From Luxury to Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Europe: The Importance of Italian Thought in History and Historiography

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Summary

The aim of this article is to shed light on the eighteenth-century Italian reflection on luxury and consumption in a comparative perspective, clarifying, on the one hand, the complex significance that it assumed and, on the other, the specificity of the Italian context, marked by the immense political value of the debate on the subject. In particular this objective will be pursued through the analysis of specific cases among the many offered by the Italian context and through different research strands. These are: the debate on the evaluation of luxury; the transition from the notion of luxury to that of consumption; and the discussion on luxury and consumption in the revolutionary context. This article intends to outline the particular contribution made by Italian thought, which conveyed a multifaceted discourse of social reform, critique and understanding built on more even foundations, and at the same time to clarify what contribution can be made to current historiography by the study of this theme within eighteenth-century Italy.

Keywords: Luxury; Consumption; Eighteenth Century; Italy; Revolutionary context.

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1. Introduction: The Consumer Revolution between Material Culture
   and Intellectual Implications

This article has two objectives. Firstly, it aims to discuss, partly from a methodo-
logical perspective, the results of recent, especially English, historiography dealing
with the intellectual implications of consumption in the eighteenth century. Secondly,
it intends to highlight the particular contribution made by Italian thought, with its
many points of political significance, which conveyed an articulate and complex
discourse of social reform, critique and understanding built on more even
foundations. It will thereby explain what contribution can be made to current
historiography by the study of this theme within eighteenth-century Italy. These
objectives will be pursued here through the analysis of specific cases among the many offered by Italy itself and also by the fragmentation of the peninsula’s political situation. The existence of different *Italianie*, from both the political-institutional and socio-economic points of view, and also within the setting of a wide circulation of ideas and in the presence of a common culture, makes the case of Italy more difficult to investigate than that of other European countries. However, precisely this uniqueness helps to determine the multifarious importance, both political and economic, that the Italian reflection on consumption assumed, and thus it helps also to explain the interest in the study of the Italian context. In the main, this investigation will travel three paths: the discussion of the revaluation of luxury that took place in Europe from around the 1740s, and its reception in Italy; the transition from the economic and political valuation of the concept of luxury to that of consumption that occurred during the 1760s and 1770s; and the reflection on luxury and consumption that was a feature of the revolutionary period.1

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, consumption has become a core theme of historiographical debate, set within a more complex general reflection on the culture of consumption.2 Although in recent years studies of consumption in the early modern era have expanded significantly, the experience of Italy has received scant attention.3 The only area that has been explored in detail is that of cultural consumption, especially in relation to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, moments in which an older, well-established urban tradition and the central position of Italy in the international economy had created the conditions for a premature birth of the culture of consumption.4 Even so, there has been little research on consumption in eighteenth-century Italy. Studies on the Italian economy during this period drew a picture that has long discouraged specific investigations into the subject: although marked by significant changes and by trends that could give rise to innovation in the system of production, the economic system of eighteenth-century Italy was never oriented towards an agrarian revolution, let alone an industrial one, and only towards the middle of the nineteenth century did a society adhering to consumerism come into being.5 Historiography, particularly British historiography, nevertheless shows how changes in consumption should be sought not so much in the increase of the value of purchased goods, but rather in a propensity to consume, or rather in the desire to

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1 The study of these specific instances is part of a book currently being written on the political implications of economic theories on luxury and consumption in Italy during the second half of the eighteenth century and during the three years of revolution (1796–1799).
2 It should be noted that the concept of a ‘consumer revolution’, which in fact has been used by Italian and French historians with much greater caution than by the English and the Americans, has been the subject of open criticism; see Gregory Clark, ‘The Consumer Revolution: Turning Point in Human History, or Statistical Artifact?’, 4 July 2010, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1653155 [accessed 09 April 2013]. While it is certainly useful to question the actual scope of the changes in material conditions that took place in the eighteenth century, studies on the subject have manifestly demonstrated that significant changes occurred during the course of the century and were perceived by the people of the time, legitimising the importance of consumption as a key theme for historical research.
acquire a greater number and greater variety of economical products.\textsuperscript{6} On the other hand, it must be noted how the few works that have so far addressed, albeit in ways limited to specific geographical locations, the issue of the transformation of consumption in Italy in the eighteenth century have shed light on the actual realisation of an expansion of consumption that involved, in varying degrees, all social orders.\textsuperscript{7}

The question of whether eighteenth-century Italy underwent major changes in consumption patterns, comparable to those experienced by French and British society, is still open. The task facing economic and social history is therefore that of clarifying to what extent a significant change in consumption also took place in Italy. This article will focus on a survey of intellectual reflection, which provides an original yet essential perspective from which to examine the complex issue of consumption and to clarify the importance it assumed in eighteenth-century Italy. In fact, it is possible to trace in Italy, especially from the second half of the century, a clear perception—not so much by supporters of material transformation as by its critics—of a substantial change in consumption manifest in the circulation of new goods, mostly imported, as well as in an unprecedented inclination towards consumerism that affected all levels of society. Even more crucial is the complex thinking about consumption, both economic and political, by Italian authors, in particular among those who added depth to the economic analysis of the second half of the eighteenth century, especially the three years of revolution, making it an issue central to the debate of that time.

The debate on consumption, understood as widespread growth in prosperity (it was in fact in this sense that the term was used during the eighteenth century by those who reflected on the material changes in society) is a key theme of the reconstruction of debates in the politics of reform, which were to have radical implications. An approach to intellectual history, open to interdisciplinary stimuli and alert to the linguistic and conceptual dimensions, allows a full inquiry into this reflection, clarifying the many meanings that it assumed. Such a methodology, in which comparative research has a vital part—fundamental, though as yet still largely absent from current historiography on the subject—at the same time makes it possible to underscore the specificity of Italian circumstances, which were marked by a strong, multi-faceted political evaluation of the economic analysis of luxury.

However, this specificity prompts us to pursue the reflection on consumption on two fronts, that of an economic analysis and that of a political one, thus showing how the reconstruction of economic thought is a rewarding way of conducting research into the political culture and social projects of the Italian authors in the complex passage from the Old Regime to the revolutionary period while, at the same time, emphasising the strong intrinsic interdisciplinarity of the subject.

2. The Debate on the Evaluation of Luxury and its Political Implications

The material changes that recurred, with varying intensity, in eighteenth-century Europe were accompanied by a long, careful intellectual consideration that today occupies the centre of historical research. An articulated reflection on consumption,


\textsuperscript{7} Paolo Malanima, Il lusso dei contadini. Consumi e industrie nelle campagne toscane del Sei e Settecento (Bologna, 1990); Alida Clemente, Il lusso cattivo: Dinamiche del consumo nella Napoli del Settecento (Rome, 2011).
its benefits for national prosperity or its damage to the economy, morality and social stability, continued throughout the eighteenth century, revealing how the material transformations that were impacting on society were perceived. The value of this reflection was not confined to identifying how the modality of consumption altered. Indeed, it also enabled an inquiry into the social ideals and economic models underlying the new perception and representation of consumption and, simultaneously, to understand the ideological and political uses that were made of what flowed from it. The debate on consumption that took place in Europe during the eighteenth century in fact served a fundamental cultural and political purpose, becoming a language for defining social identities, for criticising the traditional social structure and for implementing political action.

The first place to be investigated from this perspective was Britain. On the one hand, historiography has highlighted the attention given in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England to a new positive conception of consumption and the emergence of a reflection on the beneficial effect that increased domestic demand had on wealth creation. On the other, it has shed light on the implications, some radical, for politics and society conveyed by this new economic reflection. The discourse on the evaluation of consumption even managed to call into question the traditional socio-economic model based on the discipline of subordinate social orders. Furthermore, studies are now revealing how the development of new consumption patterns was a major topic of discussion in the debate on luxury, being considered the fulcrum around which the reflection of consumption in the eighteenth century revolved. For this reason, the concept of luxury is no longer treated as a question intrinsic to the history of political ideas or as a literary theme, but as a concrete discussion on the significance of goods and their social function. Therefore this is not merely the reconstruction of a debate, which has in any case already been well investigated, rather, the debate on luxury is accepted as crucial to reassembling the political and cultural implications of the proliferation of new consumer goods and to analysing the perception that the people of the time had of them.

