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Modern age consumption in Italian economy and society

by Paola Lanaro*

From one year to another, an outfit can be deemed unfashionable. 'Tis true that I had almost all of them redone, yet a new garment is called for, is necessary, and cannot be done without.

(C. Goldoni, *Le smanie per la villeggiatura*, 1761)¹

In the pages that follow, the complex and shifting subject of modern consumption will be debated from the viewpoint of Italian historians who have studied it over the last three decades. It must however be emphasized from the start how this theme is constantly at the center of international interest for economic historians who continue to acknowledge its transversal nature and its strong anthropological, sociological and cultural studies interrelationships, while in recent Italian studies it seems to be receding and, when approached, treated chiefly from a material cultural perspective. Thus, in Italy the theme is increasingly becoming a niche subject, with the added result of losing its interdisciplinary breadth. One can only hope that the great success enjoyed by Thomas Piketty's book, with its focus on inequality and hence also connected to consumption, will attract the attention of Italian historians in future years (Piketty, 2014).

* I wish to thank Andrea Caracausi with whom I thoroughly discussed certain parts of this paper. My debt of gratitude towards Giovanni Levi is immense – and not only with reference to this research – and beyond repayment. Some parts of the text were discussed during a SISE workshop in Ancona (Italy), November 2009 (Sori, Giulianelli, eds., 2011, *Consumi e dinamiche economiche in età moderna e contemporanea*, Napoli).

1. “Da un anno all'altro gli abiti non si possono più dire alla moda. È vero, che li ho fatti rifar quasi tutti; ma un vestito novo ci vuole, è necessario, e non si può far senza”, Goldoni C. (2005) [1761], *Trilogia della villeggiatura*, Marsilio, Venezia, p. 71.

The theme of consumption is the result of the focus now shifting to demand rather than the emphasis placed on offer that monopolized the thoughts of economic historians. A new and/or different type of sensibility towards culture and the material aspects of life – opening up to anthropological interpretations – prompted, and continues to prompt, an in-depth research into all aspects influencing demand while simultaneously considering the economic process, even though Italian historians (especially economic historians) responded somewhat belatedly – when compared to their international colleagues – and this in spite of the wealth of Italian archival sources and of some economic behaviors ahead of their time. The theme chosen here also reflects the author's conviction that economic history in the pre-modern era can be understood only in close connection with socio-cultural elements, and therefore only through an analysis considering society in a broader sense. Without overlooking research results of a quantitative nature, this analysis will privilege a qualitative approach, as the theme of consumption, with its psychological aspect emphasized by the same economists in their studies of the contemporary era, cannot be condensed exhaustively into mathematical and economic models. This fact also takes into account the heterogeneity of sources, a 'weak link' on which all researchers find themselves in agreement, irrespective of whether the approach is through qualitative tools (one thinks of Giovanni Levi) or with quantitative methods as used by Paolo Malanima: for the latter the source's weakness is overcome through the stress placed by the researchers themselves – whether Italian or not – on comparative dynamics at a European level (Malanima, Pinchera, 2012).

1. Introduction

For some decades the theme of consumption has been quite popular with historians in Italy and elsewhere: even if historians have built upon results of economic research, today this theme and the so-called consumer revolution are discussed by social and economic historians via various approaches. This paper connects the theme to late medieval and early modern society – therefore not only related to 17th and 18th centuries, periods more intensely frequented by historians inquiring upon this theme at international level. Considering that the Italian peninsula is at the core of the debate, one cannot ignore how this ends up by being significant to the entire social context of Mediterranean Europe. This is scarcely considered – except for the consumption of luxury goods – in recent studies on consumption and the consumer revolution, which have instead preferred to focus on English and

Dutch societies (and partially on French and German ones) as typical of Northern-Central European culture, while at the same time relevant almost exclusively to Protestant Europe (Brewer, Porter, 1993). It is beyond doubt that the close link between the consumer revolution and the industrial revolution, particularly emphasized by de Vries but already present in Maxine Berg's studies (Berg, 1999, 2005; de Vries, 2008), has favoured the diffusion of interest for this theme particularly in North-Western European countries, leaving the Mediterranean on the fringe (only some recent studies centered on Northern Italy seem destined to open a debate on the theme). It is however worth noting that Italian reality, as emerging from current studies, is pictured especially through analyses of northern and central Italian societies, while the southern kingdom through an intrinsic weakness of the research seems to eschew an accurate depiction. Still, some recent studies on luxury consumption in 18th century Naples (in particular, the work of Alida Clemente) have contributed to partially fill the gap and to suggest finer tuned approaches to the theme (Clemente, 2011). In all cases, even if not explicitly discussed by historians, the reference made to a Roman Catholic context² must be underlined. Precisely during the central decades of the early modern age, the Roman Catholic church found itself dealing with demographic recession and economic stagnation or, better said, economic crisis as the final outcome of a change that progressively saw a turning of tables in Europe, with the Mediterranean region falling into a peripheral situation and its rapid replacement by the northwestern regions at the center of the economic system.

