuova, Dizionario del cittadino, 11 vols, I, 262.
of the eighteenth century, it is possible to identify certain contexts that are of central importance.

First of all, it was necessary to reconstruct the economic and social context in which the reflection on luxury and consumption came about. This began to take shape at the time of growing awareness about the material changes affecting society, which resulted primarily in greater and more detailed consideration about which forms of economic development to follow. It was equally important to bear in mind the politico-institutional context. The need to investigate the political and institutional settings in which this reflection was produced and circulated, particularly the dynamics between governing policies and the ideas of the intellectual reformers who collaborated with those in power and their plans for the reform of society, is a factor of immense complexity as regards eighteenth-century Italy. This was in fact fragmented in different political realities, from Austrian Lombardy to Bourbon Naples, from Savoy Piedmont to the Papal State to the oligarchic-republic realities, which were profoundly transformed following the revolutionary period and the birth of the sister republics, from the Cisalpine Republic to the Neapolitan Republic, from the Ligurian Republic to the Roman Republic. Nevertheless, the very presence of these different realities, from the politico-institutional and the economic and social points of view, albeit within the framework of a widespread movement of ideas and a common and shared culture, contributes to an understanding of the diversified value that Italian thought on consumption acquired and thereby also helps to specify the scope of the study of the Italian context. At the same time, paying heed to both the period of the Old Regime and the revolutionary era allows us to follow change as well as continuity in the political and economic culture during the transition between the two phases.

On a different level of analysis, the textual context in which this reflection took shape takes on central importance. Luxury and consumption are not unproblematic issues and it is therefore necessary to understand how they function within a given text and to try to reconstruct the different languages in which the two terms were employed. Discourse in fact constitutes a form of action, and to understand and interpret its forms requires situating it in a context, which is primarily a linguistic universe. This aspect is closely connected to the investigation of the author's intentions and the attempt to specify their relationship not only with the text in which they are expressed, but also with their wider cultural, political and social context.37 The objective is therefore to reconstruct, taking into account the author's biography and the relationship of this to the text under examination, how the ideas and existing languages were used to achieve certain goals of legitimisation or de-legitimisation, persuasion or dissuasion, or even to build a consensus and thus to clarify the political, economic and social aims underpinning the reflection on the theme.38

Finally, it is necessary to accentuate the importance of the reconstruction of the cultural environment in which ideas were formed and the networks within which they

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37 Quentin Skinner has laid great stress on how the object of study for intellectual history is what authors have wanted to say in different historical contexts; see Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas'. On the importance of investigating authorial intentions, see also E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT, 1967).

38 It is nevertheless necessary to highlight the problematic nature of reconstructing intentions, which, on the one hand might not be set out coherently within a text, and on the other, can also be extremely ambivalent. For a detailed reflection on the problems of reconstructing the intentions of the author, see LaCapra, 'Rethinking Intellectual History', 254–56.
were disseminated, through direct personal contact or the spread of written works, nationally and internationally. This is a particularly important matter as regards the reflection on luxury and consumption taking place in Italy during the eighteenth century. In the first instance it was strongly influenced, as has been shown, by the European debate on the topic. It therefore seems that in order to clarify the significance that this reflection had in different national contexts, and also in order to highlight the unique nature of Italy, it is vital to pay attention, by means of an inquiry that may involve points of comparison, to the international circulation of ideas—vital, but still largely lacking in current historiography on the subject.

3. Interdisciplinary Research: Between Economic Analysis and Political Thought

The importance of reconstructing the different contexts in which the reflection on luxury and consumption took shape also highlights one of the fundamental characteristics of intellectual history, namely its being an interdisciplinary discipline in which it is necessary to use in a combined and eclectic way the tools of economic and social history, those of cultural history, of political history and, again, those of the history of concepts, the history of discourse and the history of ideas.

Alongside this eclectic approach, closely linked to the methodology of intellectual history, it is possible to indicate two other levels of interdisciplinarity. First, there is an interdisciplinarity intrinsic to the object of research, especially evident in relation to the notion of luxury (albeit much the same could be said of that of consumption)—a real multifaceted prism of religious, ethical, philosophical, economic, political and even medical factors that indicates the need to work on different kinds of sources, from religious texts to medical literature and to economic and political writings, be they essentially theoretical ones or those denoting specific political positions, such as reform projects presented to governing authorities or debates of the legislative assemblies of new democratic republics.