Such studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, insofar as they have contributed significantly to making a decisive break in the way in which luxury and the transformation of consumption are studied, have not yet exhausted the complexity of the issue. The discussion on luxury had an overriding focus on the socio-economic changes that took place in England in the eighteenth century. Thus only a marginal interest in the political dimension of this reflection has emerged, being interpreted primarily as an intellectual response to the complete assertion of a commercial society and the rise of the middle social orders.

The debate on a positive evaluation of luxury that permeated Europe and the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, characterised by profound economic and social changes and the maturation of new political interests, meant something more than the emergence of a

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discussion on commercial economy and middle-class consumerism. It had in fact fundamental political and ideological ramifications, as John Shovlin demonstrated in *The Political Economy of Virtue*, in which he reconstructed the diversified political significance that the critique of luxury held in eighteenth-century France.12

From this standpoint, Italy’s own consideration of luxury, which took the form of a real political language of reform and criticism of traditional society, is particularly important.13 It acquired its full expression from the early 1750s onwards, somewhat later than France and Britain, where the debate got underway in the middle of the century, quickly becoming, with the prompting of physiocracy, one on the relationship between luxury consumption and accumulation. The discussion initially developed in the Kingdom of Naples—an emblematic example of that movement of men and ideas which marked the fragmented eighteenth-century Italy—and in particular the group of *novatores*, who had been inspired by Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce* and gathered around Celestino Galiani and Bartolomeo Intieri, a Tuscan mathematician who had moved to Naples, gave it a distinctive form.

However, in contrast to what happened in France and Britain, the Italian debate on luxury was only partly stimulated by an awareness of a transformation in consumption. In effect, Italy’s particular circumstances, characterised by the increasing failure of its manufacturing sector to compete with Northern European countries in the production of less expensive goods that satisfied consumers’ changing tastes and to penetrate the colonial trade market, were less marked by a change in material reality than was the rest of Europe. The reasons for the economic reflection on luxury becoming one of the central questions of the second half of the eighteenth century should therefore be sought in the attempt by Italian authors to use the debate to expound a project of political, economic and social reform. In the reality of the reformist policies of the different Italian states—characterised by close collaboration between power and intellectuals bent on reforming society—the economic discourse was in fact one of the main languages available for change and a social criticism of the Old Regime.14


13 While the Italian reflection on luxury in the eighteenth century has long been obscured by the historiography, in recent years there appears to have been more attention paid to this theme. The two most relevant contributions to highlight are Till Wahnbaeck, *Luxury and Public Happiness: Political Economy in the Italian Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2004); *Modelli d’oltre confine. Prospettive economiche e sociali negli antichi Stati italiani*, edited by Antonella Alimento (Rome, 2009). However, it should be pointed out how these works do not place the question in the context of the new perspectives offered by the historiography dealing with the consumer revolutions and instead essentially focus on the study of the debate on luxury in the traditional viewpoint of the move from criticism to a positive judgement.

In this respect, a case in point is that of Milan, where the reflection on luxury played a large part when calls were made for a more equitable redistribution of wealth and when political attacks were made on the traditional nobility. This particular case also makes it possible to see in the clearest possible way the link between economic analysis and political thought that characterised the debate on luxury and, at the same time, to underline how the analysis of economic theory provided fertile ground for the cultivation of plans for social reform and the political culture of the Italian authors.

In Lombardy, political and economic debates centred on luxury during the 1760s and 1770s, being fuelled by stimuli coming from the European debate. Moral recriminations were rejected as luxury came to be recognised as an essential element of the progress of civilisation and as a factor in economic development. Hume, Melon, Montesquieu and in particular Forbonnais were referred to and often directly cited by Lombard authors. The debate was given a platform by the Milanese periodical the Caffè, which, in 1764, beginning with ‘Elementi del commercio’ and ‘Considerazioni sul lusso’ by Pietro Verri, and ‘Del lusso delle manifatture d’oro e d’argento’ by Carlo Sebastiano Franci, three articles that dealt directly with the issues, robustly opposed any restriction on luxury, which was considered an effective stimulus to trade and public prosperity.15

Also in the framework of this continuity with the European debate, a particular aspect of Lombard and, more generally, Italian thought, can be detected in the strong political importance accorded to the discourse on luxury as a language for the social transformation of the Old Regime. The Lombard reformist intellectuals in fact used the reflection on luxury principally as a potent language for denouncing the amassing of wealth and as an instrument for its redistribution. From this perspective, luxury was defined by Verri in his ‘Considerazioni sul lusso’ as ‘a political good’, since ‘breaking up the rich patrimonies […] contributed to dividing them’.16 And in Dei delitti e delle pene, also published in 1764, Cesare Beccaria found in luxury ‘a necessary remedy to inequality, which grows with the progress of a nation, without which wealth would accumulate in one hand’.17

The argument on the circulation of wealth taken, at least in part, from Melon’s Essay politique sur le commerce was later re-examined by Plumard de Dangeul in his Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne.18 However, unlike the French debate, in Verri and in Beccaria the ideas touched directly on the problem of inequality between individuals and merged in that of property. It was in fact during the 1770s and 1780s that the discussion on

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18 Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul, Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne (Amsterdam, 1754), 53.
primogeniture and fideicommissum, which had reached its peak at the time of Muratori and Pompeo Neri, soon turned into new thinking on private property and the need to demolish the barriers to economic mobility that still stood in Lombardy.19

Within the compass of this positive consideration of luxury, a discussion that was at once more specific and distinctive took place from the mid-1760s to the early 1770s. In it, emphasis was placed on negative and unproductive luxury, which was linked to ostentation and the legitimisation of the traditional nobility's social pre-eminence, as opposed to a useful and beneficial luxury, which was a manifestation of personal well-being and based on market goods. The discussion received extensive coverage in Caffè, from the article ‘Dell’Ozio’ by Alessandro Verri and the ‘Osservazioni su i fedecommessi’ by Alfonso Longo to Verri’s ‘Elementi del commercio’.20 It was absorbed into the project of transformation and modernisation of the traditional aristocracy which animated the Accademia dei Pugni group and was associated with the reform of nobility much desired by the Habsburg authorities. This aimed to make the monarch the only legitimate source of nobilisation and resulted, in 1769, in the establishment of the Court of Arms.21

The distinction between positive and negative luxury served the purposes of a determined political strategy, based on an economic rationale, to revoke the legitimate status of traditional hereditary aristocracy.22 In this reflection on the nobility, a general rejection of the patrician ideology of honour and the cultural and behavioural models of past generations converged with a concrete struggle against juridical institutions, such as primogeniture and fideicommissum, aimed at securing and safeguarding noble property.23 The goal, which may be correlated to the new link between the capacity for economic initiative by individuals, especially landowners, and political and administrative accountability, put in place by the reform of communal and provincial orders that Pompeo Neri championed in 1755, was that of promoting a new elite, better educated and more oriented towards the general interest, to underpin both economic development and the assignment of civil and political functions.

The use of this critical political discourse against traditional nobility made through the contrast between positive and negative luxury emerged in its most articulate form in Verri’s ‘Elementi del commercio’. In the article, which bears traces of a late-mercantilist formulation and pays special attention to the balance of trade, luxury was perceived and presented, in line with ideas emanating from the European

debate—in particular from Montesquieu, Bielefeld, Melon, and Forbonnais, the authors specifically mentioned as models of reflection on the issue—as an element of civil development, as a factor of economic growth, and as a way of circulating wealth. In open criticism of those, including some in government circles, who considered the imposition of restrictive measures on luxury to be an effective means of reviving Lombard trade, Verri insisted that luxury was not only the ‘means, by which wealth held in a few hands returns to spread over the nation’, but was also ‘the most vigorous spur to industry’, since it gave ‘citizens the hope of enrichment’. This was a deep conviction that he would retain in his activities as a man of government. These were marked by his readiness to implement plans for gradual economic liberalisation that would open the way to the modernisation of the system when in 1764 he joined the Lombard administration after becoming a member of the Giunta, instituted in the same year to study in depth the trade balance problems of Austrian Lombardy.