To better understand how certain realities still remained chained to a production of luxury goods in which they had traditionally excelled, though in a phase of shifting tastes, it is worth remembering Arjun Appadurai's interpretation. He underlines that history is by definition long history, while 'lengthy' models must be first evaluated at a local level: with regard to consumption the long term mutation is not uniform across the field, even though it may seem absurd to contrast static societies to the ones in movement. The question one must ask regards, instead, the speed and intensity of change, and also the zeal with which it is pursued (Appadurai, 1993). The approach taken will specifically focus on the period between the 15th and the 18th centuries, on the propensity to consume luxury goods (a propensity matured at Italian Renaissance courts – the Este, Gonzaga, Visconti, Medici – and

2. Reference is to the first results of an ongoing research by Giovanni Levi on the nature of a catholic society such as the Italian one in its dealings between State and Church. For Levi, the internal co-existence of two normative systems unable to neatly delineate their competencies and autonomy favors the emergence of weak institutions within the complex relationship between Roman Catholic political models and the modern State. See Levi (2008).

afterwards rapidly diffused throughout Europe in assimilating the consumption of ephemeral goods into a concept of social class distinction) and, also, in a broader sense, on the dynamics of consumption in the underprivileged social groups, upon which the consumption propagation mechanism – linked to the relevance of social emulation – seems to have played a role long considered crucial by historians (Italians included), but which now appears increasingly blurred. If the first hypothesis allows us to note a certain communion of interpretations in international circles, the critiques have continued to stir the historiographical debate with regard to the emulation hypothesis (Riello, 1999; Clemente, 2005).

For Italy there are still gaps to fill, although studies indicate a complexity of situations linked to social, but also political and cultural contexts in terms still to be considered and in this sense only future research can help understand the real dynamics.

On the other hand, it is precisely the scarcity of studies and the weakness of certain interpretations that make it particularly difficult to apply the hypothesis of a consumer revolution to the Italian situation. This pre-existing uncertainty still renders ambiguous the understanding of mutations in the attitude towards consumption between the 17th and 18th centuries in a context severely penalized by a demographic and economic drop on a general scale. In this sense, there is much to be done and multiple sources present in Italian archives lend themselves to various interpretations.

The first section of this work sets out to consider the theme of consumption and the theme of the birth of a consumer society, these two instances being hardly distinguishable (Brewer, 2004), and pays particular attention to the relationship between consumption and self-consumption on the one hand and redistribution, on the other hand, especially with regard to the sources used. The focus of this reflection is principally the urban society of the peninsula (especially in the northern and central areas) although – demonstrating the difficulties to understand possible behavior shifts within an Ancien Régime society (especially a Roman-Catholic one) where it needs to be considered in its entirety, including all social layers, urban or not, and sheds light on a different philosophy dominant in an Ancien Régime society compared to a contemporary one. In this sense, it attempts to extrapolate, by also using studies not specifically dedicated to the theme of consumption, elements and behaviors that speak to the attitudes and also the inclination (or its lack) towards consumption from large social groups, aspects usually omitted in present day reflections on this topic (second section). Also, the theme of consumption is relevant to the understanding of certain mechanisms at the basis of its functioning; they are crucial if trying to explain – in the

Italian case – the period pertaining to the crisis at the basis of the so called *perdita del primato*. These themes will be analyzed in the third segment to show how a modern society responded to variations resulting from a negative context. In this sense, in the fourth section (assistance and savings), space has been given to the significance had by the goods possessed not so much as elements of material culture but as a source of savings apt to be used, in times of crisis, to counteract a dwindling income. The final section offers comparative perspectives in order to better understand the relationship between consumption and economic dynamics also at a European level. In this sense the international historiography would have much to gain in its reading and dialogue with recent studies dedicated to the Italian peninsula.³

2. Among “markets”, self-consumption and redistribution

If a certain sensibility has been shown towards the consumption theme in the Italian peninsula, especially over recent years, this was concerned with consumption (and production) of luxury goods, therefore focusing on behaviors of the ruling elites and of those aspiring to forge alliances with the families at the center of the political system. In particular, new historiography approaches discussing conspicuous consumption at the international level and the birth of a material culture – and which however in the case of Richard Goldthwaite’s studies involved especially the Italian scene in demonstrating how, between the 15th and the 16th centuries, a consumer revolution *avant-la-lettre* had been verified in the peninsula – have found fertile ground with Italian historians. Historians of economics have often connected the dynamics of luxury goods consumption with the peculiarity of Italian industries often inclined towards manufacturing high quality products (Goldthwaite, 1993, 2009). Studies by Marco Belfanti (2008, 2009), Valeria Pinchera (2000, 2005), Renata Ago (2006; Ago, Raggio, 2004), Salvatore Ciriaco (1978, 2007, 2014), Alida Clemente (2001) – to quote but a few names – reacting to the international debate, have researched in-depth and in original ways – through new archival research results and new approaches – this ambiguous problem, particularly with regard to Italian courts and ancient states of the peninsula: the Medici court, Papal courts, Venetian and mainland patricians, and the courts of the southern kingdom. Thus, personal appearance and home decoration, connected to a certain social level and requesting specific objects and