Second, it is possible to emphasise a specific interdisciplinarity that derived from the methodological choices which substantiated my research. As has been pointed out, the decision to concentrate on the political implications of economic reflection on luxury, in the belief that the reconstruction of economic thinking is a fundamental requirement in the investigation of eighteenth-century political culture and the social projects carried out by Italian authors at that time, apprises us of a pronounced interdisciplinary relationship between political considerations and economic analysis, on which I would now like to focus attention.

My belief in the expediency of carrying out research on a double level of investigation—economic and political reflection—stems from a clear perception of the uniqueness of the Italian context. In the political circumstances of the different Italian states, characterised by a close collaboration between the authorities and intellectuals, economic discourse in fact constituted, as has already partly been shown, one of the main languages available for transforming, and also for critiquing, the society of the Old Regime.

The uniqueness of the Italian situation is particularly important to the reflection on luxury and consumption. In contrast to what occurred in other parts of Europe, the Italian debate on the subject was inspired only in part by the realisation that patterns of consumption were changing. The reasons that made the economic analysis of luxury one of the central issues of the second half of the eighteenth century, and the significance that it acquired, should in fact be looked for in the
endeavour of Italian authors to utilise the debate to expedite a project of political, economic and social reform.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the close link between political reflection and economic analysis in the period of political reform in eighteenth-century Italy and in order to clarify how, from a methodological point of view, economic discourse provides an excellent position from which to determine the political presumptions of any particular author, I would like to focus—out of the many instances that Italy has to offer in this perspective—on the discourse of political attack against traditional nobility made through the economic critique of luxury, which took shape in the south of Italy between the 1780s and 1790s.

Throughout the eighteenth century the situation of Naples was marked by a slow economic development that faced considerable opposition. On the one hand, the still powerful feudal barony and an archaic juridical order made it hard for agriculture to progress towards modern forms of production and investment. On the other, the scarcity of manufacturing centres, due to a lack of initiative by the small merchant class and a dearth of capital, contributed to the difficulty of giving fresh impetus to the underdeveloped trade that was based mainly on the export of raw materials.39

In 1734 Charles of Bourbon’s ascent to the throne ushered in a new phase of reforms, in the framework of practices still attributable to mercantilism, which helped to spark a lively debate and to fix attention on new social models and proposals of political economy, which arose from the centre of the European economic world during the heated confrontation between France and Britain for commercial hegemony. However, from around the 1780s a change came about in economic thought, marked by a new focus on agriculture and an intensification of criticism of feudal revenues and also of the actions of government. With the establishment in 1782 of the Supreme Council of Finance, in which reformers like Domenico Grimaldi, Gaetano Filangieri, Giuseppe Palmieri and Domenico di Gennaro di Cantalupo took an early part, a series of key measures for the development of manufacturing and agriculture were adopted, resulting in the free circulation of annona goods within the kingdom and the abolition of internal customs, rights of way and tolls.

However, the activity of the Supreme Council of Finance was marked chiefly by a radical anti-feudal controversy. This was linked to concrete changes in the socioeconomic fabric of the rural south, which made the weight of the objectives pursued by the barony, exercised through the judiciary, unbearable. At the same time, the polemic was fuelled by the ambiguity of the anti-feudal policy initiated by Prime Minister Giuseppe Beccadelli, which signalled a reversal of the policy pursued by his predecessor, Bernardo Tanucci, and by the economic downturn ensuing from the famines of 1759 to 1764 that assailed the whole Mediterranean area, damaging production and trade in the kingdom.