Although ‘Elementi del commercio’ was distinguished by a strong social and economic appreciation of luxury, at the end Verri still differentiated between positive luxury, based on a desire for market goods, and the ‘truly pernicious luxury of a nation’, specifically ‘that which takes farm land, to devote it to hunting, parks and gardens’, associated with the characteristic idleness of traditional nobility. The comparison between these two types of luxury and the reference to a request for the enlightened legislator to intervene on this waste show clearly how Verri’s objective was to call for a reform of the nobility that would ultimately re-legitimatise it on the basis of economic usefulness.

Political considerations, psychological analysis and economic reasoning were closely intertwined in this critique of the nobility. Against the backdrop of politically significant economic debate, which marked the Italian eighteenth century, this rhetoric of attack against the nobility had its roots in the economic thought of Milan, which adhered to the utilitarian paradigm. The Milanese reformers reflected on eudemonia from a hedonistic perspective, strongly influenced by Condillac’s sensism: economic advancement was set in motion by needs, desires and aspirations to a better life. Indeed, in Meditazioni sulla felicità, published in 1763, Verri asserted that the ‘love of pleasure’ constituted ‘the only universal and always obeyed law by sentient beings’, and Beccaria in Elementi di economia pubblica identified the desire for comfort and luxury goods as the stimulus of man’s increasing ‘industry and labour’.

The emphasis was not on the sense of fulfilment of desires already achieved, but rather on that creative process that drove people to commit themselves to a definite effort in order to procure the goods they coveted. The aspiration to happiness and well-being was the basis of society’s economic development, made by dint of an active

26 Venturi, ‘Da Muratori a Beccaria’, in Settecento riformatore, I, 690 and following.
mechanism of longing for the realisation of desires based on creativity and work—and capable, therefore, of combining personal self-interest and public happiness. From this perspective, the damage caused by the inactive nobility, on account of the security of wealth guaranteed by conservative property institutions, as well as the traditional nobility’s disposition, was offset by the economic dynamism of a new class of owners. This dynamism, spurred on by the desire to achieve happiness, created jobs and increased domestic productivity, thus becoming the foundation of the strength of nations.

The subject of luxury enables the premises of an author’s argumentation to be made clear by highlighting on the one hand the common elements of the political and economic culture of the period and, on the other, the diversity that existed within it. In this regard the thoughts of Beccaria are symbolic. On the one hand, he developed a discourse of political critique against the traditional nobility built on an economic reflection similar to that formulated by Pietro Verri. On the other, his ideas were not only more radical than Verri’s, being nourished by a more pronounced social sensibility in part as a result of his reading of Rousseau, but were also based on an economic analysis (which was to emerge with the _Elementi di economia pubblica_) quite different from that of Verri. Beccaria in fact put at the base of Lombard economic expansion the low-cost production of agricultural goods to be achieved through investment in large estates, while a key aspect of Verri’s economic analysis, as we will see more clearly below, was the revival of competitiveness in domestic manufacturing, to be supported by an increase in domestic consumption of manufactured goods, albeit within the framework of the value attributed to agriculture.

The political criticism of nugatory noble groups—made by juxtaposing their idleness, guaranteed by the security of income, and activity, driven by the desire for new commodities—was first highlighted by Beccaria in _Dei delitti e delle pene_, where he likened the traditional nobility to those who contributed
to society not with labour, nor with wealth, which it acquires without ever losing […] and that being without that stimulus towards an active life, which it is necessary to nurture, or to increase the comfort of life, leave to the passions of opinions, which are none the weaker, all their energy.31

In this reflection Beccaria distinguished between the ‘luxury of ostentation’ and the ‘luxury of comfort’, including them in a broad, complex discussion of population and despotism.32 For Beccaria, who resumed Montesquieu’s considerations on the link between luxury and inequality and on the positive role played by luxury in larger states, the poorly developed countries and those with small populations were characterised by the ‘luxury of ostentation’, perceived as at once the cause and effect of despotism, which, in the manner of the past, indulged in ostentation and

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31 Beccaria, _Dei delitti e delle pene_, 78.
32 Beccaria, _Dei delitti e delle pene_, 78.
magnificence, and reproduced and reinforced social hierarchies. In contrast, in more populated countries, identified with modern monarchies, there developed a ‘luxury of comfort’, based on market goods capable of triggering the circulation and redistribution of wealth.

The distinction between ‘luxury of comfort’ and ‘luxury of ostentation’ was restated and elucidated by Beccaria in *Elementi di economia pubblica*, a profoundly analytical reflection that was the fruit of lectures delivered during his professorship in the Cattedra di Scienze Camerali from 1760 to 1771, the year in which the Lombard economist became part of the region’s administration as a member of the Consiglio di Economia. The luxury of ostentation was equated to services to the person, such as the employment of servants, while the luxury of comfort found expression in the ‘productive’ and ‘functional’ consumption of market goods. Real economic benefit was given only by the latter, since it relied on the production of goods ‘convenient to everyone’s use’, and indirectly had favourable effects on the population. This positive value attributed to the luxury of comfort should be understood in the context of the economic model that Beccaria proposed as the basis for Lombard development: the low-cost production of agricultural goods, made possible by greater productivity and the division of labour. In this picture the function of luxury was to absorb excess employment in the agricultural sector, thereby encouraging population growth and manufacturing enterprise, elements that both helped to strengthen agriculture. At the heart of Beccaria’s reasoning was the notion that agriculture and industry were intrinsically complementary. Consequent upon this was the conviction that the expansion of manufacturing, driven by the spread of the luxury of comfort, could help to sustain a population greater than that which the land alone could allow, as well as a concomitant increment in demand for agricultural produce.

The case of Milan thus makes it possible to understand the complex significance that the reflection on luxury assumed in eighteenth-century Italy. It also demonstrates how that reflection did not end in the valorisation of luxury as the exaltation of commercial society, but instead made luxury a core constituent of eighteenth-century reformist policies, part of a finely tuned political strategy to undermine the structures of the Old Regime by using a language derived from the economic discourse. Traditional hierarchies, founded on external appearance, were weakened not only by the wide availability of new luxury goods, accessible to the rising middle

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33 For Montesquieu, see Charles de Secondat de Montesquieu, ‘Du luxe’, in *De l’esprit des lois ou Du rapport que les lois doivent avoir avec la constitution de chaque gouvernement, les mœurs, le climat, la religion, le commerce [...]*, 2 vols (Geneva, 1748), I, book VII. In a letter sent on 26 January to André Morellet, Beccaria explicitly recognised Montesquieu as an author fundamental to the formation of his own ideas; see Cesare Beccaria, ‘Lettera del 26 gennaio 1766 a André Morellet’, in *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Beccaria*, IV, 219 and following.

34 Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, 105–06.


class that created its identity through the enjoyment of such assets, but also by a language that confirmed the value of luxury.