3. In F. Trentmann (2012), there is little reference to modern Italy.

consequently determining specific behaviors, had to be at the base of a practice towards consumption of the very goods coveted by the noble or patrician families. If, in many cases, social and political integration into the upper social class was regulated by almost unbreakable laws (here I refer to sumptuary laws), outer appearance identification occurred freely and in a certain way was able to mitigate different forms of exclusion which, as such, could have incited situations of social and political conflict. At least this is the general idea shared by the majority of historians, even though dissonant opinions start to appear with their emphasis on how in reality the emulation principle did not supersede social class because of the psychological obstacle set in front of such transitions by the culture of the time itself. As will be shown later, such emulation was being exercised by comparison with those sitting at the top of the same social class. This very suggestive hypothesis has not echoed widely in discussions of economic historians. An idea that was somewhat more easily accepted seems to have been that sumptuary laws alone, by formally ratifying social inequality, were regulating the desire of external identification while at the same time moderating the obsessive desire to possess certain luxury goods by codifying their use as a barometer of social status.

Notwithstanding numerous studies, these laws increasingly appear as complex mechanisms, ambiguous and – in certain ways – still largely to be understood, particularly in relation to their economic repercussions until now overlooked to the exclusive benefit of social ones, gender studies included (Castellano, 2003). More so, with the mutual sharing of an ideology essentially intended to curb but also to distinguish social groups through their respective possessions of goods, especially in the case of emerging groups eager for forms of identification – informal as they may have been – the sumptuary norms in ancient Italian states were responding heterogeneously to various stimuli, and were at times permeated by economic factors intrinsic to the choices of economic policies of the various governing forms.⁴

4. Venice is a typical case. Although, from a social point of view, the use of austere black dress by patricians was typical of the moderate styled favored by the Venetian system of values and was applicable to dress code in general (where silk or damask were permitted only for the sleeves of the outfit), sumptuary norms concerned with dowries distinguished between movable goods and property, careful to protect family patrimony against division through male and female inheritance. Increasing limitations imposed on dowries, particularly between the 15th and the 17th centuries took into account, on the one hand, the guarantee required from the groom's family in case of a restitution leading to freeze a part of the patrimony and, on the other hand, the sum of money traditionally associated with the dowry and made available in cash by the bride's family, with serious consequences on other siblings, particularly if these were involved in commercial activities.

As mentioned earlier, the attempt here will be to go beyond an interest limited to the upper classes of Italy and strive to broaden the social analysis to a society seen in its complexity and defined by principles different from those overseeing a market society. In this sense, it is worth pointing out in advance that various hypotheses interpreting consumption have also been extended to a period of crisis – the so-called 17th century crisis – with the result of further complicating the argument. The fact that today, in a prolonged time of crisis, specific consequences can be verified even at consumer levels should in no way lead to analogous reasoning with regard to the past, imagining a sort of integrated society, as one might think of when using the term ‘revolution’ (Levi, 2010). It is necessary to counteract the spell of the chimera inviting us to suppose that there are forms of continuity in behavioral patterns, as if all of pre-modern society wished to align to the prestigious consumption characteristics of the upper classes.

Keeping in mind the role of inequality as an intrinsic trait of pre-modern society, it is worth emphasising that a better understanding of the phenomenon, although achievable through quantitative research should not neglect the micro-historical approach. Only a reconstitution departing from individuals or households – and, in all cases, a qualitative approach – can shed light on the psychological mechanisms at the foundation of consumer choices in an Ancien Régime society. Quantitative reconstructions inherent to the relationship between income and consumption or a percentage distribution among expenditure sectors, while evincing objective traits, at the same time cancel every subjective choice of consumer behavior, choice placed at the heart of the ‘psychological mystery’ (Duesenberry, 1967). Considering the fact that all recent quantitative interpretations referring to the consumer revolution in the modern era in fact rely only on the quantitative reconstruction of a market for luxury goods (such as tea, sugar, coffee, cocoa, porcelain and ceramics, wine – all goods related to high international trade) the qualitative study of the non-mercantile consumption is being neglected. This emphasis on a chiefly mercantile approach in the analysis of goods which previously didn’t transit in the market completely forgets the strong impact that self-consumption had on household economies during that same period of time (Carmagnani, 2010). In all cases, this ‘marketability’ of goods does not necessarily imply a different education towards consumption, nor does it involve consumption practises extending towards lower social classes.

In this sense, new information regarding working hours in pre-modern society could lead to new hypotheses (or confirm existing ones) on the arrival of a new attitude towards consumption. Exhortations from Appadurai (1993)

in considering consumption as a phenomenological marker of the free time left available to the working class, either produced or justified by work, may, *mutatis mutandi*, produce more accurate analyses of consumer revolution in the pre-modern era. Choosing the courtly society as point of reference, some work hypotheses dedicated to ‘free time’ would merit reconsideration and adaptation to the Italian reality in more persuasive terms (Cavaciocchi, 1995; Maitte, Terrier, 2014). Even now, when confronted with multiple interpretations regarding the emergence of a new attitude towards consumption, the question of understanding if we are looking at a market of objects and goods which were previously self-produced or considering a general increase of consumption, understood as usage of material goods, still remains. Closely connected to this is the observation that the sources most frequently used by historians – particularly economic historians studying northern and central Europe – are in their majority post-mortem inventories, or limited to family balance sheets and dowry inventories.