In this transformed picture, discussions which had previously been accorded little attention—such as issues about land, the problems of agricultural production, the distribution of grain and landed property—now came to the centre of attention, thanks in part to the influence of Physiocratic ideas,40 and there thus developed a

40 On the spread of Physiocratic ideas between Neapolitan Enlightenment thinkers, see Lucio Villari, ‘Note sulla fisiocrazia e sugli economisti napoletani del 700’, in Saggi e ricerche sul Settecento (Naples, 1968), 224–51.
well-organised critical argument against luxury based on economic considerations, which led to a shift from the ideas of past decades. Between the 1750s and 1760s, authors such as Ferdinando Galiani and Antonio Genovesi had focused attention on a positive idea of luxury, interpreted as a factor of social progress and economic development, encouraged largely by the reading of Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce*. Melon’s work, which placed the relationship between politics and economics on a new footing, seemed to offer many possible solutions to the problems of southern society and a realistic programme for the economic development of the kingdom. In this scene the Neapolitan authors, especially those belonging to the *novatores* group gathered around Celestino Galiani and Bartolomeo Intieri, a Tuscan mathematician who had moved to Naples, maintained a strong interest in the articulate and decisive apologia of luxury developed in the *Essai*, taken as a symbol of the new model of economic and social development.

The critique of luxury that took place in the 1780s was formed essentially as a rejection of the economic development model theorised by Melon and propounded in the 1760s by Genovesi and the *novatores* group as a viable solution for Naples. The new generation of economist-reformers were united in the conviction that luxury was a damaging element of the Neapolitan economy, founded in large part on the agricultural sector. The slow and declining progress of reforms, the failure of manufacturing development and modernisation in the agricultural sector to take off, and the concomitant deepening imbalance between town and country led to people and revenue being concentrated on the capital without flowing back to the countryside in the form of investments, and caused doubts to increase about the applicability of Melon’s development model.

Authors such as Melchiorre Delfico, Giuseppe Maria Galanti and Francesco Mario Pagano—intellectual reformers who played a leading part in designing the policy reforms advanced by governing authorities wishing to modernise southern society—began to place the accent more carefully on the economic situation in the countryside and the importance that agriculture had for the kingdom. In light of this, the consumption of luxury goods was seen essentially as a drain of precious resources, since it was a manifestation of ostentation and social pre-eminence incapable of being the basis of real manufacturing development. Thus stress was laid on the need to focus on agricultural development through the formation of a class of large landowners able to bring about a true agrarian revolution based on the diffusion of capitalist methods of managing the countryside. These authors, who did not develop a comprehensive analysis of the economic process and did not bring into focus a clear conceptualisation of the categories of production, consumption and investment, on the one hand referred to mercantilist theories and practices when giving attention to the deficit of the trade balance caused by the importation of luxury goods, and, on the other hand, adapted and drew up a new approach to economics inspired by the spread of Physiocratic ideas, which gave centre stage to the countryside and the role of consumption in the production chain.

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It was precisely on the basis of these economic ideas and the consideration of the role of luxury in the economic reality of Naples that a determined political attack against the feudal nobility was made. This was in line with measures taken by members of the Supreme Council of Finance and the new anti-feudal offensive waged by the second generation of reformers by highlighting the undeniable association between this negative and unproductive luxury and the feudal nobility, perceived as the cause of the kingdom’s economic and social backwardness.

In this framework, the ideas of Melchiorre Delfico, a follower of Genovesi and avid reader of Locke and Condillac, were emblematic. Delfico’s work was distinguished by his strong political commitment to the Supreme Council of Finance, and it was embodied in a series of proposals to the government that together provided for a radical transformation of the provincial socio-economic and agrarian-landowner order, ranging from trade liberalisation to the development of domestic manufacturing companies and to the reform and liberalisation of feudal property.

According to Delfico, the question of luxury and its benefits and disadvantages for society should not be addressed in the abstract, as he held had been done up to that time in evaluations of luxury, but it should instead be assessed in the Neapolitan socio-economic context, where luxury was not so much an expression of a process of manufacturing development and circulation of new products, but rather the importation of ostentatious goods. He therefore did not consider luxury to be a spur capable of relaunching the kingdom’s economic development, but underlined instead how its gradual spread through society had resulted in capital being diverted from productive sectors, provoking, in a strongly stratified society, such as that of Naples, unequal growth that deepened the contrast between the capital and the provinces.