This perspective uncovers a difference with respect to French ideas, in spite of these being characterised by a political exploitation of the value of luxury as a language with which to attack financial wealth and to denounce the financiers and the French fiscal system and public finances. In fact, in the French context, the discourse on the value of luxury was aimed at maintaining the balance between social groups endangered by quick fortunes, and not at posing questions of the traditional hierarchies.39

3. The Transition from the Notion of Luxury to that of Consumption
Recent studies on the intellectual implications of consumption therefore have the merit of recognising the centrality of the notions of luxury and consumption in the reflection on material transformations. However, this historiography appears to be marked by a lack of attention to the definition of the two concepts, their evolution, and the different sense in which they were used in various social and economic settings. This limited interest in a real linguistic and conceptual dimension is exemplified by the dearth of comprehensive studies of eighteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Yet these books, and their attempts to define terms, are a precious resource for the tracing not only the conventional meanings of the two concepts, as they came to be defined during the eighteenth century, but also the conceptual changes they passed through.40

The reconstruction of the notions of luxury and consumption, their semantic shifts and the shades of meanings they were given in diverse linguistic and discursive contexts is of fundamental importance not merely because it allows a more exhaustive investigation into eighteenth-century ideas on the subject, but principally because it enables light to be shed on the progressive change from the notion of luxury to that of consumption, through a focus on the concepts of ‘convenience’ and ‘comfort’, which were gradually to replace the idea of luxury in the debate on the value of consumption. This shift from the appreciation of luxury, linked to the consumption of a few, to that of average nationwide consumption, was a major break in Italian thought, which initially matured, from the 1760s onwards, in economic analyses, before passing into political debate in the 1780s.

In the Italian political economy of the second half of the eighteenth century the emphasis on the dynamics of consumer desires was of crucial importance. Italian authors, from Ferdinando Galiani to Antonio Genovesi, Verri to Beccaria, and Isidoro Bianchi to Agostino Paradisi, took inspiration from the ideas of Mandeville and Melon, which they placed in a more mature model of economic analysis characterised by the strong ethical-social concern that distinguished the thinking of Italian economists. Thus the authors perceived that the fundamental factor that made the economy grow through the development of trade and production was the

39 Shovlin, Political Economy of Virtue.
continually evolving desires of individuals. However, their thoughts on the subject were largely marked, at least in a first phase, by the lack of a clear conceptual distinction, in the mechanisms of economic growth, between luxury and widespread generalised consumption.

Pietro Verri was the first author to focus his attention fully on this distinction between the luxury of a few and the spread of domestic consumption, making moreover a lucid conceptualisation of the latter’s role in the economy. From ‘Elementi del commercio’ and ‘Considerazioni sul lusso’ he had assigned, as we have already seen, a central position to luxury as a factor in the increase of wealth. In a positive valorisation of luxury as a means of stimulating trade and manufacturing, and also as an instrument for the redistribution of wealth, he concentrated on one specific aspect: identifying in the increased profitability of the agricultural sector the first and most positive consequence of the spread of luxury. In fact, he pointed out that it was mainly luxury that spurred landowners to invest in their land, in the knowledge that by doing so they boosted productivity and so produced a surplus that could be spent on new market goods. This theoretical reflection on the economic usefulness of luxury, found in the earliest works of the Lombard author, appeared to be paralleled by the reformist activities he pursued as a member of the aforementioned Giunta, formed to review the articles of the Ferma and to amend tariffs on exchange duties. On 9 March 1764 he presented a report in which he proposed to fix an average eight-per-cent levy on the value of all commodities. The decision to attach a very moderate share on luxury goods to avoid burdening them more than others reflects his thoughts on the value of luxury as a driving force for the growth of national wealth.

With Meditazioni sulla economia politica, published in 1771, he made a break in the thinking on luxury, which should be understood in the more general change in economic theory that marks this work, where he identified the measure of wealth as the ratio of ‘annual consumption’ to ‘annual reproduction’, and attributed a key role to manufacturing as a driver of economic growth. In Meditazioni the reflection on luxury was no longer as pre-eminent as it had been in previous writings, giving way to a focus on the part played in the economy by average consumption spread among the population, distinct from and opposed to the spending of the elite. This was a maturation of economic thought—in the context of an economic science that was progressively defining the concept of consumption and would provide it with a complete conceptualisation with Jean-Baptiste Say—which made the transition from a reflection on luxury as a factor of economic development to an analysis of the role of consumption in a well-defined working model of the economic system.

The central position given to domestic consumption as an outlet of national production had already been clearly recognised by Forbonnais in Elémens du

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commerce, a book which was not only described by Verri as ‘the best work so far in this genre’, but which also formed, together with Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce*, the foundation on which the Lombard economist built his discourse on the value of luxury.

In *Meditazioni*, however, Verri presented a more mature formulation of the positive valorisation of consumption compared to the *Eléments*—in which can be traced a less obvious comparison with physiocracy, mediated by the reading of works by the Quesnay group that recognised the positive role of consumption—focusing on a clear differentiation between consumption and luxury, and detailing their specific roles in the mechanism of wealth production, elements that were missing in the treatment by Forbonnais. If the ‘vanity of landowners’, or the ‘luxury of consumption’, persuaded owners to invest in land in order to acquire more market goods, domestic consumption augmented ‘annual reproduction’ since it was an incentive to ‘create each year a new value that corresponds to total consumption’.

In *Meditazioni* a full appreciation of enhanced consumption as a factor in national prosperity—in the context of the role attributed, in terms of political thought, to widespread consumption as a means of redistributing wealth and creating a more egalitarian society—was articulated by accentuating the cause-and-effect link between the multiplication of needs and the expansion of agricultural and manufacturing production. Not only did needs guarantee the ‘civilisation’ and development of trade, but in the ‘cultured nations’ it was mainly the desire for ‘man-made needs’ that stimulated the growth of wealth, the goal of political economy. Thus in Verri’s political economy, the needs and desires of the people formed the bedrock of ‘annual reproduction’, encouraging creativity and giving a new impetus to supply, triggering a virtuous circle of economic growth:

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47 Answering a letter of December 1770 from his brother Alessandro, who asked for his news and a judgement on the works of the physiocrats, amongst which were included the *Physiocratie* and the *Épithéories du citoyen*, Pietro confirmed his knowledge of the works and declared that they ‘were very much on the side of precision’; see A. Verri to P. Verri, 5 December 1770, in *Carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro*, IV, 86–87.
48 Already in the entry ‘Grains’ of the 1757 *Encyclopédie*, del 1757, Quesnay underlined how ‘consumption carried out by the subjects is the source of income for the sovereign’; see François Quesnay, ‘Grains’, in *Œuvres économiques complètes et autres textes*, edited by Christine Théré. Léo Charles and Jean-Claude Perrot, 2 vols (Paris, 2005), I, 162. In 1767, Mercier de la Rivière defined consumption as ‘the measure of reproduction; because products which are not consumed degenerate into something superfluous and without use, without value’; see Pierre-Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière, *L’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques*, 2 vols (London, 1767), II, 250.
50 Verri, *Meditazioni sulla economia politica*, 69.
As soon as a nation begins to move away from a state of savagery, knowing new needs and comforts of life, then it will be forced to proportionally grow its industry, and to multiply the annual production of its products [. . .] and this is how, to the extent that the needs of a nation multiply, the annual product of land and national industry naturally tends to increase.  

This specific economic importance given to consumption fit snugly in the framework of the valorisation of desires. First, if, for Verri, in order to guarantee the increment of wealth and economic development, annual production had to exceed consumption, he was always cautious when addressing the question of a reduction in the number of consumers. A decrease in consumption would in fact involve a contraction of production. The optimal balance between producers and consumers could not therefore be reached through a compression of consumption, which would have to stay high, but only through increased production.

Nonetheless, Verri did not only show how a reduction in the number of consumers was negative and harmful but also identified those consumers as the actual driving force of ‘creative production’ on which growth in wealth was founded. Addressing the problem of consumption exceeding production, he found in fact that such an excess of demand was the very spur that production required, ‘because the work of the producer acquires an ever stronger stimulus when the market is secure, and all the more so if consumers increase’. In his economic theory therefore not only were production and consumption closely related, but demand itself and thus the increase of consumption, based on the expansion of desires, was recognised as a key factor of national wealth, insofar as it stimulated higher ‘annual reproduction’.

