

Chronicling Political Economy: Medieval and Renaissance Italian Historiography and the Formation of Economic Knowledge

David Hume remarked in 1777: ‘Trade was never esteemed as an affair of state till the last century... Even the Italians have kept a profound silence with regard to it’. Hume’s remark encapsulates in many ways a marked tendency in the intellectual history of political economy to concentrate on developments from the late seventeenth century and the Atlantic ‘financial revolution’ as a moment from which politics could no longer be understood without reference to the economy. My research does not seek to prove an Italian or Renaissance primacy in the development of modern political economy, rather it strives to show the overlooked and significant contribution of chroniclers and historians in the development of representations of the economy. This line of enquiry moves attention away from theologians, jurists, and humanist moral philosophers that have been much better studied, to texts that, despite having frequently been mined by economic historians for their wealth of economic detail and statistics, have rarely been analysed by intellectual historians interested in the history of economic thought. The analysis of this literature as an object of intellectual production remains underdeveloped, both at the level of retrieving authorial intentions, as well as the more granular level of studying cultures of knowledge production that takes into consideration language, biography, prosopography, argumentative practices, such as the use of evidence, as well as the access to information (archival documentation, chancelleries, and offices).

From the fourteenth century in Italy history writing became increasingly interested in public finance, making it a narrative preoccupation for the representation of the political past and considered an imperative strand of politics itself. By the sixteenth century historians had inherited from chroniclers a preoccupation with the birth and nature of fiscal institutions, as well as their relationship to the wider economy. This textual representation of economic knowledge was a key contribution of Italian historiography to the birth and development of modern political economy.

This paper offers the outline for a comparative study of the representation, analysis, and legitimation of fiscality in Italian medieval and Renaissance history writing. It will be the basis for my second monograph provisionally titled *Fiscality and the Past*. The project seeks to map how public finance emerged as a topic of historiography and how knowledge of fiscality began to be systematized from the fourteenth century. The project will reveal how history writers, especially in city-republics, established public finance as an object of enquiry and began to analyze the nature of taxation, debt, and the wider economy. It aims to uncover how the pragmatic knowledge of writers who held financial office and were citizen-creditors shaped the description and classification of new fiscal institutions and phenomena. Furthermore, it will demonstrate the impact of urban chronicles, ‘family books,’ and their compositional practices on new approaches to writing history from the early Renaissance to the Enlightenment. The book will research the uses made of historical knowledge and approaches in economic policy, and as tools for institutional legitimation. A selection of the authors I will analyze – figures who brought direct administrative knowledge of taxation into historical narration – include: the Villani brothers (sec. XIV), Galeazzo Gatari (1344–1405), Baldassare Bonaiuti (1336–1385), Rafaino Caresini (sec. XVI), Giovanni Sercambi (1348–1424), Giorgio Stella (d. 1420), Matteo Palmieri (1406–75), Giorgio (1396–1458) and Pietro Dolfino (1444–1525), Marin Sanudo (1466–1536), Girolamo Priuli (1476–1547), and Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540).