In particular, inventories are documents which (due to their static character) destroy any link to the family lifecycle, and weaken the possibility of distinguishing durable goods, transmitted or produced within the household from goods, particularly market goods, acquired by the family head or individual transcribing the list. In this sense, it appears difficult to distinguish between consumption and changes in consumption; these sources display their weakness especially when enquiring into the hypothesis of a consumer revolution. It seems appropriate to recall that these very documents, when not examined in their temporal discontinuity, are unable to offer any of the additional information necessary to deepen the reconstruction of the relationship between people and objects. As repeatedly noted by Renata Ago (2003), this should be a fundamental point in any attempt to reconstruct the relationship between people and consumption.

In reality, as various studies in the Italian milieu have demonstrated, it is necessary to connect the theme of the family lifecycle to a scrutiny of sources such as post-mortem inventories or dowries. It must be again acknowledged that the first to observe this incongruence was Giovanni Levi, even though the observation has been taken on by various Italian scholars including Malanima and Cecchini, who, although using the above mentioned sources, have proven to offer more informed interpretations or, as Malanima did, justified the use of these sources as tools of comparison on a European scale.

I wish to bring here the example of the *Giudici del proprio* and *Giudici del mobile*, Venetian sources often used by scholars over the last years with the intention of reconstructing aspects and dynamics of an emerging material culture in the pre-modern society, considering the richness of the source and

the possibility it offers to reason upon long periods of time. Research results based upon the perusal of numerous dowry inventories – even if they appear to show a multiplication of goods and a growth of their value in Venetian households between the 16th and 17th centuries – should however consider a wider context which sees a general increase of prices throughout late 16th century Italy, and therefore call for an accurate reading of the source itself. This complex analysis is the only valid one when reading post-mortem inventories, account books, entries and expenditures, which are so rich and frequent in Italian archives and from which numerous studies stemmed in the Tuscan, Genovese and Venetian milieu as early as the third decade of the last century, even though more concerned with the history of prices. Only in the 1950s and 1960s did this come to be re-evaluated in terms more aware of a preliminary approach towards the history of consumption, however still connected to the research on prices (Tagliaferri, 1968).

Giovanni Levi's recent study is a methodological guide for those willing to weigh the idea of consumption using these tools. Only by referencing them to the family lifecycle and keeping in mind the role played by inequality can these documents provide information valid for an in-depth exploration of the subjective aspects of consumption. It must not be forgotten that luxury goods such as jewellery, collections of paintings, books and artworks in general tend to be limited as early as the 13th and the 14th centuries and to be transmitted to the next generations through male-line inheritance (Lanaro, 2012).

Finally, it must be remembered that in many of these documents it is impossible to establish the importance held by the trade in used goods. Patricia Allerston (2000) has demonstrated how in commerce of the 16th and the 17th centuries, the exchange of second hand clothes was actively practised in Venice – as in other big cities of Europe – and supplied a large spectre of the Venetian population. With its approximately 180,000 inhabitants in the early 17th century (which between late middle ages and early modern era made it one of the cities with the highest demographic density in Europe), Venice saw economic developments unfolding at high speed.

Connected to mercantile trade, opportunities such as trading in second hand goods were easy to find: this would have favored the desire to possess larger quantities of clothing items among members of various social levels and, one can suppose, regardless of emulation mechanisms. In this sense, any link to possible hypotheses of consumer revolution becomes still more complicated and calls for analyses more complex than those conducted over the recent years.

Simultaneously, it is precisely the Venetian case of the used goods market that offers elements for a discussion on Veblen's emulation principle,

according to which the privilege of being born patrician was hereditary and thus disconnected from economic status, and the need to attain at least a threshold of minimum wealth, resulted in producing in Venice a consolidation of a social class constituted by the so-called ‘poor nobles’, who in certain cases sank to dramatic levels of poverty.

Therefore the Venetian second-hand market, with its extraordinary social and economic impact, as observed by Allerston, cannot be limited exclusively to the circulation of goods, particularly clothing, within circles not belonging to the governing elite – in an attempt to apply the emulation thesis – but needs to be connected to the existence of a social group of nobles who were unable to afford certain clothing items and therefore had to resort to the second hand market, where clothing was a dominant sector (Lemire, 2000).

