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Political Economy of Virtue: Civil economy, happiness and public trust in the thought of Antonio Genovesi

Abstract:

Amid the growing literature in English on the work of the Neapolitan political economist Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769), this paper focuses on his conception of civil economy (*economia civile*) as a theory of government. By contrast with existing interpretations, the argument is that for Genovesi virtue is a significant ordering device of the polity: virtue mediates between passions and reason, and the human capacity for virtue helps individuals better to realise their different talents. This, in turn, means that virtue is central to the division of labour and the right proportions between different activities, including the balance between consumption and trade.

Keywords: civil economy; virtue; happiness; sympathy; reciprocity

Political Economy of Virtue: Civil economy, happiness and public trust in the thought of Antonio Genovesi

Adrian Pabst¹

Introduction

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the ideas of Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769), including a growing body of scholarship in the English language (e.g. Robertson 1997, 2005; Reinert, 2011; Bruni and Sugden 2000, 2007, 2008, 2013; D’Onofrio 2015). Genovesi’s two main works were *Della Dicosina* (a compendium of ethics published in 1766) and the *Lezioni di economia civile* (*Lectures on civil economy* [1765-67; 2nd edition, 1768-70]).² In different ways, both works had a significant impact on eighteenth-century debates in Italy and beyond about the nature of political economy and the relationship of moral philosophy to commercial society (e.g. Guasti 2006; Di Battista 2007; Costabile 2012, 2015).³

At that time, Genovesi’s *Lezioni* were translated into German, Spanish and later into Portuguese, and extensively discussed in Europe and Latin America, where it was read almost as widely as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (Venturi 1960; Chiaramonte 1964; Vaz 1999; Astigarraga 2004; Astigarraga and Usoz 2007, 2013; Fernandez López 2007). While there is still no full translation of the *Lezioni* into the English language, the growing secondary literature in English has generated debates about the commonalities and differences between Genovesi’s political economy and that of near contemporaries, like Adam Smith. These debates focus on three broad issues: first, the Neapolitan and the Scottish Enlightenment (Robertson 1997, 2005; Guasti 2006); second, the commercial society in relation to development economics (Reinert 2007, 2011); third, the relationship between moral anthropology and the market (Bruni 2006; Bruni and Sugden, 2000, 2007, 2008, 2013; Bruni and Zamagni 2004; see the critique by D’Onofrio [2015]).

By contrast with existing interpretations in English, this article focuses on Genovesi’s ‘civil economy’ as a theory of government. In the preface to the *Lezioni*, he defines *economia civile* as “the political science of the economy and commerce (*la scienza politica dell’economia e del commercio*)” (Genovesi 2013, 11).⁴ Genovesi rejects the idea of an irreducibly anarchic and violent ‘state of nature’ in favour of natural sociability and the political nature of human society, including the political bodies that constitute the civil realm. The human capacity for virtue is a significant ordering device of the polity, and Genovesi roots civil life (*vita civile*) in the mutual exchange of different natural faculties and virtues. In terms of his political and

¹ I would like to thank two anonymous referees for the EJHET whose comments have helped me to refine my argument. All remaining errors are mine.

² This article uses the Arata edition of the *Dicosina* (Genovesi 1973) and the second Neapolitan edition of the *Lezioni*, edited and amended by Genovesi himself, recently republished in a critical edition by Francesca Dal Degan (Genovesi 2013).

³ Among the main contributions to the historiography on the economic thought of Genovesi, see Demarco (1956), Villari (1959), Venturi (1970), Galasso (1977), Pii (1984), Di Battista (1985, 1987), Ferrone (1989) and Perna (1998). For a more detailed bibliography of Genovesi’s historical and political thought, see Jossa, Palatano and Degan (2007).

⁴ Among the main contributions to the historiography on the economic thought of Genovesi, see Demarco (1956), Villari (1959), Venturi (1970), Galasso (1977), Pii (1984), Di Battista (1985, 1987), Ferrone (1989) and Perna (1998). For the most recent comprehensive overview of authoritative interpretations, see Jossa, Palatano and Zagari (2007).

⁴ All translations from Italian are mine, unless otherwise specified.

economic thought, this means that virtue is central to the division of labour and the right proportions between different activities, including production and trade. As the article also shows, Genovesi advances the argument that government is concerned with the pursuit of “common prosperity” (*comune prosperità*) and the “public good” (*bene pubblico*) based on the pursuit of mutual benefit, which in turn is grounded in a balance between “reciprocal needs (*bisogni reciproci*)” and the “reciprocal obligation to assist (*reciproca obbligazione di soccorrere*)” (Genovesi 2013, 22, 30).

In this connection, Genovesi maintains that without public trust (*fede pubblica*) society cannot nurture “the taste for civil life, and thus the spirit of industry, which bring about the opulence of the State (*il gusto del vivere civile, e quindi lo spirito d’industria, che cagionano l’opulenza dello Stato*)” (Genovesi 2013, 342). Contrary to the interpretation put forward by D’Onofrio (2015), this article shows that public trust consists in the bonds binding together persons and families to one another and to the polity and that the pursuit of “common happiness (*commune felicità*)” (Genovesi 2013, 30) is not limited to the power of the sovereign and his ministers. Rather, it is the responsibility of all citizens because the exercise of virtue is instilled through public education. Therefore public trust is neither the aggregation of private trust nor the sole prerogative of the State but instead a kind of universal sympathy that includes a disposition towards the “good life (*ben vivere*)” (Genovesi 2013, 9). By contrast with the work of Bruni, Sugden and Zamagni (cf. Bruni and Zamagni 2004, 2013), the argument is that Genovesi combines Neo-Platonist ideas (rather than predominantly Aristotelian and Ciceronian concepts) with modern thinking that he inherited from Vico, Doria and the Cambridge Platonists.

