

History of Economic Thought and Policy

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and for the precise discussions of models. Therefore, there is not discussion on the excellence of this study. What may be questionable is the title, *Prioritarianism in Practice*, because there is not much practice in it. The prevailing abstract theoretical models tend to make it a non-practical approach. How much the contemporary rationalistic way of theorising plus econometric testing can be related to the concept of practice is an open question.

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SERGIO NOTO (ed.) *Scienza Come Dovere Civile. Due Scritti di Angelo Messedaglia*, Florence, Leo Olschki, 2022. Pp. 200. € 50.00. ISBN: 978-88-222-6831-0.

Sergio Noto has edited this volume titled *Science as Civil Duty* for the high-quality editions of Leo Olschki, reprinting some writings of Angelo Messedaglia. It includes the essays on population plus two papers on scientific methodology. While the main theme is the theory of population, the real focus of this book is scientific methodology. These writings of Messedaglia are introduced by a commentary of Ryan Walter and the preface by the same Sergio Noto. The latter contextualises the work of Messedaglia highlighting his civil engagement and the complexity of his thought. The original Messedaglia's essay on the theory of population was published in 1858, the prologue on science is of 1873, while the last paper was read and published in 1890. Therefore, the book allows to follow the evolution of Messedaglia's perspective on methodology along the progress of economic science.

Ryan Walter specifies how Malthus' essay, object of the reflections of Messedaglia in 1858, was first published in 1798 in a different scientific context. Walter presents Malthus' argument and his peculiar methodology, particularly the connection with his religious beliefs and his role of policy adviser. Malthus was not engaged in positive science, his perspective is *natural theology*. His view of political economy was still that of a moral science: "Malthus was operating at the intersection of reason of state and political economy to counsel the legislator..." (p. 13). His view was that of natural theology and the issues dealt with were the Poor laws and the Corn laws. Therefore, Walter supplies a historical reading of Malthus' arguments to best understand the extent of the criticism of Messedaglia. The latter, however, had no intention to

perform any sort of contextualization of Malthus ideas, but analysed how much this population principle could be useful in scientific inquiry.

The concern of Messedaglia is on scientific method applied to social economy and in particular to the growth of population. He clearly supported the development of an *economic-naturalistic theory of population* (p. 24). In 1858, Malthus' essay was still the best work on that theme (p. 42), but Messedaglia was primarily interested in the method, which was not convincing him. He distrusted the excessively abstract systems because facts had to be inquired *with more love and impartiality* to let the nature of things merge (p. 43). The method of Malthus was said that of mathematicians when dealing with a problem of mechanics. It stated the geometrical progression of population in response to an arithmetic increase of subsistence means – when population is not relented by a series of obstacles. But this mathematical principle of Malthus is embedded in the framework of harmony with providence order and morality. Malthus, in fact, said that the enemies he fights were *vice and misery*. In any case, Messedaglia was aware that Malthus' aim was not framing the principle of population increase as an empirical law or as a fact (p. 46).

Nonetheless, Messedaglia was particularly disturbed by the principle of the arithmetical increase of subsistence means, which he considered arbitrary. He had difficulty to accept its functional-hypothetical role relatively to the geometrical increase of population. On the contrary, he supported the use of induction for the formulation of scientific laws, opposing deduction and a-priori reasoning. Therefore, he proposed the use of *mathematical induction* that I guess is some form of statistical inference. I find his metaphor of science and practice as *a vessel on the ocean* as particularly brilliant.

In the appendix of this first essay, Messedaglia proposed a review of scholars who discussed the theme of population: from Machiavelli and Montesquieu to Botero, from Beccaria to Ricci, and a particular attention is paid to Ortes. He could show how the view of Malthus had already been expressed by these scholars, particularly the geometrical tendency of population growth, even if not with the same way of reasoning.

This *non-rationalistic positivism* of Messedaglia is confirmed in the pro-lusions on method held in Padua, 1873 and in Rome, 1891. In the two texts he frequently asserts that science should remain in the empiricist tradition of Leonardo, Galileo, Kepler and Bacon. He trusts the practical value of science and exalts the role of scientific activity, but scientific method should be based on observation and experience. In these lectures he affirms his faith on science and liberty. Interestingly, in 1891 he explicitly argues that the order of social facts is based on evolutionary change, particularly industrial facts as well as the whole phenomenon of *incivilimento* (progressing civilisation).

This evolutionary perspective originated in political economy to inspire biology and today comes back to economics. Besides stressing the role of active observation that supplies the *da ubi consistam* of theorisation. Moreover, he shows some perplexity on the geometrical expression of marginalism. This raises the question of how happy Messedaglia would be with the contemporary standard way of doing research, based on abstract a-priori modelling plus econometrics. I guess not much.

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