3. Understanding how consumption works

The fundamental point, not yet sufficiently understood, is that for a society based on different principles than the one we live in it is indeed difficult to reconstruct the psychological mystery of consumption; in other words, the subjectivity of the individual consumer. I refer essentially to the thesis of James Duesenberry (1967), who, by contesting the utility thesis, has faced the problem of a psychological foundation for consumer choices, setting aside the established method of analyzing individual preferences, and departing rather from the assumption that consumer preferences are interdependent and consumption models can be explained not just in terms of the quantity of consumer goods but also of their quality. With this perspective, the change in behavior is not the result of a variation in absolute income but, rather, a shift in relative earnings (i.e., the comparison to the revenue of other families). In this context, consumption increase is irreversible as the imitation effect occurs even if only one group experiences a growth in its earnings. This is why Duesenberry’s qualitative approach is a useful tool to analyze the problem of consumption. And it becomes even more so when applied to a pre-modern society. It is true that in recent years the ‘consumer revolution’ has become a favorite topic of discussion, as has the birth of a ‘material modernity’ with reference to the 17th and 18th centuries, from Jan de Vries (2008) for northwestern Europe to Maxine Berg (2005) for England, from Simon Shama (1997) and more recently to Bruno Blondé (2010) for Antwerp and Cissie Fairchilds (1993) for Paris.

In this sense however – as already anticipated with reference to the market of used goods – I would like to critically stress the so-called emulation thesis

(here I refer to the hypothesis expressed by Veblen (1899), but in a sense also to Simmel's '(1905) trickle down' theory), that is the gradual process of assimilation to the privileged groups through the identification of consumption (particularly of luxury goods) agreed upon also by Duesenberry, a thesis – as recently underlined by Maxine Berg – applied in a completely uncritical manner by historians seeking to stress the wider impact on society. In fact, this theory must be investigated by asking many questions on its consistency with the culture of the time. In this sense, Renata Ago (2011), in her study on mobile heredity, dwells on the adoption of princely behavior of people with no such status – for example artists and scholars – noting that one cannot 'swiftly dismiss this as a typical case of class emulation'. Their behavior would seem not so much intended to gain aristocratic appearance, as to demonstrate personal nobility as a fruit of personal excellence, from which, precisely, possession of cultural and artistic goods would derive. On the other hand the concept of equity – understood as self-contentment with personal status – which, together with the principle of inequality, stood at the base of pre-modern society was rather prompting mobility goals inside the same social group, and this favored not a will to stand out through consumption patterns typical of the elites, but rather to adopt forms of consumption which tended to identify those at the peak of the social group to which a person belonged. In the pre-industrial society, strongly segmented as we shall see also with regard to the co-existence of various markets – and this from social, economic and territorial points of view – the identification with various forms of consumption does not occur inter-socially or across social groups, as this was abhorred by applicable sumptuary laws, but rather it occurs with the richest individuals within the given social group, as segmentation itself is founded upon the existence of cultures, survival strategies and diverse forms of consumption. Therefore, the a peasant or an urban worker wouldn't aspire to be like a nobleman or a wealthy merchant but, rather, more like one of the richest peasants or the richest urban workers and so forth.

This is just to emphasize that Veblen's thesis should be taken cautiously and cannot constitute a universal model qualified to build up a general consumption theory based on the 'Veblen effect': the tendency mobility models have to organize themselves to imitate upper social classes (Appadurai, 1993).

The plethora of interpretations dedicated to the consumption of luxury goods in the Italian peninsula seems to favor the emulation approach especially with regard to those restricted intermediary social groups which precisely in the culture of that time were trying to identify themselves with

the dominant elites, from which they were formally excluded in most cases. In this sense, clothing, interior decoration, the propensity for forms of collecting (requiring ad hoc exhibiting spaces) or for certain expressions of sociability tended to overlap, and it is exactly through external consumption that those excluded from the top were seeking available forms of integration. Specifically, as underlined by Palladio himself in his *Quattro Libri* – a theme afterwards researched in-depth by Howard Burns (2012) – the erection of villas was considered the most effective way to render visible the privileged social status reached by the family. But even here it is necessary to observe that, if in this sense commissioning the building of villas during early modern times throughout most of central and northern Italy could be perceived as one of the most spectacular forms of conspicuous consumption, we cannot forget that in the Venetian case, (particularly the Palladian edifices) they managed almost miraculously to combine an economic function with ostentatious display. This further complicates the understanding of the ‘emulation’ phenomenon, in the sense that the Palladian villas built by mere wealthy merchants (such as Villa Gazzotti at Bertesina near Vicenza and Villa Forni at Montecchio Precalcino) could, much more simply, have been the result of strategic choices to invest in the agricultural sector as it was especially lucrative in those years.