This critique of luxury should be read with reference to the model that Delfico proposed as the basis of the kingdom’s development, founded, as he stated in the Memoria sulla libertà del commercio, on agriculture, defined as ‘the first source of wealth’. A country like the Kingdom of Naples, deprived of raw materials and totally marginalised from international trade, had to focus on the quantitative and qualitative development of its agricultural production for a market made free of internal restrictions, in the framework of a full adherence to the liberalist principles that distinguished Delfico’s ideas. These were strongly influenced by Smith, as was made clear by the open and early reference to the Wealth of Nations in the Memoria sul tribunale della Grascia e sulle leggi economiche delle provincie confinanti del Regno, published in Naples in 1785.

Delfico built on the analysis of the socio-economic effects of the consumption of luxury goods already presented by Carlo Antonio Broggia, a reformer and economist...
linked to the veteres group. Broggia’s *Trattato sul lusso* was written as a critique of Melon’s *Essai politique*—which he systematically confuted in the second half of his essay—and of those who shared its vision of society. Delfico drew attention to the imbalance between town and country in the Neapolitan system of resource distribution, noting that the predominantly agricultural structure of the Neapolitan economy and its inadequate manufacturing base restricted the export of raw materials, while manufactured goods had to be imported. To his mind, in such economic circumstances the spread of luxury led to the countryside’s resources being moved to the capital, without the former receiving any economic benefit, since all the wealth in circulation was used to acquire imported luxury goods. In this picture the consumption of luxury goods lost any positive function, becoming negative insofar as it removed capital from productive sectors of fundamental importance to the kingdom’s economy.

Delfico’s thoughts on luxury signified an unambiguous political denunciation of the feudal nobility, the most articulate and mature expression of which was expounded in his brief essay *Sull’importanza di abolire la giurisdizione feudale, e sul modo*, drafted in 1790 and addressed to the Supreme Council of Finance. Indeed, for Delfico, in the reality of Naples, ‘luxury’ constituted an ‘insane and fruitless’ phenomenon that accentuated the chasm between the social groups without succeeding in triggering any real mechanism for economic growth and the redistribution of wealth, since it was not consequent upon an economic dynamism that led to the consumption of new goods by active social groups, but rather was squandered through the wasteful expenditure of an economically inactive feudal nobility that cared only for the maintenance of its own privileges and social pre-eminence. Luxury was therefore a negative element because it was the direct expression of an inactive feudal baronage, whose wealth was founded on unearned income. This criticism of luxury gave voice to a radical opposition to the traditional nobility’s attitude and outlook, also calling into question the cultural and behavioural patterns of past generations. Moreover, it resulted in a more detailed fundamental condemnation of feudal property and of those constraints that impeded a wider circulation and liberalisation of property, and made luxury the symbol of the ‘concentration of riches in the hands of a few’ rather than a contributor to development.

The attack on feudalism was also the main purpose of the text that Delfico submitted to the Supreme Council of Finance. In this he proposed a root-and-branch reform of feudal property, perceived as the chief cause of the economic and social backwardness of the kingdom and referred to as a ‘political monstrosity’ that entailed ‘essential injustice’ and a ‘ferment of maleficence’. His essay concentrated in particular on questions concerning the right of devolution, which he brought back under the auspices of the crown, of such things as alodial property, feudal estates where there were no natural heirs within four generations, and the sale of devolved

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estates. The latter was a critical element of the anti-feudal offensive carried forward by the reformers of the late 1780s, who recognised that giving the crown complete discretion over property was crucial to the overturning of the feudal system. Delfico proposed, on the one hand, the abolition of the right of transfer, and, on the other, the sale in allodium and through the splitting up of the fiefdoms returned to the crown. The division of estates into small properties would increase the number of purchases on offer, thereby maximising their value and the sovereign's profit. In addition, the free sale of land would result in the abolition of all feudal rights, including that of devolution, and thus lead to the dismantling of the feudal system. This was a position that Delfico had already expressed effectively in the plan he formulated and presented to the King in 1788 on the occasion of the sale of the State of Atri, the devolution of which had led to a policy of controlling sales, which was promoted in 1767 by Prime Minister Tanucci and opposed the fiscal arguments underpinning the government's position in its fight against feudalism.