The economic theory elaborated by Verri, influenced by his insights into the socio-economic situation of Habsburg Milan in the 1770s, was partly filtered—at a time when ideas flowed from all corners of Italy—through the South, which was experiencing a slower economic development than that of Lombardy. The Kingdom of Naples, especially in the 1780s, was however experiencing a shift, on the one hand, in economic thinking, marked by new attention to agriculture fomented by the penetration of physiocratic ideas and the increasingly bitter criticism of feudal revenues and, on the other, changes in government activities. With the institution in 1782 of the Supremo Consiglio delle Finanze, in which Gaetano Filangieri took part, and which was one of the fullest realisations of practical collaboration between intellectuals and government, a series of key measures were adopted for the development of manufacturing and agriculture, resulting in the freedom of movement of annona goods within the kingdom and the abolition of internal customs, rights of way and tolls.

However, the activities of the Supreme Council of Finance were marked above all by a radical anti-feudal controversy, the demands of which were partially implemented with the privatisation in 1792 of municipal domains. This was a battle fought by the second generation of reformers, whose thinking had been formed by

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51 Verri, Meditazioni sulla economia politica, 12–13.
52 Verri, Meditazioni sulla economia politica, 89.
53 Verri, Meditazioni sulla economia politica, 90.
54 On the spread of physiocratic ideas amongst Neapolitan Enlightenment figures, see Lucio Villari, ‘Note sulla fisiocrazia e sugli economisti napoletani del ’700’, in Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, Saggi e ricerche sul Settecento (Naples, 1968), 224–51.
55 Anna M. Rao, Il regno di Napoli nel Settecento (Naples, 1983), 110 and following.
contact, on the one hand, with a backward provincial reality and, on the other, with Genovese and Enlightenment teaching. The anti-feudalism of those years was linked to concrete changes in the socio-economic fabric of the rural South, which the weight of the baronage, exercised through the powers of the judiciary, had made untenable. At the same time it was fed by the ambiguity of the anti-feudal policy initiated by Prime Minister Giuseppe Beccadelli, Marquis of Sambuca, which marked a reversal of the policy of his predecessor, Bernardo Tanucci, and also from the economic downturn ensuing from the famines of 1759 to 1764 which assailed the whole Mediterranean area, damaging production and trade in the kingdom.

In this context there came about, beginning with Verri’s economic analysis, a crucial turning point in the political debate, which materialised in the shift from the valorisation of luxury as a factor in the redistribution of wealth to the recognition of nationwide consumption as a means of achieving a fairer society. What emerged, however, was not so much the model of political economy proposed by Verri as the distinction he made between luxury and consumption, on the basis of which a new political and social assessment of consumption could be made.

This new reflection on luxury and widespread consumption was first articulated, albeit within the framework of an incomplete conceptual and terminological clarification, in the work of Filangieri, who was an avid reader of Verri’s Meditazioni. In La scienza della legislazione, the first volume of which was published in 1780, Filangieri set out a complex reflection on luxury, using as his main sources Georg Ludwig Schmidt d’Avenstein’s Principes de la législation universelle and the article ‘Lux’ in the Encyclopédie. While the influence of physiocratic opposition to sumptuary laws as a criticism of the restriction of individual freedom reached Filangieri through Schmidt d’Avenstein, the article written by Saint-Lambert furnished him with the definition of luxury as the ‘use which one makes of wealth and industry to obtain a pleasurable existence with the aid of the most sought-after means that can help augment the comforts of life and the pleasures of society’. This definition, together with the intellectual references of the Neapolitan economist, makes clear its positive judgement of luxury, which was the mature outcome of the rethinking of ideas coming from the European debate: it was a positive and progressive influence on society because it was linked to the idea of a good life and simultaneously to the productive use of wealth and labour. Luxury was in fact ‘the soul of industry and the distributor of riches […] a necessary source for the state’s affluence and the corollary of the nation’s well-being’.

It was the second book of La scienza della legislazione that presented the most detailed reflection on luxury. In particular, the issue was first addressed in a discussion of the contrasts between ancient and modern societies and their foundational systems. This was not a new topic, as Montesquieu had already applied himself to it and it had also been analysed in Hume’s Of Commerce, which
concentrated on the socio-economic mechanism of production and wealth redistribution. This, by profoundly altering the traditional structures of agrarian countries, such as the ancient states, directed resources towards the enlargement of the production base, thereby causing a subsequent correlated expansion of needs and consumers, and of luxury.61

Hume’s ideas were prevalent in *Science della legislazione*, where Filangieri, on the one hand, saw the market as an exceptional factor of growth and, on the other, argued that if poverty and frugality comprised the basis of virtue and happiness in ancient republics then in contemporary society, in which the development of the arts inspired new and more complex modes of behaviour and consumption, it was riches and luxury that ensured public prosperity and individual happiness:

Industry, trade, luxury and the arts, all these means that at other times helped to weaken states and perhaps made Tyre the prey of Alexander and Carthage that of Scipio, have now become the firmest support of the prosperity of the people. And in fact since the time of the foundation and overthrow of Empires [... ] riches no longer corrupt people, since they are no longer the fruit of conquest but the reward for hard work and a fully occupied life.62

This positive view of luxury is best understood, however, in Filangieri’s economic model, erected on the belief that labour was the fundamental factor of the growth of wealth. Thus in *La scienza della legislazione* he attacked the unproductiveness of aristocratic society, insisting that consumption was a major inducement to endeavour.63

As part of this more general reflection on the relationship between virtue and wealth, nourished by the European debate, the discourse on luxury served a specific purpose in the anti-feudal polemic that swept through southern society from the 1780s onwards. This controversy gave voice to the exigencies and the ascent of new social forces and thus was directly linked to real transformations of the socio-economic fabric of rural areas of the South,64 which, in *La scienza della legislazione*, found focus through the recovery of an egalitarian approach oriented towards an ideal of the ‘equitable distribution of money’.65

In fact, Filangieri, taking up an issue which, as we have seen, had already been carefully examined in the Milanese debate of the 1770s and 1780s, designated luxury the re-distributor of wealth. This recognition of luxury was closely bound to his views on property, specifically his utter denunciation of feudal property that had its roots in hereditary privileges, and to his call for a broadening of land ownership, which he held would never be achieved through the pipe dream of an agrarian law, but only through the use of indirect means, such as the abolition of the rights of primogeniture and fideicommissum, and the abolition of the right of devolution.66

but profound switch in the nature, distribution, and management of property, whether feudal or state-owned, and, as a member of the Supreme Council of Finance, he argued again for this in his *Parere* on the draft reform that the Tavoliere delle Puglia presented to the sovereign on 7 March 1788.67

Developing this positive assessment of luxury as a political weapon with which to combat feudal nobility, Filangieri shed light on a new valorisation of the average consumption—of the people and opposed to luxury—in which Verri’s influence was discernible in the distinction made in the economic analysis of luxury and consumption. In fact, Filangieri differentiated between luxury as a means of wealth redistribution and another luxury defined as ‘positive’, no longer identified with the spending, however productive, of a rich elite, but with the average level, symbolic of a society founded on well-being and prosperity. In this way there took shape a more mature understanding of consumption, one which provided a privileged means through which to achieve greater equality among all social orders:

> It is therefore not possible to arrive at an exact and precise equality of wealth in the families of a state; but not for this is it impossible that riches be well distributed. By good distribution or apportioning of wealth I mean an equitable spreading of money, which, by preventing its concentration in just a few hands, results in shared comfort, the necessary means for the happiness of men.68