Section 1 explores Genovesi’s conception of ‘civil economy’ with a particular focus on the ordering of the sciences and the quest for common prosperity and civil life, which brings questions of human vice and virtue to the fore of political economy. Section 2 analyses the role of virtue in Genovesi’s conception of happiness defined as mutual flourishing and the implications for the art of government. Section 3 turns to the relationship between public trust, reciprocity and virtuous commerce, with an emphasis on the need for a balance between production and trade according to the proportionality principle developed by Genovesi. The concluding section summarises the main arguments and outlines some avenues for future research.

1. The virtue of common prosperity: Genovesi’s conception of ‘civil economy’

Antonio Genovesi has variously been described as a rationalist philosopher or as a metaphysician who mutated into a merchant – from *metafisico* to *mercantante* (Bellamy 1987). Such and similar characterisations are misleading because, rather like his near contemporary Adam Smith (1976 [1759], 1991 [1776]), he was both a moral philosopher and a political economist. And rather like the Glaswegian professor, the Neapolitan priest viewed economics as embedded in ethics and, in turn, ethics as ordered to theology, which he defined in the preface (*Proemio*) to his *Lectures of Civil Economy* as “the contemplation of the first cause and the demonstrator of eternal happiness (*contemplatrici della prima cagione e dimostratrici dell’eterna felicità*)” (Genovesi 2013, 9). I shall return to the meaning of happiness in Genovesi’s work at present, but for now it is instructive to focus on how he conceived the ordering of the sciences.

In the same preface Genovesi argues that ethics considers “man in general (*considerando l’uomo in generale*)” and studies “the nature of our instincts, affections and motives (*la natura de’ nostri istinti, affetti e forze*)” with a view to forming character and fostering the

pursuit of the “good life (*ben vivere*)” (9). Meanwhile, “economics looks at the human being as head and prince of his family and instructs him how to preside over it well, and to bestow it with virtue, riches and glory (*L’economia il risguarda come capo e principe della sua famiglia e l’istruisce a ben reggerla e procacciar le virtù, ricchezze e gloria*)” (9). “Finally”, he writes, “politics contemplates the human being as the great father and sovereign of the people and trains him to govern with science, prudence, humanity (*Finalmente, la politica il contempla come gran padre e sovrano del popolo e ammaestrarlo a governar con iscienza, prudenza, umanità*)” (9).

In turn, Genovesi distinguishes politics in terms of ‘political tactics’ (*tattica politica*) and ‘civil economy’ (*economia civile*). The former is defined as the “art of making laws and serving State and Empire (*contiene l’arte legislatrice e servatrice dello Stato e dell’Impero*)”, while the latter is a part of political science that “encompasses the rules to make one’s nation populous, rich, powerful, wise, polite (*abbraccia le regole da rendere la sottoposta nazione popolata, ricca, potente, saggia, polita*)” (9). Thus ‘civil economy’ is not an alternative theory of economics but rather a certain conception of government. The political character of *economia civile* is further reinforced in the *Proemio* by reference to Montesquieu’s *Esprit des lois* (Montesquieu 1749), Bielefeld’s *Institutions politiques* (Bielefeld 1760) and Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce* (Melon 1736).

This ordering of the sciences can be traced to a long and rich heritage of thinking that emphasises the teleological character of knowledge and being – the shared ends or finalities characterising human life (Garin 1958; Venturi 1959; Porta 2016). Genovesi’s specific conception of the ways in which economics, politics, ethics and theology are linked with one another revolves around notions of the “good life (*ben vivere*)” whose roots are found in the intellectual context of eighteenth-century Naples (Rao 1978, 1982; Ferrone 1989; Perna 1998; Costabile 2012, 2015). Genovesi is the heir to the previous generation of intellectuals in Naples that include his teacher Giambattista Vico and Paolo Mattia Doria (Tagliacozzo 1969; Pii 1984; Amodio 1997). Indeed, Genovesi, who had attended Vico’s lectures in Naples, described him in the *Lezioni* as “the illustrious Giambattista Vico, one of my masters, man of immortal fame for his *New Science* (*L’illustre Giambattista Vico, uno de’ fu miei maestri, uomo d’immortal fama per la sua Scienza nuova*)” (Genovesi 2013, 275n6 [original italics]). Among the ideas that Genovesi inherited from Vico and Doria were notions of natural law, common good and civil life (Guasti 2006; Pabst 2011; Costabile 2015; Porta 2016).