In the essay *Sull'importanza di abolire la giurisdizione feudale*, the economic critique of luxury therefore supported the political opposition to feudalism, in the context of a detailed discourse of political reform aimed at the abolition of feudal jurisdiction. This form of political attack, posited through an assessment of the negative economic effects of luxury emerges clearly also in the ideas of Giuseppe Maria Galanti, who worked actively alongside the governing authorities and was the author of economic works still influenced by mercantilist ideas, although open to the reformism of Genovesi, whose lectures on economics he had attended.

In the *Descrizione geografica e politica delle due Sicilie*, published between 1786 and 1794 after the government had assigned him the task of compiling a geographic, statistical and economic report on the state of kingdom, Galanti, who linked the question of luxury to the problem of the subordination of the Kingdom of Naples to France and Britain, used economic arguments to find against luxury. After having established that in the cities of the kingdom, above all the capital, luxury had spread rapidly and relentlessly over recent years, he observed how it was a luxury based on ostentation and pomp, founded mainly on imports and unaccompanied by a parallel development of national manufacturing output.

For Galanti, a relaunch of the kingdom's economy had to be based on greater agricultural productivity, brought about by an increase in creative investments by landowners actively involved in the management of their estates. With regards to the more specific issue of luxury, his chief concern was, as for Delfico, the distorting effects of the distribution of resources between town and country, and the consequent contraction of the agricultural sector. Making explicit reference to Condillac, he underlined how luxury, propagated in the cities, caused a significant reduction in investment in the primary sector, and thus of agricultural production, and simultaneously a decrease in the population:

> It is easy to understand that the more luxury advances, the more land has to be given up to nurture it […] and many more men are needed to care for it, who

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52 See Anna Maria Rao, *L'amaro della feudalità. La devoluzione di Arnone e la questione feudale a Napoli alla fine del '700* (Naples, 1984), 54–57.
even if they take money from foreigners, still consume goods made by foreigners, because the materials needed for their handiwork come from land that should be employed for the food that they consume. Thus the state of greater increase of luxury in a kingdom must be a sign either of a greater decrease of its population, or its greater need for foreign goods.\textsuperscript{54}

It should be underlined that in the \textit{Elogio storico}, published in 1772, Galanti had expressed a completely favourable judgement of luxury, which he defined as ‘the leaven of the arts, and the soul of a great state’.\textsuperscript{55} This valuation echoed the work of Genovesi who, reworking the arguments of Hume and Melon, beginning with the \textit{Elementi del commercio}—a text of university lecture notes used for a course in political economics held in 1757/8—saw luxury as a factor in the growth of trade and as a proof of social progress, evidenced by the transition from basic needs to more complex needs relating to culture and the refinement of manners.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time in the later \textit{Lezioni di commercio}, with a shift from the \textit{Elementi}, which continued to argue, in a more markedly mercantilist framework, for the distinction between positive luxury, for export, and negative luxury from imports, Genovesi attributed a new positive value to the spread of luxury through a reflection on the concept of emulation as an aid to the development of domestic manufacturing. Luxuries, even imported ones, sparked off ‘the spirit of emulation’ in the ‘lower classes’, and this drove a ‘reawakening of ingenuity’, ‘perfecting the arts […] and trade’\textsuperscript{57} and starting up the national production of goods ‘as good as or even better than foreign ones’.\textsuperscript{58} For Genovesi, therefore, luxury was an asset when it led to an increase in internal systems of production. But it was a liability when it manifested itself in ostentatious spending that swelled the unproductive workforce and was nourished by foreign products.\textsuperscript{59}

On the basis of this analysis Galanti adjudged the spread of luxury in the kingdom of Naples during the late 1780s to be negative, since it failed to improve the people’s living standards by dint of greater agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the spread of luxury had not brought about—as had been thought possible in the 1760s and 1770s—an expansion of home-grown manufacturing through imitation and innovation, but had instead led to sterile extravagance that fed on imports.