If the notion of equality of happiness based on the ability to perform a job that allowed one to benefit from goods of comfort and pleasure was borrowed from Helvétius, as a summary of a passage from *De l’homme* included in *La scienza della legislazione* suggests, in Filangieri’s ideas it is possible to trace something more of his adherence to a social ideal based on greater well-being and easier accessibility to wealth, as set out by the French philosopher.69 The potential right to enjoy the same assets and pleasures was in fact adopted by Filangieri as fertile ground in which to realise an effective equality between individuals, understood as equality of opportunity.70 For him the ‘equality of happiness for all classes’, which had to be ‘the object of politics and laws’, was rooted in the ability to enjoy a ‘certain common comfort’, or rather of having an occupation that opened the way to commodities that made life comfortable and pleasant.71 He thus described a third way that ran between those who accepted with realism inequalities among men in all fields and even posed this inequality as the guarantee for economic development, and those who postulated absolute equality among men, outlining a more levelled society founded on individual well-being derived from work. In this reflection there seemed to be traces of the *Way to Wealth* by Benjamin Franklin, with whom Filangieri regularly corresponded in the 1780s, in which the exaltation of a middle level of conditions, resulting from work and opposed to unproductive privilege, equated to a demand for


greater equality. At the same time Franklin, like Filangieri, considered consumer goods and better living conditions to be instrumental in levelling society, a process which had democratic connotations. 72

In La scienza della legislazione Filangieri therefore elaborated an egalitarian argument built on a reflection on consumption which, on the one hand, fed largely on European and North American ideas, was, on the other, a clear restatement—at a time when innovative thinking swirled around Italy—of insights that came from the stimulating the Lombard debate of the 1760s and 1770s on luxury as a factor in the redistribution of wealth.

4. Luxury and Consumption in the Revolutionary Context

The reflection on luxury and consumption assumed a central position and a new significance with the eruption of the revolutions that shook the Atlantic world in the final decades of the eighteenth century. If the French Revolution is the most studied in this context, it should be noted that this historiographic interest has matured only in recent years. Indeed, it has long been maintained that the French revolutionary period could not be profitably examined through the lens of the consumer revolution. However, recent studies have demonstrated that, to the contrary, those years constitute an extremely fertile area of research for at least two reasons, because in this phase the legislative assemblies were actively seeking to distinguish between necessary goods and luxury goods. On the one hand, the detailed tabulations compiled by the Committee of Subsistence aimed to set the general maximum of many consumer products, and, on the other, there was opposition to indirect taxes. These were the two main ways through which to give concrete meaning to the two ideas after the long theoretical reflection of the previous decades. Furthermore, this attempt to reflect on the nature of goods highlighted how, at the time of a burgeoning diffusion of new consumer goods, it was still difficult to decide what should be defined as a necessity and what as a luxury. 73

From another standpoint it has been observed how the transition from the Jacobin and Robespierrist period to the Directory brought about an important change in the reflection on luxury. While an ethical and political critique of luxury was a dominant feature of Jacobin ideology, during the period of the Directory the idea of luxury was progressively substituted—partly thanks to the contribution of the Idéologues, who left a deep impression on the philosophical and economic debate on luxury and consumption—by that of pleasure. Thus it was possible to pose individual wishes and desires at the base of social organisation and to interpret consumption through the parameters of national economic benefit. 74 Goods, and their production and sales, thus became the signs of a developing economy in the context of a more

general adherence to a model of modern republicanism, compatible with trade and social progress.\(^{75}\) Historians are therefore beginning to point out the importance of investigating the debate on luxury and consumption during the revolutionary era, above all in relation to France, for the way in which it provides evidence of changes in the thinking of society and in the economic analyses of those tumultuous years. However, the investigation in that direction must be intensified. First of all, it is essential to follow the reflection while holding together the Old Regime and the revolutionary phase. This is of course a task of immense complexity which has often led scholars to abandon a combined study and to concentrate instead on just one of the two periods. The theme of consumption is nevertheless a particularly profitable path by which to explore the changes and continuity of the economic and political culture in the passage from the reformist period to that of the revolutions. Furthermore, it is important to deepen the analysis of the reflection on luxury and consumption that was made in the Jacobin-Robespierre years and during the Directory, for the purpose of clarifying the many political implications that it conveyed.

Also in this context, to understand the complex value that the discussion on consumption acquired in the revolutionary period it is useful to consider the specifics of the Italian context, where ideas were strongly influenced by those of France. The democratic Triennium (1796 to 1799) was in fact marked by a strong valorisation of consumption, as much economic as political. Within the latter sphere, consumption was given a multi-faceted meaning and placed at the heart of the reflection on equality between individuals, founded on the egalitarianism of opportunity. If during those three years the discussion on equality, articulated mainly by distinguishing between formal equality and substantive equality, was a crucial issue, the adherence to an idea of equality based on the equal allocation of goods represented an entirely minority position. In the literature addressed directly to the people with the aim of educating them in the new republican principles, an insistence on the unrealisable nature of an absolute egalitarian distribution of wealth responded to the decision not to raise false expectations. Thus there were few who proposed egalitarian solutions based on the redistribution of land.\(^{76}\) What largely prevailed instead was an attempt to secure a consensus on the notion of equality before the law, in line with the French Constitution of Year III, in an effort to safeguard the results gained through the process of radically transforming the society of the Old Regime. In consequence things moved from the French democratisation which survived the Terror to a rejection of those radical notions that risked compromising the socio-economic innovations that various republican realities were sanctioning: formal equality, the elimination of titles, and the abolition of all residual feudalism.


All the same, it is possible to bring to light the effort, which characterised the men who joined the revolutionary cause and who collaborated, albeit at different levels and from different positions, with the new political authorities, to seek a new scheme related to consumption by which to establish an equality that went beyond equality before the law. This was found in the equality of opportunities, guaranteed by the feasibility of securing new pleasures, ease and comfort. It was a full political valorisation of consumption as an agency through which greater equality among citizens could be realised, while not denying the usefulness of a moderate economic inequality as a determinant of economic development.

This discourse on the consumption/equality nexus, which was central to the political debate taking place in different republics—from Rome to Naples, from the Liguria to the city of Venice—was most plainly articulated in the Cisalpine Republic, where it was grounded, especially in the reflection of authors such as Giuseppe Compagnoni, Matteo Galdi and Melchiorre Gioia, in a mature economic analysis of the role of desires, and hence the augmentation of consumption, as a constituent of the growth of wealth. At the same time, it was in the context of the discussions of the Cisalpine legislative assemblies that the conception of a balance between producers and consumers, ensured by full economic freedom, was first mooted in an incisive form.\(^77\) For the brief duration of the republican experience and the serious political and economic difficulties with which it had to contend, these discussions did not translate into the adoption of consistent economic policy measures designed to stimulate and expand the demand for market goods. Nonetheless, they did demonstrate how strong and widespread was the belief that the free market would ensure the creation of an economic circuit capable of sustaining supply and demand. In this way the positive recognition of both increased consumption, seen as the demand for production, and luxury spending, seen as the result in profit determined by a completely free market and leading to a virtuous cycle of national economic development, could find space.

Particularly significant from this point of view was the reflection elaborated in *Elementi di diritto costituzionale democratico*, published in 1797. The author was Giuseppe Compagnoni, a former priest and a law scholar who alternated reading of Grotius and Pufendorf with that of Montesquieu, Beccaria and Filangieri and who, in 1797, having abandoned his ecclesiastical career and become, with a conspicuous shift from his hitherto moderate positions, a staunch supporter of the revolutionary cause, was appointed *iuniore* in the legislative body of the Cisalpine Republic. In *Elementi di diritto costituzionale* he explicitly contrasted substantive equality with an equality based on the assurance of being able to enjoy all the same things. The right of man was to ‘aspire, demand, compete […] in the insuperable sense of well-being’ that was natural to him.\(^78\) Men were equal not only before the law, but also in their needs and desires and in their right to have them met. This was not simply a matter of guaranteeing a right to subsistence, although this had often been invoked in the


\(^78\) Giuseppe Compagnoni, *Elementi di diritto costituzionale democratico ossia Principj di giuspubblico universale del citt* (Venice, 1797), 46.
revolutionary debate. In reference to the needs of man, Compagnoni’s appeal was not for basic necessities and staples but for the sum of a wide variety of ‘means’ which could ensure ‘well-being’ and which would multiply and diversify on account of being produced by a society in constant evolution. 79