The principle that connects the ‘civil economy’ branch of politics to ethics and even theology is *eudaimonia* in the Platonist and Aristotelian sense of ‘holistic’ happiness or flourishing (Pabst 2011; Porta 2016).⁵ In his economic thought, Genovesi echoes Doria’s book *Civil Life* (*La Vita Civile*, 1710 [Doria 1729]), which begins with the following words: “without any doubt, the first object of our desire is human happiness (*Primo oggetto de’ nostri desideri è senza fallo l’umana felicità*)”. By happiness Genovesi, rather like Vico and Doria, means a combination of individual fulfilment of personal talents and mutual flourishing in terms of shared wellbeing. The conception of being that underpins this conception emphasises the relational nature of human beings and therefore rejects the idea that humans are either isolated individuals or subsumed under a single collective. In other words, humanity is a complex compact of relational beings bound together by a common outlook – a natural desire for mutual flourishing, common prosperity and the public good. The following passage from the *Lezioni* expresses Genovesi’s thinking well:

⁵ On the relationship between private and public happiness in the eighteenth-century context, see Rao (2012).

Every person has a natural and intrinsic obligation to study how to procure his happiness; but the political body is made of persons; therefore the entire political body and each of its members is obligated to do his part, i.e. all that he knows and can do for common prosperity, as long as that which is done does not offend the rights of the other civil bodies. This obligation, from the civil body, with beautiful and divine ties, returns to each family and each person for the common pacts of the society. Each family and every person are under two obligations to do that which they can to procure public happiness: one comes from within nature, and the other comes from the subsequent pacts of communities. A third obligation can be added, that of one's own utility. That which Shaftesbury [*Inquiry of Virtue and Merit*] said will be eternally true: he said that the true utility is the daughter of virtue; because it is eternally true that the great depth of man is the love for those with whom he lives. This is the love that is the daughter of virtue. (Genovesi 2013, 30–31)⁶

In this passage and other parts of the *Lezioni*, Genovesi emphasises both the social nature of humankind and the importance of communal pacts or political bodies. These themes suggest a mediation in his work between more classical and modern approaches to the polity – a fusion of natural law ideas with elements of the social contract tradition that can be found in the works of Vico, Hume and Shaftesbury – rather than Machiavelli, Hobbes or Locke. Central to Genovesi's synthesis is his conception of virtue as more primary than the pursuit of pure self-interest or mere utility (Bruni and Zamagni 2004; Bruni 2006). In a way that is consistent with the ideas of Shaftesbury and Doria, Genovesi defines virtue as “[...] the harmonic consilience between passions and reason, both in regard to ourselves and with respect to our concern for the public good. See Shaftesbury, *Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit*, book 2 (*Intendo qui per virtù in generale l'accordo armonico tra le passioni e la ragione, così per riguardo a noi medesimi, come per rispetto all'affezione del ben pubblico. Vedi Shaftesbury, Inquiry of virtue and merit, lib. II*)” (Genovesi 2013, 38n41).

Virtue is at once a constitutive element of human nature and life in society based on human disposition towards what Genovesi described in the above-cited passage as “love for those with whom he [man] lives”. In this sense, for Genovesi the polity reflects both a natural and a social order (Marcialis 1994, 1999). The practice of virtue, defined as the “the harmonic consilience between passions and reason”, represents a mediating middle between extreme forms of human behaviour: for example, courage stands between the extremes of recklessness and cowardice or justice between anarchy and tyranny – as for the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle that was held by Genovesi as a point of reference (Garin 1958; Venturi 1959; Porta 2016). His understanding of virtue is consistent with the classical and Christian Neo-Platonist conception of virtue as “*virtù* is the arithmetic middle between vices” (Genovesi 1977, 252, quoted in Reinert [2011, 193]).

Maintaining this equilibrium is not a matter for the natural sciences or abstract contemplation but rather a function of both reason and judgement. This is why he contends against modern

⁶ “Ogni persona ha un'obbligazione naturale e insita di studiarsi a procacciare la sua felicità, ma il corpo politico non è composto, che di sì fatte persone, dunque tutto il corpo politico e ciascun membro è nell'obbligazione di fare quanto è dalla sua parte tutto quel che fa e può, per la comune prosperità, purché si possa fare senza offendere i diritti degli altri corpi civili. Questa obbligazione con bello e divino legame ritorna dal corpo civile in ciascuna famiglia e in ciascuna persona, per gli patti comuni di società. Di qui è che ogni famiglia, e ogni persona, è obbligata a procurare, quanto sa e può, la comune felicità, per due obblighi, l'uno de' quali è l'interno della natura, e l'altro quello de' primi patti continuati ne' posteri per lo vivere in comunità. Si può aggiungere il terzo, l'utilità propria. Sarà eternamente vero, dice Shaftesbury, che la vera utilità è figlia della virtù, perché è eternamente vero che il gran fondo d'ogni uomo, ond'è la massima sua rendita, è l'amore di coloro, on cui vive. Or quest'amore è appunto figlio della virtù”.

rationalism that “reason is not useful unless it has become practice and reality” (Genovesi 1962, 245). This emphasis on balance shapes his conception of virtue, which is not part of the artifice of human volition but rather reflects a certain natural and social order (albeit in an imperfect and deficient manner) that the polity is supposed to preserve and improve. As Genovesi writes in the *Lezioni*, “virtue is not [...] an invention of philosophers” but instead “a consequence of the nature of the world and of man (*la virtù non è [...] una invenzione de’ filosofi [...] ma è una conseguenza della natura del mondo, e dell’uomo*)” (Genovesi 2013, 349). Thus, ‘civil economy’ is the art of government that is consistent with the practice of virtue and the pursuit of the good life and common prosperity.