For Galanti, therefore, the question of luxury was directly linked to the social retardation of the kingdom and merged with the condemnation of the baronial system, founded on feudal revenues rather than investment in productive activities. This theme was nothing new in Galanti’s work, for he had already vividly described the effects of the ‘monstrous’ feudal system on the Naples countryside in his \textit{Descrizione del Molise}, published in 1781,\textsuperscript{60} but the \textit{Descrizione geografica e politica delle Due Sicilie} added depth to this economic analysis. Galanti had witnessed the reformist monarchy’s failed attempt to develop national manufacturing and it seemed

\textsuperscript{54} Galanti, \textit{Della descrizione geografica e politica delle Due Sicilie}, 227–28.


\textsuperscript{57} Genovesi, \textit{Delle lezioni di commercio, o sia Di economia civile}, 274.

\textsuperscript{58} Genovesi, \textit{Delle lezioni di commercio, o sia Di economia civile}, 246–47.

\textsuperscript{59} Genovesi, \textit{Delle lezioni di commercio, o sia Di economia civile}, 260.

\textsuperscript{60} Giuseppe Maria Galanti, \textit{Descrizione dello stato antico ed attuale del contado di Molise; con un saggio storico sulla costituzione del regno} (Naples, 1781).
to him that the blame for this lay with the noble class, which had made scant effort or investment to that end but used its wealth ‘more for adornment with a small return than in lucrative factories’. The luxury of the Neapolitan aristocracy did not assist any productive activity, but inevitably ended up depriving the countryside of land and resources, leaving it ‘poor and deserted’ and forcing the kingdom to import ‘the materials of subsistence’. According to Galanti, the only viable solution was a complete overhaul of feudal property, to be realised through the abolition of feudal ties, such as the right of primogeniture and the entail, consigning jurisdiction over transferred estates to the sovereign and selling them later in allodium. This was in line with what he had expressed when invited by Secretary of State Saverio Simonetti to give his opinion on the dispute concerning the estates devolved to the crown, which differed from the views of the superintendent of allodial estates, Domenico Di Gennaro, and the fiscal counsel of regal patrimony, Michelangelo Cianciulli.

The political importance accorded to economic thought in the south of Italy between the 1780s and 1790s did not pertain only to the critique of luxury used as a political weapon against the baronial nobility and feudal property. The economic analysis of the negative effects of luxury for the Neapolitan economy was in fact also linked to the positive assessment of rising consumption and, alongside this, the focus on a new ideal of an average way of life, equidistant from the two extremes of luxury and frugality. This helped to legitimise the social and economic role of the middle class—identifiable with a new form of property ownership that had gradually become established from the late 1770s—in opposition to the feudal nobility.

The initial focus of this reflection is to be found in the Saggi politici by Francesco Mario Pagano, a lawyer and judge in the Court of the Admiralty during the Bourbon monarchy and later a leading figure in the Parthenopean Republic, in which he was the main inspirer of the Progetto di Costituzione, which was never enacted because of the short duration of the republic. In the context of the debate on the reform of the juridical institutional system that was thrashed out in the south of Italy during the 1780s and 1790s, to which Gaetano Filangieri’s Scienza della Legislazione made a notable contribution—this proposed a radical transformation of the traditional juridical order through the promotion of new legislation based on rules in tune with the changed circumstances and directed at the elimination of privilege—Pagano’s work was oriented towards the reform and simplification of the contents of the juridical disciplines and on the abolition of privileges and partiality. These were

61 Galanti, Della descrizione geografica e politica delle Due Sicilie, 176.
62 Galanti, Della descrizione geografica e politica delle Due Sicilie, 195.
65 Gaetano Filangieri, La scienza della legislazione (Naples, 1780–1785), 7 vols. See also Gaetano Filangieri, La scienza della legislazione, edited by Vincenzo Ferrone, critical edition (Venice, 2004), 7 vols. Gaetano Filangieri, who held a key position in the Neapolitan reformist movement of the 1780s, developed a highly detailed reflection on luxury that differed somewhat from what was set out by Delfico, Galanti and Pagano, who were all in agreement over an economic critique of luxury. Nevertheless, the limited space of this paper does not permit an investigation of a complex author like Filangieri, or of his thoughts on luxury.
positions that he had expressed in his early twenties in his first work, the *Politicum universae romanorum nomothesiae examen*, published in 1768.66