Compagnoni’s work included elements of egalitarian radicalism inspired by Rousseau: for example, the reference to the ‘scandalousness and futility of wealth’ and the exaltation of the simplicity of the ancients. However, he tried to harmonise these affirmations—often in striking contrast with the socio-economic ideal that gave substance to his writing—with an evident aspiration to a widespread well-being. The evolution of society had introduced ‘a thousand different needs, for which to live more comfortably and happily a man needs a hundred different means, and which in the state of nature he would never have had occasion to desire’. 80 He linked this reasoning on a progressive unfolding of needs to his reflections on the right to property. This was the spur to satisfy needs and to legitimise property:

from the nature of new needs intimately linked to the new state there emerges a new right, that of surrounding oneself with the greatest abundance of possessions. 81

A fairer distribution of property, to be achieved through the full liberalisation of production and the abolition of institutions of feudal origin, such as primogeniture and fideicommissum—in keeping with the views that Compagnoni expressed in the sittings of the Consiglio dei Iuniori that dealt with direct taxes, 82 a subject that occupied the legislative corps from December 1797, after the Directory proposed introducing a proportional land tax 83—thus led to the realisation of an equality between men that was not purely formal, but was expressed in equal opportunity to satisfy desires expected to expand with the progress of society. Compagnoni’s ideas thereby shed light on the intimate reciprocity of economics and politics. On the one hand, the economy became the ground on which to build greater equality among men and, on the other, the political rupture of the Revolution and the abolition of Old Regime hierarchies made possible economic development and created conditions of equal opportunities for individuals.

In the perspective of a close link between economics and politics in the valorisation of consumption as an equalising agent, the thinking of Melchiorre Gioia was of central importance, both for the intense political activity that distinguished the author during the years of the Cisalpine and Italian Republic, and for the breadth of his economic analysis. The theme was addressed comprehensively in the essay with which he won a competition organised in 1796 by the General Administration of Lombardy on the question of ‘Quale dei governi liberi meglio convenga alla felicità dell’Italia?’, with Pietro Verri chairing the panel of judges. In

79 Compagnoni, Elementi di diritto costituzionale, 48.
80 Compagnoni, Elementi di diritto costituzionale, 94.
81 Compagnoni, Elementi di diritto costituzionale, 94.
this paper substantive equality among individuals was contrasted with an equality achieved through consumption, or rather through the ability to satisfy desires. In the framework of the theory of elementary sensualism, which based the legitimacy of economic activity and the pursuit of self-interest on pleasure, Gioia focused on a notion of equality founded on ‘a certain equality of goods […] and the hope of increasing them’. The model he outlined was that of a society characterised by an average wealth, which allowed all men to enjoy the same goods. This would create a feeling of sociability among men and a common ‘enthusiasm for the nation’. The same notion of equality was repeated by Gioia in Il Monitore italiano, a periodical which, established with Ugo Foscolo in January 1797, became known for the harshly critical stance it took against the policies of the French Directory. Indeed, in an article published in March 1798, Gioia stressed again—using words from his 1797 dissertation that demonstrated the continuity of his ideas—how ‘a certain equality of goods, the common security of preserving them, the hope of augmenting them’, guaranteed by a commensurate possibility of enjoying them, would reinforce links between men, thereby engendering a more prosperous and economically developed society.

Further evidence of the relevance that the link between consumption and equality acquired in the reflections of the Cisalpine Republic is found in De l’abolizione dei fidecomessi, published in 1797. The author was the Matteo Galdi of Salento who, having moved to France after the discovery of a conspiracy in Naples in 1794 and having obtained French citizenship the following year, transferred to Milan to take up the post of secretary to the French Republic’s representative, Villetard. According to Galdi, if the theoretical perspective of the substantive equality of citizens, combined with that of law, constituted the pinnacle of ‘political perfection’, in the practices of society the objective had to be that of facilitating a widespread average consumption, based on a more equitable distribution of wealth, to be brought about through the free movement of property. In the context of the importance attributed to the theory of needs and the belief that man’s desires (in constant evolution and expansion because of trade) were not only a powerful force of commercial development but also the mainspring of human activity—as better argued by Galdi in Dei rapporti politico-economici fra le nazioni libere, published in 1798—equality was deemed not to depend on wealth itself, but on man’s capacity for happiness. For this reason, the objective could not be an equality of wealth, but an equality of happiness.

88 Matteo Galdi, Dell’abolizione de’ fedecomessi. Memoria politico-legale del cittadino Galdi (Milan, 1797), 25.
89 Galdi, Dell’abolizione de’ fedecomessi, 34.
90 Matteo Galdi, Dei rapporti politico-economici fra le nazioni libere (Milan, 1798), 35.
This reflection, which expressed well the aspirations and anticipations of men whose roots lay in a middle class of professionals, landowners, and small businessmen, responded to the practical need for a conception of equality compatible with a dynamic vision of society and desires, founded on prosperity and growth, and guaranteed by consumption. This was influenced not only by the philosophical and economic revaluation of passions being carried out by the *Idéologie*, in particular through the ‘Décade philosophique’ and the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Say, but also by the reception to the economic analysis developed in Italy during the 1770s and 1780s. In the latter it is possible to trace, on the one hand, echoes of the Milanese debate of the 1760s and 1770s in the centrality attributed to needs and desires, placed at the heart of political economy as an element of economic development, and, on the other, the influence of Filangieri, who in *La scienza della legislazione* had explained in detail the link between consumption and equality.

During the triennium there was also a strong and decisive break from the ideas of the Old Regime. Firstly, the valorisation of consumption no longer used the reflection on luxury as its main vehicle. Additionally, during those three years great attention was paid to the distinction between dependence among men, typical of the Old Regime, and interdependence based on the economic relationships which characterised the new democratic societies. The trend towards greater equality through consumption no longer passed through the dependence between individuals, but through their interdependence. Moreover, consumption was no longer perceived as a positive and legitimising consequence of economic development but rather presented as a right, which could be secured only by the new democratic realities and which was fundamental—and so not accidental—to economic development.

The strong political valorisation of consumption as the field in which to actualise a greater equality, which marked this period, was resultant upon a maturation of economic theory and the expression of a new and fairer vision of society, as well as the perception of the need for a firm political break with the Old Regime, but was also linked to the retention of traces of a traditional mindset, which was difficult to eradicate and which intended to reaffirm and legitimise entrenched political inequalities. A particularly significant example was the attempt during the triennium to exclude women from active citizenship and to limit their public role. Of crucial importance to this issue was the debate on female luxury, as this helped create a language of justification for the denial of political rights to women.

The subject of the link between women and luxury, and the reconstruction of the political implications underlining it, has up to now been inadequately explored in connection with the three revolutionary years in Italy. The French case has, however, been better studied. Historians have in fact not only investigated the value of political and social de-legitimisation that the link between women and luxury held in eighteenth-century France, both in the Old Regime and in the revolutionary period,\(^{91}\) but they have also centred attention on the French definition of citizenship, a formulation elaborated from the start of the revolutionary phase, as being associated with maleness and intended to exclude women from being given active political rights.\(^{92}\)

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Seen in this way, the enquiry is plainly relevant to the Italian context, marked as it was by a concerted effort to discredit women by associating them with luxury. The woman/luxury binomial, with its strong negative connotations, had already been put under the spotlight and utilised by the Italian Catholic moralists of the second half of the eighteenth century in their critique of luxury, the core of which was a denunciation of any use of goods that did not comply with social conditions. Undue use was perceived as a grave danger, since it was the cause of a confusion of ranks and threatened the hierarchy on which societal coexistence was grounded. The undisputed requirement to respect the social hierarchy was applicable to men as well as women, yet the recurring examples used by the moralists of the eighteenth century regularly focused more on the latter. This first Christian reflection, which established a close link between luxury and the female sphere, was destined to typify many of the considerations of the subject in succeeding centuries.