Richard Goldthwaite’s studies first suggested that in Italy during the Renaissance, production, exchange and consumption of luxury goods by the elites registered an increase to the point of influencing also the wealthier social layers of urban society independent of economic and political circumstances. The elites were increasingly prompted – from the 15th century onwards, and in completely new terms – to refurbish their homes with endless types of manufactured goods. These homes had been rather unadorned – though not completely deprived of luxury goods, often of Oriental importation. As a result, it has been concluded that this production of quality goods had a stimulating and “anti-cyclical” effect on the entire economy. Furthermore, in the 15th and 16th centuries, new products originated from workshops in northern and central Italy, effectively favoring social development towards more advanced forms of civic life. In this sense, Goldthwaite’s reflection has indicated a path for studies which subsequently was taken up with enthusiasm by many Italian historians, who declined sources and analyses, from the approach offered first by the American historian, in considering close links between courtly civilization, luxury goods consumption, and incentives to their production (Guerzoni, 2006). In this sense also Belfanti (2008), who dealt repeatedly with the consumption theme, didn’t fail to recognize in the civilization of the Renaissance court,

and thus not exclusively Italian, the suggestion leading to the fashionable idea of a diverse material culture, which rapidly expanded across all of Europe (Berg, 2001). About the same time the idea of an Italian consumption model and the virtues of liberalism were tested in the long run by Ago and Raggio (2004) in a research project initiated in 2003 and which better grasped the hypothesis by analyzing particularly the relationship between objects and human beings.

In reality, by being willing to consider the Ancient Régime society in its entirety – without focusing only on the upper demographic layers – the theme of consumption and the hypothetical consumer revolution of the early modern era remains difficult to explore. The difficulty in understanding the weight laid by direct production on self-consumption is probably the major obstacle to an unconditional adhesion to the consumer revolution theory. Shifting the accent from production to consumption, historiography studies have ventured upon an emphasis of pervasive consumption starting with the mid 17th century in countries such as Holland and England, while connecting in a completely uncritical way the consumption of pre-modern era to the theory of the ‘stranglehold of scarcity’.

In effect, the scarcity of information about non-industrialized society, especially the complex ways in which income was being formed and its uses inside a deeply unequal society, render difficult the analysis of the consumption phenomenon in its projection as economic and symbolic value. Italian studies have been on the other hand inspired by Carole Shammas’ (1990) research on consumer goods – and particularly spices – in England and the colonial world. What it is, however, intended to emphasize at this stage is that, if there are no problems in agreeing on an increase in the consumption of goods linked to the market, numerous doubts persist on the hypothesis of a generalized consumption growth, in other words a consumer revolution, with reference to the early modern age, as the income structure and the subsequent dynamics of consumption escape us. As previously stated, this is precisely because of the specific nature of the sources, unable to detect temporal discontinuities. At this point, the recent project on *Inequality across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800* conducted by Guido Alfani (with financing from the European Research Council) might help us partially achieve a better insight into this entangled theme.

4. Consumption, crisis, price growth

Over the last decades, interest in the theme of consumption has led to a historiographical debate, acknowledging to this day many interpretive hypotheses in overt contradiction. The ancient Italian states experienced a dramatic economic crisis during the 17th century that was characterized by heavy demographic recession and, especially, by a de-structuring of the industrial system connected to the urban framework in the areas that had constituted the core of the Italian productive system: Lombardy, the Veneto, Emilia, and Tuscany.

As a result, studies on consumption cannot ignore that in 17th century Italy the country progressively lost its economic primacy and followed a declining path. In the Venetian state area it would take more than a century to fill the demographic gaps resulting from the epidemic of 1630; the revival would occur mainly through rural growth, where proto-industrial activities were successfully set up. The objectives of such activities were not chiefly the production of high quality goods in line with the Italian tradition but, rather, lower quality goods that imitated foreign items such as English woollens or French glass; usually the goods were intended for a regional market (although also partially aiming at an international one as, in this case, the market immediately north of the Alps).

The attempt to explore the theme of consumption in Italian society during the period of the *ancien régime* wasn't limited to the reasoning of the elites but expanded to the whole complexity of society; it inevitably led to approaching the theme of demand and, in the same direction, the equally elusive concept of economic crisis. Now, without entering into details of such an analysis, which would lead astray from the purposes of this paper, we can underline how during the past, high numbers were equivalent to prosperity and if today's crises are mainly due to overproduction, before the industrial revolution they were fundamentally crises of underproduction (at least viewed through the Malthusian perspective which led the trend in economic history) resulting from famine or warfare as situations that destroyed resources, especially agricultural ones. It may well be that the case of excessive production of manufactured goods resulting from a lowering of peasant buying power, also took place under the *ancien régime*, but corporations and privileges would have probably ensured that a swift adjustment to the manufactured goods offered.

Therefore, if today, in years of crisis, one experiences a lowering of prices, during the modern era an increase in prices would have been registered. Response time from consumers was a lot slower compared to

today, and the lack of communication among various markets that mirrored the social fragmentation of that period – markets were generally non-communicative and divided especially in their social, not just economic, dynamics – rendered more acute such a process, extending the period needed to respond to on-going mutations. As such, this tardiness was at the core of behaviors which, compared to present day ones, appear heterodox.

To help better demonstrate this slowness, I hint only at the fact that from 1630 onwards maize started to spread consistently and visibly in northern cultivations, then in central Italy, with a higher growth rate than wheat. The latter, though, was increasingly more present in the market because the growing consumption of maize ran parallel with a drop in the consumption of wheat flour. As a result, the prices of corn and of the ‘minor cereals’ tended to increase with the increase of consumption: even the price of wheat tended to increase but to a lower extent than corn and other minor cereals. However, at first, because of the delay referred to above, there is no variation registered in consumer behavior⁵.