In his *Saggi politici*, published between 1783 and 1785, which showed traces of the influence of the Scottish philosophers, especially Hume, as well as of Giambattista Vico, Pagano championed the ideal of a perfect society achievable through perfect laws that would abolish all forms of privilege. He linked the critique of luxury—identified with the ostentatious spending of the feudal nobility, which was unproductive and concerned solely with protecting their social prestige—to the promotion of consumption based on the purchase of market goods and evidence of personal well-being. Although he had not made an analysis of the economic conception of consumption, despite the fact that Verri had already done so in the *Meditazioni*, Pagano proposed a clear endorsement of the average quality of life, founded on widespread spending and therefore on enhanced well-being, and disposed to bring about greater equality between individuals and national prosperity. He placed particular emphasis on the close connection between consumption, labour and economic development. Only through work could one in fact earn the wealth required to purchase market goods, and so consumption represented both a profound incentive to work—becoming the foundation of the economic development of the country—and the tangible consequence of individual industriousness in the context of the steadfast adherence to liberalist principles that distinguished Pagano’s ideas and were first given substance in the struggle against the irrational and archaic Neapolitan *annona*.68

This commendation of average consumption was influenced by the analysis developed by Filangieri in the *Scienza della legislazione*, which had explicitly linked consumption, labour and economic prosperity,69 and by Physiocratic thinking, of which the belief in the natural order as the general regulatory principle of economic and political relationships was explicitly set out in the *Saggi*. In the context of the wholly economic reflection formulated in the *Tableau économique*, if Quesnay’s distinction between ‘luxe de décoration’ and ‘luxe de subsistance’ in one way viewed spending on agricultural products and consumer goods as positive, it also in another placed consumption at the centre of the economic process, giving theoretical legitimisation to spending on material goods.70

The valorisation of consumption presented in the *Saggi* and fuelled by this economic culture served as a vehicle for an important political discourse. Pagano in fact linked average consumption—which was the fruit of labour and hence positive—as opposed to the luxury of the feudal nobility, deemed unproductive because it was guaranteed by private income and not the diligent stewardship of their property, to ‘a new order’, namely the ‘middle order’. This middle class, defined as the order ‘far from the vices of the extremes, without the pride, indolence, laziness, sometimes seen

in the opulent nobility [...] not having much wealth, the need for which smothers the activity of the spirit and animated ‘by moderate needs’, was perceived and presented by Pagano as ‘the true buttress of the state’.

In this way Pagano brought into focus a serious discourse of the political and social legitimisation of the middle class—which implied a parallel critique of the feudal nobility—articulated through a reflection on the economic usefulness of those social groups. By defining the middle order as the most virtuous class in society, precisely because of its positive effects on public prosperity, and arguing that the government should be guided by virtue, Pagano openly lobbied for a political role for the members of this order, who, as expected, were effectively identified with a new class of landowners engaged in a more modern management of land, and who had begun to establish and assert themselves as a social force from the 1770s onwards.

4. Conclusion

The reconstruction of the Neapolitan debate of the 1780s and 1790s presented within these pages through the ideas of Delfico, Galanti and Pagano does not do justice to the importance of the debate on luxury and consumption in the kingdom, or in the rest of Italy, during the eighteenth century. Even so, in the context of this limited overview, it does allow one to clarify how that discourse was a central element of eighteenth-century reformist politics, being used in a targeted political attack erected on economic foundations and aimed at undermining the social hierarchy of the Old Regime and legitimising a new middle class. The analysis of the Neapolitan case also demonstrates the importance of a methodology not only designed to reveal, with a strongly interdisciplinary approach to intellectual history, the economic, political, social and cultural context in which the reflection on luxury and consumption took form, but which also holds closely together economic analysis and political thinking in order to penetrate the different meanings that the discussion on the subject assumed, and to clarify the specificity of the Italian context, marked by the strong political value given to that discussion and reflection.

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71 Pagano, Saggi politici, I, 348.