2. The economics and ethics of *felicità*

As the previous section has indicated, happiness (*felicità*) in the classical sense of *eudaimonia* is central to Genovesi’s teleological understanding of human nature and sociability. This has far-reaching implications for political economy because Genovesi’s account avoids equating happiness with individual self-interest or with collective utility. Instead, civil economy concerns a more reciprocal and mutual form of flourishing that seeks “common prosperity” (*comune prosperità*) and the “public good” (*bene pubblico*). Genovesi insists that “[i]t is a universal law that we cannot make ourselves happy without making other happy as well” (Genovesi 1962, 449). This conception is grounded in his ontology that accentuates both joint social bonds and shared ethical obligations. For example, in his 1766 treatise *The Philosophy of the Just and Honest*, Genovesi writes that “[we are] created in such a way as to be touched necessarily, by a musical sympathy, by pleasure and internal satisfaction, as soon as we meet another man; no human being not even the most cruel and hardened can enjoy pleasures in which no one else participates” (Genovesi 1973, 42). As we will see in this section, sympathy is also key to Genovesi’s conception of civil economy.

In the *Lezioni* he explicitly connects the relational nature of humans to reciprocal needs and assistance:

How is man more sociable than are the other [creatures]? [...] Every animal unites itself with its like [...] but in men there is something more sublime and divine that gives rise to a stronger bond, and that is PIETY [*PIETÀ*], the proper foundation of the human heart [...] and reason which calculates an infinite of relations with the ends of our life [...]. This reason, I say, discloses to us a reciprocal right to be assisted and consequently a reciprocal obligation to help others in their needs (Genovesi 2013, 22).⁷

This balance of the ‘right to be assisted’ and the ‘obligation to assist others’ is for Genovesi part of the virtues that are an ordering device within the polity, enabling persons and groups better to pursue their shared ends – the quest for common prosperity and the good life.

Genovesi’s account of happiness in terms of mutual flourishing is connected with his focus on human vice and virtue. Both are grounded in the ontological structure of humanity – the blend

⁷ “*In che dunque diremo l’uomo essere più socievole che non sono gli altri? Ogni animale si unisce col suo simile, secondo la sua natura; essi si soccorrono eziandio scambievolmente ne’ loro bisogni, ciascun genere a tenore delle sue forze e delle sue cognizioni e ciò per istinto, non per riflessione. Ma negli uomini vi è qualcosa di più sublime e divino, che dee farne un vincolo più forte, e questa è la PIETÀ, fondo propri del cuore umano [...] e la RAGIONE calcolatrice d’ un’infinità di rapporti col fine della nostra vita [...] questa ragione, dico, ci discopre un reciproco diritto di esser soccorsi e conseguentemente una reciproca obbligazione di soccorrerci ne’ nostri bisogni”.*

(*impasto*) of instincts, affections and motives in forming the good life (“*istinti, affetti e forze e si ingegnasi di formarci al ben vivere*”, in Genovesi 2013, 9) that includes the desire for self-preservation, comfort and distinction. For Genovesi, human nature and human conduct have to conform to the proportionality condition between self-interest and what he calls in the following passage the “sympathetic principle (*principio simpatico*)”:

If we call *interest* to lessen pain and worry [...] it is clear that the human being only acts after this motive. However, I believe that, in the ordinary way of thinking and speaking, it would be wrong both to say that the human beings only act in consideration of their interest, and to deny it. There are people who consider as interest nothing but a *reflexive self-love* and it is false that every human being only acts after this motive. For nothing is clearer by experience than the fact that the human being is an *electrical being* and that the sympathetic principle is the mainspring of three-quarters of human actions. But if by interest we mean indulging to, and assuaging, those pains, troubles and discomforts in which the *restlessness of the soul* consists, we would find we do not act under any other principle, independently of whether our action is motivated by a good or a bad passion. (Genovesi 2013, 34 [original italics])⁸

A well-ordered polity requires a balance between self-interest and the sympathetic principle that is constitutive of political bodies. In Genovesi’s language, the social nature of humankind is governed by two forces: “self-love (*forza concentriva*)” and “love of others (*forza diffusiva*)” (Genovesi 1973, 42–43; cf. Guasti 2006, 392–93; D’Onofrio 2015, 457). As he writes in the *Diceosina*, “those who pretend that one of these forces is born from the other are mistaken [...] These two forces in us are both primitive and tied together” (Genovesi 1973, 42). Happiness for the individual and by analogy for society is only obtained when they are held in balance because a mismatch is not conducive to civil life – including common prosperity and the public good. As Lucio Villari remarks, “the principle of *equilibrium* or *proportionality* [...] is of great importance to Genovesi’s economic system [...]: it governs [...] any expression of the economic and socio-political life [...] The *law of equilibrium*, as Genovesi sees it, perhaps gives the key to the whole of Genovesi’s system” (Villari 1959, 72 [original italics]).