Together with market segmentation due to a low social homogeneity and the division in classes (creating a whole series of niches where various products find their place a fact that contributes on the other hand to contain the crisis) one can add a geographical segmentation of the market, linked to policies of protectionism, mercantilism and internal excise duties which see privileged agents at play – as they would be exempt from these constraints: agents like mercantile companies would demonstrate higher resilience to shocks.

Obviously, the approach taken in the discussion about cereals being micro-historical, may seem in part contradictory with quantitative analyses based on overall estimates. This is the path followed by Malanima (2012), who made sure to extend his reflection on agricultural consumption to a certain number of European countries, giving credit to the hypothesis of a decline in the consumption of agricultural products per individual (a fall quantified between the 16th and the 19th centuries at 24%), where the maize and potato cultivations softened the fall in terms of caloric intake. Of course, coffee, chocolate, tea and sugar saw an increased consumption between the 17th and the 18th centuries, but this did not have the effect of compensating the fall in primary consumption from lower social groups, and instead expanded among the middle and upper classes, especially in Central-Northern Europe.

5. The introduction of maize appears therefore as an innovative cultivation, though not replicable as such in a positive context (one should think of pellagra epidemics resulting from increased and exclusive maize consumption, contradicting the commonplace that equals innovation to welfare improvement).

5. Between assistance and savings

A further argument worth examining regards consumption in times of crisis, the savings in the consumption of goods with the purpose of maintaining personal status and role within the social group, and the effects deriving from the thinning of one's savings quota on the uncertainty levels in members of 'un-protected' social groups who face a weakening of personal or familial state of health. Certainly, in an ancien régime society, there were social groups able to rely, in case of emergency situations, on help coming from institutions outside their own families. We think here of people enrolled in corporations, whose statuses guaranteed – in critical situations or challenging contexts of poor health – assistance for the family; we recall also that these very statuses recognized the right to a dowry at the time of their betrothal (or when entering the convent) to orphan daughters of craftsmen enrolled in the corporation. Furthermore, help (in the form of a contribution towards burial costs⁶) was given by the corporation to the family of a poor craftsman in case of death. Generally speaking, however, the majority of men did not benefit from these forms of 'insurance' and it can be supposed that, facing the fragility of life, as soon as the economy had surpassed the negative context, they first aimed to restore their small 'treasure' unspoiled by a consumption protracted even in times of crisis, in order to restore a warranty to draw upon in case of emergency: in a certain way it is precisely in the post-crisis expansion moment that one can hypothesize that consumption remained constant, regardless of the increase in available income.

In this sense, recent studies have shed light on how precious items in the wardrobe functioned as small 'treasuries' (for example, in times of crisis, the head of the household could easily pawn them – here I refer to Luciano Allegra's study of Turin in the second half of the 18th century – and obtain credit). Furthermore, as soon as the situation improved, these goods could be reclaimed and so return to familial possession, though in fact we know, as was often the case with the debts of peasants, that this rarely occurred.

Allegra's hypothesis leads us though to a slippery and problematic field of research and opens an interesting question on whether to evaluate as consumer goods certain items which in fact were primarily functioning as an investment, being closely linked to credit operations. If Allegra was able to demonstrate that often the best family garments would be brought with the

6. Thus, during the late 16th century crisis, workers at the Venetian arsenal were guaranteed a minimum wage to cap the effects of the crisis on qualified workmanship, the same in mid 17th century Genoa, where diminishing trade led to the appointment of a city commission to give work to unemployed craftsmen.

authorization of the housewife to the Jewish pawn shops of Turin, the same can be said for pawnbrokers in whose registers one can easily find objects and goods which may have been part of wedding wardrobes, and this even for the lower social layers. Even in the rural areas, it was widespread practice to pawn certain parts of a wardrobe to the local pawnbroker⁷.

6. Comparisons and processes of regionalization

I would like now to conclude by showing how a comparative analysis of Italian studies can help to better understand some connections between consumption and economic dynamics, even when looked at in a broader European perspective. On the continent, in fact, the 17th century appears crucial with regard to the birth of a modern culture of consumption linked to an ‘industrious revolution’ hypothesis, which has been discussed in the recent years as one of the causes of the industrial revolution, aiming at a generalized phenomenon of ordinary – not luxury – goods. In fact, another perspective can be to understand if new or diverse forms of consumption, breaking cultural and inequality barriers, give place to a ‘less unequal’ inequality, favoring the evolution from a hierarchical society to a more homogeneous one. As already mentioned, international historiography has taken first to the theme of consumption, opening new paths of analysis, often by considering those documents hosted by Italian archives, but which in fact remained unexplored for a long time and which are now scrutinized with diverse interpretations. Northwestern European countries are, by *antonomasia*, the places where a consumer revolution would have been linked to a process of industrious revolution leading to the very industrial revolution, thus constituting a forerunner of sorts. After a wide initial success, the thesis has been recently subjected to criticism (Grenier, 2010). To this day, though, the theme of consumption is often read as a propelling element for the passage towards contemporary society.

