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Nation and Public Happiness
in
Two Italian Political Economists

Nations as contexts of political economy

This paper is designed to put in comparative perspective two instances of approaches to political economy in Italian states in the late eighteenth century. The comparison is developed both between the two instances (Verri and Ortes), and between the Italian situations they represent and a wider context.

The focus of our conference in Turin was on the diverse ways in which economic science, seemingly in itself a tendentially unified mode of knowledge, originated and developed in different circumstances according to patterns which may be characterized as 'national'. Awareness of those peculiarities intimates a kind of historical narrative which enables us to connect highly abstract ways of conceptualizing economic phenomena to larger and politically characterized contexts. The point is not just to acknowledge peculiarities instead of a homogeneous evolution, with nations ranking along a common path and eventually merging into a common pool of scientifically unified economics. It is rather to find out whether there is any specific connection between recognizable features of ways of thinking theoretically about economy and situations defined by some prominent characteristics of a national state. This implies that what we have to identify are not simply different agendas for policing the economy — choices of priorities in the problems to be dealt with — but also the pre-analytical view, in Schumpeter's phrase, which defines the thrust of analysis.

The same national character of the larger context is best described in strict terms. In a loose sense we are inclined to call 'national' any large, centrally-governed, legally-unified sovereign political unit, implying somewhat obscurely that in its normal form it should coincide with a nation. A unit so defined, if taken as the point of reference when looking for peculiarities in the development of economic science, would draw us again towards a pre-eminence of the political agenda as a clue