Without the proper proportions between self-interest and sympathy, instincts can direct human beings away from the quest for relational flourishing towards the pursuit of purely individual happiness, for instance maximising wealth or power based on the sins of avarice and pride. In this process, the triumph of vice over virtue leads to economically and ethically questionable practices such as usury: “whoever therefore demands usury from pure *mutuum* [benefit] destroys the nature of the benefit, converts friendship and humanity into merchandise (*Chi adunque esige usura del puro mutuo, distrugge la natura del beneficio, converte l’amicizia, e l’umanità in mercanzia*)” (Genovesi 2013, 383).

⁸ “Se il soddisfare al dolore e alla sollecitudine si dica interesse [...], è chiaro, che l’uomo non opera naturalmente che per interesse. E pure nel volgar modo di pensare e parlare, io stimo che s’ingannino così coloro che dicono che l’uomo opera per solo interesse, come quelli che il negano, parlando gli uni e gli altri poco consideratamente. E ciò derivasi dal dare maggiore, o minore estensione alla parola interesse. V’ha di coloro i quali non intendono per interesse che un amor proprio riflesso, ed è falso che ogni uomo opera sempre per sì fatto interesse, niente essendoci più manifesto per l’esperienza quant’è che l’uomo è un essere elettrico, e che il principio simpatico sia la sorgente di tre quarti delle azioni umane. Ma se per interesse s’intende quel soddisfare e compiacere al dolore, alla molestia, alle irritazioni di quelle specie che son dette, all’inquietudine dell’anima, e ad ogni buona o rea passione, non si troverà che noi operiamo per altro principio [...]”.

However, Genovesi insists that human nature is just as capable of practicing virtue as succumbing to vice. For example, he writes that man is “naturally jealous of his own good [...] but] not envious of others” (Genovesi 1962, 47–54; cf. Genovesi 1962, 101–7). Virtue extends the natural desire for happiness in the direction of mutual flourishing by reinforcing sentiments of sympathy that bind our self-interest and our individual needs to those of others. Many (though not all) interests overlap and can be secured by taking into account what Genovesi calls in the above-cited passage the “reciprocal obligation to assist one another in our needs (*reciproca obbligazione di soccorrerei nè nostri bisogni*)” (Genovesi 2013, 22).

For Genovesi, the universal desire for happiness and virtuous action are mutually reinforcing because they are grounded in reality: “for it is necessary to be virtuous in order to be happy; for we are capable of virtue; for this virtue is not a vain or fanciful word, but a true and real one (*Che perciò bisogna essere virtuosi, per esser felici: che siamo di virtù capaci: e che questa virtù non sia una voce vana, e chimerica, ma vera, e reale*)” (Genovesi 1765, 2). Put differently, for Genovesi virtue is not an empty moralistic term that is artificially fabricated by the mind. Rather, virtue is grounded in the reality of the good, regarded as the real factual and valuative object of human pursuit. By contrast with the accentuation of the Aristotelian and Ciceronian legacy in the work of Bruni, Sugden and Zamagni, my contention is that Genovesi’s idea can be traced to Plato, Christian Neo-Platonism and the renewal of Platonist thinking during the Renaissance and modernity, and it shapes Genovesi’s civic humanism, which has elements of Neo-Platonist and Epicurean themes (Bianchini 1982, 1988, 1994; Pabst 2011). For example, in the *Lezioni* Genovesi repeatedly cites Plato’s *Republic* as an exemplary treatise on public education committed to the inculcation of virtue (e.g. Genovesi 2013, 10, 11, 19, 25), and Plato, as well as the Cambridge Platonists, are extensively referenced in the *Lezioni*.

The influence of Neo-Platonist ideas is also visible in relation to Genovesi’s argument that intentional human actions have unintentional consequences thanks to divine providence and grace. Here he follows Giambattista Vico, Ludovico Antonio Muratori and Paolo Mattia Doria (Villari 1959; Porta 2016). For Vico, “Man has free will, though it be weak, to turn passions into virtue; but is helped by God with divine Providence and supernaturally with divine grace” (Vico 2002 [1725], II, §7). Similarly, Muratori argues that “the master desire in us, and father of many others, is our own private good, or our particular happiness [...]. Of a more sublime sphere, and more noble origin, is another Desire, that of the Good of Society, of the Public Good that is Public Happiness. The first is born of nature, the second has virtue for a mother” (quoted in Bruni and Zamagni 2007, 73). Crucially, for Doria the mediating function of virtue – between passions and reason – enables human beings to limit their imperfections and to pursue their natural potential for mutual wellbeing:

[t]he invention of civil life aims at providing a remedy to this almost moral impossibility, which is in human beings, of possessing all virtues, and to the human property that each human being possesses only some of them [...] [Civil life] aims at providing this remedy by assigning every particular virtue to its own place in the company of others, so that it may be an advantage to them, and also so that individual vices are not harmful to others [...]. This shows the true essence of civil life as that mutual exchange of virtues, and of natural faculties, which human beings make with one another, so as to achieve human happiness; or else a harmony brought about by all particular virtues mutually supporting each other in order to constitute a perfect political body. (Doria 1729, 82–83)

Doria's 'mutual exchange of virtues and of natural faculties' in pursuit of the common good is consistent with Genovesi's conception of social differentiation and division of labour. In the *Lezioni*, he writes that "everything is connected in the civil body, and [...] there is a communication of goods between all the productive activities that makes the civil body solid and thriving (*Tutto è connesso nel corpo civile e [...] è una comunicazione di beni tra tutte le arti che fa il rigoglio e la robustezza del corpo civile*)" (Genovesi 2013, 95).