The Italian case, with its diverse regional typologies, could however help to better understand the difficulties intrinsic to the direct application of homogenizing interpretations, more apt to analyze other areas of the continent. A preliminary comparison, thanks to existing studies, among three different Italian realities of the time (Tuscany, Venetian Republic, Reign of Naples) can help us launch some directions for future studies. If we follow the research of

7. But this practice was widespread even among members of the refined Italian courts. See Welch (2005).

Malanima (1990) – dedicated to the Tuscan countryside of the 17th and 18th centuries – rural society appears, of course, articulated in a multiplicity of roles, but, a few fortunate exceptions aside, it seems quite far-fetched to speak of ‘luxury’ in the rural areas, at least until the 1740’s – a time when a change in consumption and life habits of the rural population can be perceived. Besides the introduction of new foods in the household, the frequentation of taverns becomes customary, and so does a certain luxurious overtone in dressing habits, and all of the above are encountered rather in the areas neighboring cities and urban markets. However, the largest part of the rural population was formed of renters and rural day labourers who did not partake in these mutations, continuing to live in absolute poverty. Still, a slow shift can be undoubtedly registered even with these workers. Especially with regard to clothing, this change concerned the population in its entirety, not just the wealthier peasants: more tablecloths, more bed sheets, more napkins, and even increasing numbers of shirts and footwear.

This mutation has in any case been paralleled to the tendency towards improvement in the rural standard of living already existing in previous centuries, and therefore less influenced by phenomena leading to changes latently present at the dawn of the industrial revolution in Northern Europe. In comparison, perhaps, Venetian society of the time appears more dynamic. Until now there are no studies demonstrating, between the 17th and the 18th centuries, a demand for *populuxe* goods similar to the one developed in England as a result of new exigencies expressed by women and because of their traditionally closer ties to the market. For now, the phenomenon appears registered in more recent periods. A recent study dedicated to ceramics in the Venetian state has shown only for the 17th and 18th centuries a tendency towards consumption of such goods, by reconstructing a production of ceramics, which between 1790 – perhaps more precisely 1782 – and 1840 take on the connotations of *populuxe* goods by introducing the earthenware according to the English use and by resorting to recurrent designs and decorations especially in the manufacture of Nove (near Bassano). What looks certain at this point, regardless of a new and/or different role acquired by women and of a reassignment of work within the household – dynamics we know very little of – is that the cost-effectiveness and practicality of earthenware managed to bring the production of majolica and porcelain into a crisis while, on the other hand, terracotta products were no longer able to satisfy a clientele, even if not terribly refined, that preferred a more expensive and less rustic product. Even in the Veneto trade of porcelain and majolica, the consumer’s ‘change of face’ was bringing about mutations in the product itself. The new consumer required a quality object imbued with aesthetic qualities

even if he was unable to afford luxury goods such as those coveted by an aristocracy now in decline under the new political climate. It was precisely the consumption of imported English earthenware, well documented during the late 18th century, that prompted merchants from the Veneto to invest in setting up local earthenware productions and gradually to abandon the more traditional majolica and porcelain productions. In fact, research on Venice and the Venetian republic seen in this light is now unforeseeably experiencing, under the impulse of international historiographical research, an accelerating pace also because of the richness of Venetian sources; it's now possible to count on rich quantitative and qualitative studies that are able to consider long periods of time. In this respect, mention can be made of a graduation thesis by Mattia Viale (2014) that centered on Venice. In Viale's PhD project an attempt is made to discuss the connection between consumption and well-being: ignoring this aspect obscures even now the understanding of an evolution in the standards of material life, which as we saw earlier, has interested and continues to interest many scholars. There is also the intent to verify if, even in a transition economy such as the Venetian or the Veneto one, there have been mutations in the dynamics of consumption similar to the ones evinced in England and France.

Finally, a few words on the studies concerned with the kingdom of Naples where the research of Clemente (2011) offers interesting points of reflection. Here the importation of low cost goods seems to have characterized Neapolitan society, as even the small bourgeoisie of the city owned imported textiles, porcelains and furnishings, not as much to emulate the upper classes, but in a desire to use low cost durable goods, rendered available by the international market to anyone who could afford them, even on a unique occasion. As a result, homes of all social groups were filled with furnishings and ornaments such as paintings, mirrors, vases, tableware: the increased affordability of these goods, combined with the dynamics of emulation favored a diffuse consumer culture. However, the expansion of the internal market did not constitute a stimulus, as it did for the manufacturers of the Veneto area: here it signified an opening towards new foreign manufacturers. While the Bourbons persisted in supporting luxury manufactures for the exclusive benefit of the aristocracy, noble and bourgeois households became filled with English woollen fabrics, French silks, tobacco, coffee and chocolate imported through northern European trade routes. This is a further example of how the study of consumption could lead to a better understanding of some of the dynamics animating the fragmented narrative of the Italian peninsula, even when seen in a European perspective.

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