If the revolutionary period was marked by a resumption of interest in these issues, the depiction of women as being dominated by a passion for luxury was not simply a reiteration of the traditional moral critique, but instead took on a new value. Indeed, in a departure from earlier thinking, emphasis was placed on the danger posed to the stability of the republics by the propensity of women towards luxury and their inability to control their instincts.

The connection between the luxury of women and the denial of their political rights featured widely in the literature designed to educate the people about revolutionary principles and to build a popular consensus. The revolutionary literature is the main font from which to draw in order to reconstruct the criticism of luxury during the triennium, as the invective against luxury was chiefly expressed through this literature. The theme of this discourse was the standard one: women, the victims of luxury, were a danger to the common good insofar as they were incapable of controlling their passions and—behaving in a way similar to that of the old aristocracy—they showed that they had not passed through the necessary process of regeneration required of citizens of the new republics.

A case particularly useful to the in-depth study of this critical discourse, both for the lucidity of exposition and because it established argumentations that would be revisited, with little originality, by later works, is the Dissertazione sul lusso, published in Turin in 1797. The author was the former Piarist Gaspare Morardo who, having grown close to jurisdictional and Jansenist ideas during the 1780s when he was honorary professor of moral philosophy at the University of Turin, began to develop

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new constructs in the ethical and religious spheres and in those of politics and sociology which, after 1789, led him to openly side with the revolutionary cause. During the triennium he embarked on an extensive production of literature, which the Church placed on the Index in 1821, and he became chief editor of the women’s periodical La Vera Repubblicana, which, on the one hand, denounced the protection afforded by law to adulterous and violent husbands, from whom wives could not divorce, and, on the other, strongly condemned the luxury of women. In his Dissertazione sul lusso Morardo discussed female nature, marked by luxury and the inability to control passions and instincts, and likened it to the political and social instability of the republics:

From this situation of unregulated luxury come uncontrolled women of ease or those who want to become such. Their lack of control leads the public to deprivation: this causes a loss of freedom and equality, which is to say, the total massacre of the republic. Vicious feminine luxury [...] womanly luxury, the deprimer of public honesty, destroyer of customs and ruiner of republics.

According to Morardo, the danger posed by women to the very survival of the new republican institutions proved they were completely unqualified for active citizenship and taking up positions in public office, which instead had to remain the preserve of men, who were capable of self-control, as was demonstrated by their informed renunciation of luxury.

The theme of the relationship between women and luxury had already been tackled by Morardo in one of his earlier works, La damigella istruita, published in Turin in 1787. In it he had bitterly criticised the luxury that characterised women, without however underlining the negative implications of feminine behaviour for society. That element instead took a central role in the paper written during the revolutionary phase, and which was later exploited to legitimise the denial to women of active political roles.

The explicit connection between excessive female consumption and the denial of political rights was a key theme in publications of the era, and was central to the public debate in different republics in the context of the strong circulation of ideas that marked the revolutionary period. They typified the revolutionary years, as the words of an anonymous parish priest in Venice made clear:

Do you believe that those unruly youths and vain women deserve the name of citizen, who degrade with their idleness and softness the virtues of a soul capable of elevated and magnificent objectives, and consume their shallow brains with the invention of new fashions of ridiculous and scandalous clothes?

97 Gaspare Morardo, Del lusso. Dissertazione di Gaspare Morardo professore emerito di filosofia (Turin, 1797), 25 and following. Similar considerations were also developed in Gaspare Morardo, Quali debbano essere le donne in tempo di guerra (Turin, 1799). On Morardo and his activities during the revolutionary period, see Luciano Guerci, ‘I giornali repubblicani nel Piemonte dell’anno VII’, Rivista Storica Italiana, 102 (1990), 375–421.
98 Gaspare Morardo, La damigella istruita (Turin, 1787), 57.
Even when the relationship between female nature and the exclusion of women from citizenship was not stated as openly, the link was fully evident. In the vital moment of the redefinition of the role of individuals in society, the reflection on consumption, which also touched upon the theme of women’s inordinate participation in it, was used as a way of making their debarment from politics appear perfectly normal.

The discourse on luxury, then, reflected, crystallised, but also contributed to corroborating the idea that women were incompatible with politics: weak figures, easily corruptible, over whose ‘public, and private control’ fathers and husbands had to keep a close watch lest they became the cause of the nation’s degeneration, rendering ‘unclear the love of the homeland, and that steadfast and noble character of placing the salvation and happiness of others before one’s own’.100

In this way the revolutionary political debate brushed aside the stimuli emanating from mid-century European ideas, which had brought to the fore a revaluation of female luxury, as verification of progress in society. In his Fable of the Bees Mandeville had indicated in unambiguous terms how national prosperity was linked to women’s predilection for luxury goods:

I have shown already that the worst of Women and most profligate of the Sex did contribute to the consumption of Superfluities as well as the Necessaries of life, and consequently were Beneficial to many peaceable Drudges, that work hard to maintain their Families, and have no worse design than an honest Livelihood. The variety of Work that is perform’d, and The numbers of Hands employ’d to gratify the Fickleness and Luxury of Women is prodigious.101

In the middle of the century, with the Esprit des lois, feminine inclination towards luxury consumption, interpreted as a powerful spur for the development of trade, was presented as a source of national wealth.102 Women became the symbol of the ethics of exchange in a commercial society. Seen from this viewpoint, the feminine sphere belonged to a civil and refined society, such that its values, its ways and its state were considered the measure of the progress of civilisation.

But this discourse of revaluation of female luxury did not filter into the revolutionary debate, precisely because the accent placed on the female penchant for luxury was a useful means of denying political rights to women. During the triennium this language of political inclusion and exclusion was seen to be even more necessary than during the Old Regime. In a society of orders based on privilege, the unequal distribution of freedom and resources was, at least from a theoretical point of view, irreproachable. But in a society of fundamental rights and equal citizenship, every act of exclusion had to be justified. In light of this, full advantage was taken of the association between women and luxury in order to validate a limitation of the universalism of rights proclaimed by the Revolution which, by being applied only to men and the citizen, had barred women from the exercise of those rights.103

100 ‘Opinione di un libero cittadino’, in Raccolta di carte pubbliche, V, 43.
103 A sign of the full understanding of the limits of the universalism of the rights proclaimed by the revolution was the intervention of the Roman tribuno, former Piarist and exponent of the moderate wing.
This analysis of the language that legitimised the denial of political rights to women, articulated through the woman/luxury nexus, does not exhaust the complexity of the issue or the various and multi-faceted meanings that the critical discussion of luxury assumed in the three revolutionary years. It makes it possible, however, to clarify how the invective against luxury which permeated revolutionary rhetoric did not terminate—as historiography has so far shown—in adherence to an economic and social ideal based on the containment of passions and the reduction of consumption, replicating the models of the ancient republics. In contrast, the discussion of luxury was intended to communicate a complex political language and diverse values, which helps to evidence, on the one hand, the need to investigate in greater depth, from a comparative perspective, the multiple political meanings of the reflection on revolutionary Europe on the subject, and, on the other, the specificity of the Italian context, marked by the immense political value of the debate on luxury and consumption.

the Tribune, Marco Faustino Gagliuffi on the need to clarify the term ‘citizen’ also for women. Gagliuffi referred to the French experience, where there had been a failure to make clear that women were included in the universal obligation to use the epithet ‘citizen’, so that they continued to be addressed with the title mesadames. Gagliuffi did not deal with the rights of women, but nonetheless recognised the threat that apparently universal laws that did not in fact include women might represent to the democratic tradition; see Sitting XXI, 26 germinal year VI (15 April 1798), in Assemblee della Repubblica romana, edited by Vittorio Emanuele Giuntella, 3 vols. (Bologna, 1954–1993), I. On these issues, see Diritti e privilegi, edited by Giorgia Alessi, Marina Caffiero and Dinora Corsi (Genesis, 2 [2002]).