Linked to this balance within the civil body is Genovesi's account of the mediation between self-interest and the common good. Virtue is key to this mediation in Genovesi's civil economy because it ties together the natural desire for goodness with the attempt to nurture as much as possible humankind's capacity to do good, notably the emphasis on human dispositions towards the virtuous practices of trust, cooperation and mutual benefit (*mutuo*). These are qualified by human dispositions towards vice, including distrust, conflict and narrow self-interest, but the latter can be mitigated by the institutional arrangements of civic life and the political bodies (*corpi politici*) that constitute the domain of civil economy as the set of rules for the provision of the material and immaterial needs of society (*Proemio* to the *Lezioni*, in Genovesi 2013, 9–12).

The above-mentioned distinction between interest and sympathy allows Genovesi to address the issue of virtue as a constitutive element of the human dispositions that are conducive to the formation and government of the polity. In 'civil economic' terms, this underpins Genovesi's conception of the balance between production and trade. Both are vital for civil life and a well-functioning polity as they help to address the diverse needs of individuals and groups within and across different nations in accordance with the twin principle of the 'right to be assisted' and the 'obligation to assist others'. For Genovesi, the right proportion between trade and production requires among other things public trust (*fede pubblica*), without which society cannot nurture "the taste for civil life, and thus the spirit of industry, which bring about the opulence of the State (*il gusto del vivere civile, e quindi lo spirito d'industria, che cagionano l'opulenza dello Stato*)" (Genovesi 2013, 342).⁹ The relation between sympathy and public trust will be the focus of the following section.

3. Public trust, reciprocity and virtuous commerce

In Genovesi's thought, sympathy links the relational nature of human beings and their quest for happiness as mutual flourishing to the functioning of the polity and the economy, which involve the sympathetic ties of interpersonal bonds: "for contracts are bonds and civil laws are [...] also compacts and public contracts (*Perché i contratti sono legami, e le leggi civili [...], patti, e contratti pubblici*)" (Genovesi 2013, 341 [original italics]). In the *Lezioni* and the *Diceosina*, Genovesi insists that there is no strict distinction of formal law and the informal bonds between individuals or groups, since both are informed by what he calls 'public trust' (*fede pubblica*). The latter is defined in relational terms: "Public trust is therefore a bond that ties together and binds persons and families of one State to one another, with the sovereign or other nations with which they trade (*La fede pubblica è dunque la corda, che lega e stringe le persone e le famiglie di uno Stato fra loro, col sovrano, o con ogni nazione, con cui traffica*)" (Genovesi 2013, 341n121).

In the same paragraph in the *Lezioni*, Genovesi clarifies that public trust, far from being merely instrumental or functional, constitutes a unifying ontological force – similar to

⁹ Genovesi notes that "This Latin word *fides* [Latin for 'trust'] is the Greek σφιδις, string, bond (*Questa parola fides de' Latini è lo σφιδις de' Greci, corda, legame*)" (Genovesi 2013, 341n121).

Hume's notion of universal sympathy.¹⁰ In Genovesi's words, "trust is to civic bodies what to natural bodies is the force of cohesion and of reciprocal attraction; without which there can be no solid and lasting mass, and all is but fine sand and dust (*la fede è ne' corpi civili quel che è ne' corpi naturali la forza di coesione, e di reciproca attrazione; senza della quale non si può avere niuna massa ferma e durevole, ma tutto è minuta rena, e polvere*)" (Genovesi 2013, 342). For Genovesi, public trust underpins the bonds without which contracts cannot function and civil life does not flourish. In its absence, society lacks interconnection and risks dissolving at the first shock, just like a pile of sand: "society will either erode itself, or it will convert in its entirety into a crowd of bandits" (Genovesi 1757-58, 496; see Reinert [2011, 227]).¹¹

Later Gaetano Filangieri, who developed some of Genovesi's thinking (Guasti 2006), stressed that economic inequality has the same corrosive effect as criminality and that wealth cannot be defined in terms of a merely abstracted quantity: "Exorbitant riches of some citizens, and the laziness of some others, presumes the unhappiness and misery of the majority. This civil partiality is contrary to the public good. A state cannot be said to be rich and happy save in that single case where every citizen through a definite labour in the course of a reasonable time is able commodiously to supply his own needs and that of his family" (Filangieri 2003, 12).

In the work of Genovesi, public faith is not so much the aggregation of private trust as a kind of universal sympathy that includes a commitment to public happiness conceived as the public good, which also helps secure peace and prosperity within and across nations. Once again virtue is central to Genovesi's thinking:

Virtue teaches how to love the obedience to the laws, and how to practice justice scrupulously: it teaches how to be human, discrete, prudent, compassionate, how to appreciate and cultivate the arts, it teaches how to be ashamed of laziness, luxury, intemperance, lack of modesty, incontinence, stupidity, anger, vainglory, etc. You will never read that a Republic was peaceful and happy where science, virtue, and the arts did not flourish, the only nurture of our happiness: and if we consider things more closely and more philosophically, we will discover that things could not be otherwise.¹²

Since public trust consists in the bonds binding together persons and families to one another and to the polity, the pursuit of public happiness is not limited to the power of the sovereign and his ministers (as claimed by D'Onofrio [2015]). Rather, it is the responsibility of all citizens because the exercise of virtue is instilled through public education (Genovesi 2013, 344–45).

Moreover, Genovesi conceptualises public trust in terms of three dimensions – ethical, economic and political trust – and only the latter is the sole prerogative of the state. Ethical trust is the "reciprocal confidence that every citizens has in the probity and justice of the

¹⁰ Hume himself speaks of "the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world" (Hume 1948, XII, 86).

¹¹ Here Genovesi seems to echo Augustine's point that "without justice what else is the state but a band of robbers" (*De Civitate Dei*, Book IV, 4).

¹² "*la virtù insegna ad amare l'ubbidienza alle leggi, a praticare scrupolosamente la giustizia: all'essere umani, discreti, circospetti, compassionevoli, a riputare e coltivare l'arti, a recarsi a vergogna la poltroneria, il lusso, l'intemperanza, l'immodestia, l'incontinenza, la stolidezza, l'escandescenza, le rodomontate, ecc. Mai non si legge esservi stata tranquilla e felice Repubblica, senza che vi fiorisse molta scienza, molta virtù, e molte arti, le sole nutrici di questa nostra felicità: né a considerare le cose da vicino, e con occhio filosofi co si troverà poter essere altrimenti*" (Genovesi 2013, 415).

other, that is to say, those private and simple conventions and promises (*la reciproca confidenza, che l'un cittadino ha nella probità e giustizia dell'altro, onde sono le private e semplici convenzioni, e promesse*)” (Genovesi 2013, 342). Economic trust is “the security which springs from the certainty of funds on which to ground debts (*la sicurra nascente dalla certezza de' fondi, su cui fassi de' debiti*)” (Genovesi 2013, 342).

Finally, the trust that grows from “conventions and promises sustained by civil law, the laws of religion [...] customs, the wisdom and strength of the state, and it is called political [trust] (*convenzioni e promesse sostenute dalla legge civile, dalle leggi di religion [...] e consuetudine, e dalla sapienza e robustezza dell'imperio*)” (Genovesi 2013, 342). While all three forms are indispensable to production, trade and therefore common prosperity, Genovesi insists that ethical trust is the foundation for the other two: “ethical trust [...] as the basis for both [economic and political trust] (*l'éthica [...] base di ambedue*)” (Genovesi 2013, 343).

Crucially, for Genovesi, the nature of ethical trust is relational in the sense of being interpersonal. This is the source of reciprocity that is so central to his conception of civil economy as the art of government. For example, in an early draft of the chapter in the *Lezioni* on public trust, Genovesi writes about the “reciprocal love of families and peoples composing a state” (Genovesi 1977, 499). Reciprocal bonds and reciprocal needs are a recurrent theme in his writings, especially the *Lezioni* but also the *Diceosina*. By contrast with the work of Luigino Bruni, my argument is that reciprocity is not predominantly Aristotelian but also has roots in the work of Plato, Christian Neo-Platonists and many of the modern thinkers cited by Genovesi, including the Cambridge Platonists – above all Shaftesbury, as well as Vico and Doria (Villari 1959; Bianchini 1982, 1988, 1994; Pabst 2011; Porta 2016). Based on the distinction between ‘*forza concentriva*’ (concentrating force driven by self-love) and ‘*forza diffusiva*’ (dispersing force driven by love for others), Genovesi’s account of ethics and economics is bound together by the idea of relational interdependence – reciprocal needs (*bisogni reciproci*) with the mutual obligation to assist (*reciproca obbligazione di soccorrere*; Genovesi 2013, 22).

Together with the proportionality requirement, this emphasis on reciprocity underpins Genovesi’s conception of just or virtuous commerce, by which is meant a balance between a measure of protection and support for domestic production, on the one hand, and the promotion of international trade, on the other hand. Indeed, Genovesi applied the principle of reciprocity to the international context, which distinguishes his position from that of Montesquieu’s on the question of the spirit of commerce (Genovesi 1777, 195). On the one hand it tends, in the mode of protectionism, to foment rivalry, conflict and war. On the other hand, a more developed commerce – by inter-entangling nations and revealing that the poverty of one is to the detriment of the wealth of another – tends to diminish the actual occasions of clashes between nations and empires: one of the fruits of commerce “is to bring trading nations to peace [...] war and commerce are opposed like motion and rest (*è di portare le nazioni trafficanti alla pace [...] la guerra e il commercio sono così opposti come il moto e la quiete*)” (Genovesi 2013, 213).

Genovesi’s civil economy seeks to blend efficiency with justice in such a way as to avoid an unjust or inefficient market that ends up eroding the very basis upon which it tries to generate common prosperity. This is the core of his critique of trade imbalances in eighteenth-century Europe when economic decline went hand in hand with moral decay (Robertson 2005; Reinert 2011). The contrast between the Spanish and the Neapolitan ‘disease’, on the one hand, and English vigour, on the other hand, illustrates his point well. The Spanish disease consisted in the influx of foreign silver and gold from colonial conquests, which contributed

significantly to cultural decadence. Meanwhile, the Neapolitan disease was linked to asymmetrical patterns of trade and subjugation to foreign masters, exporting its raw materials in exchange for imported goods, which failed to build up more domestic capacities for internationally competitive manufacturing and industry (Pabst and Scazzieri, forthcoming).

Genovesi warned that Naples and other raw material exporting nations would be forever “dependent on foreigners” and become “in certain ways tributaries”, in other words “instruments of their wealth and power” (quoted in Reinert 2011, 24–25). By contrast, English vigour was largely the result of banning exports of raw wool and promoting the production of manufactured goods that could be traded for natural resources or other commodities. Up to a point, England’s approach to production and trade – based on a mix of trade protection and military power (Reinert 2011) – was less reliant on pure self-interest and a competitive struggle with others and more consistent with the principle of reciprocity, fusing reciprocal needs with the mutual obligation to assist (Genovesi 2013, 22).

Here one can go further and suggest that Genovesi’s understanding of civil economy is precisely not so much the science of reforming institutions and generating wealth but rather the art of good government – the pursuit of mutual flourishing among the nations in a historical context characterised by growing commercial competition. This idea of virtuous commerce underpins Genovesi’s conception of the relationship between protection and free trade, as expressed by Thomas Mun in his *England’s Treasure by Forraign Trade* (Mun 1664), which appeared in Italian as an appendix to the translation of John Cary’s *Essay on the State of England* (Cary 1695) – edited by Genovesi himself:

And even though one wants commerce between all nations to be free, nonetheless I think that this liberty can and should be restrained by certain limits so that in helping others, it would not hurt ourselves, as all countries should accommodate it to its own interests, without others having the right to complain: because everyone is master of his house [which is a right that] the liberty of commerce cannot dispute. (Mun 1757 [1664]: 289)

Genovesi advocated a selective use of tariffs for cities and countries in order to be able to import raw material and export manufactured goods. In this manner, mutual trade can genuinely serve reciprocal needs (*trafficano assieme per reciproci bisogni*, in Genovesi 2013, 250). In the late eighteenth-century debate about the relationship between virtue and commercial society, he sought to chart a middle position between morality and commerce by acknowledging the ‘natural’ dimension of division of labour and trade, on the one hand, and the ‘cultural’ dimension of interpersonal ties and the practice of virtue, on the other hand. For Genovesi, the commerce of a well-ordered polity has to meet the requirement of balance consistent with prosperity within and across nations in a specific historical and institutional context. In short, Genovesi’s civil economy as the art of government extends to the promotion of virtuous commerce.

5. Concluding reflections

In this paper, I have argued that Antonio Genovesi’s civil economy is not an alternative theory of economics but rather a theory of government. Civil economy is a strand of what he calls “the political science of the economy and commerce” that is concerned with “the rules to make one’s nation populous, rich, powerful, wise, polite”. For Genovesi, civil economy is governed by virtue that acts as an ordering device to direct human instincts and intentions towards “common prosperity” and the “public good”. Developing notions of natural law and

“civil life” inherited from Vico and Doria, Genovesi’s conception of government focuses on the pursuit of “public happiness”, which is grounded in Plato’s idea of the transcendent good that ordains persons and groups towards mutual flourishing – individual fulfilment and shared well-being.

Central to my reading of Genovesi’s political and economic thought is the argument that society is composed of “communal pacts” or “political bodies” that reflect the relational nature of humankind and the quest for the “public good”. Virtue is key because it mediates between the passions and reason, fusing self-love with love of others. As “a consequence of the nature of the world and of man”, virtue is not an invention of the human mind but a reality and as such it combines what Genovesi calls “interest” and the “sympathetic principle”, which is a condition for achieving “common prosperity”. Crucially, the practice of virtue depends on “public trust”, which is not the sole prerogative of the sovereign state and its representatives but rests on the interpersonal ties of families and civil bodies, as well as public education. The latter – a question on which Genovesi repeatedly references Plato – is concerned with forming character and instilling virtue.

Finally, I have tried to show that Genovesi’s conception of civil economy is based upon the proportionality principle – the condition of equilibrium between different activities, which underpins his account of the division of labour and the balance between production and trade. Nations can only attain shared prosperity if they engage in virtuous commerce that balances what he calls “reciprocal needs” with the “reciprocal obligation to assist”. In this manner, Genovesi sought to chart an alternative to protectionism and free trade in a way that secures as far as possible peace and prosperity between nations.

There are a number of avenues for future research that follow from these arguments. First of all, did Genovesi contrast the idea of “civil life”, which he seemed to inherit from Vico and Doria, with the notion of “commercial society” in the writings of Locke, Cary and Smith? Linked to this is the question of the extent to which Genovesi modified the social contract tradition and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, already revised by Hume, or whether he tended follow the civic humanism of Renaissance figures and the ‘alternative modernity’ of movements such as the Cambridge Platonists and later Shaftesbury.

Secondly and connected with the first set of question is the nature of the synthesis by Genovesi of ancient, medieval and modern ideas, in particular more Platonist or more Aristotelian concepts, as well as Cicero and later Aquinas, Descartes, Newton and others. This matters for the meaning of civil economy as it combines notions of the common good with theories of balance and equilibrium that were key in the emergence of different traditions of political economy (Faccarello 1986; Perrot 1992; Latouche 2005). Exploring Genovesi’s intellectual debt and the novelty of his synthesis is important for a better appreciation of the legacy of the civil economy idea, the Neapolitan school and the wider Neapolitan Enlightenment.

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