



“Alas, poor Italy!” David Hume and the Italian Civilization in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This article focuses on David Hume’s journey to the northern Italian peninsula in 1748, a journey barely explored in contemporary historiography. The Scottish philosopher was a field assistant to the British General St. Clair on a secret military mission to the courts of Vienna and Turin. After crossing Holland, Germany and Austria, he stayed in Trento, Mantua, Cremona, Milan and Turin and described in some letters to his brother, which formed a true travel diary, the social, economic and political realities of Italy, a country severely torn and harassed by exorbitant taxes, but rich in history and culture before national unification. For the first time in Hume’s intellectual production his scrupulous social and political analysis appears, as well as his careful observation of the character of the princes at the European courts, the identity of the nations and popular customs, the nature of the cities and landscapes, and his study of the causes of productivity and the misery of nations. Inspired by Hume’s observations of Italian civilization, which are of great historical and political value, the article reconstructs the historical, military and political-institutional context of the territories visited by a philosopher in military uniform.

Keywords

David Hume - Italy 1748 - Politics - Economy - Culture

A philosopher in military uniform

In 1747, David Hume accepted the invitation of the British Army General James St. Clair to assist him as an *aide-de-camp* in a secret military mission to the courts of Vienna and Turin (Hume 1987, xxxv). For the second time, Hume accepted his compatriot’s proposal after serving as his secretary in 1746 on a mission that consisted of the invasion of the coasts of France. The real reason for agreeing, aside from the chance of earning a few useful extra pounds, was that Hume was not only a lover of political speculation who dealt with politics in his major works but also an expert in military strategies and techniques; a talented diplomat and interpreter in international affairs

and war, which he witnessed first-hand on the battlefield¹. And his second military mission, which we will discuss below, is indisputable evidence of that. The corresponding text, *Journal of the British Embassy to the Courts of Vienna and Turin* (1748), not only provides an outstanding source for scholars who wish to understand Humean thought, for the inevitable connections between his personal experiences and his historical and political writings, but also a complete, if indirect, picture of the intricate dynamics of eighteenth-century Europe.

The *Journal* coincides with the text of some letters that Hume wrote to his brother between 3 March and 16 June 1748, which have the character of a travel bulletin in war-torn Europe, and which completely reflect the various stages and contents of a military mission in the final phase of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48). This text has remained scarcely explored in contemporary historiography².

The war that broke out over the question of the succession to the throne in Vienna was about to end the historical phase of the dynastic wars of the old regime amid tiredness, indifference and scepticism. The main consequence of the conflict in which Austria allied with Sardinia and England against France and Spain was the establishment of a stable political order on the Italian peninsula, aided by the equilibrium between Austria, Spain and France, the confirmation of the rise of Prussia on the international stage and the withdrawal of English influence in Europe, which meant its crisis in relations with Paris and Vienna.

It was an era marked by an upswing of fanaticism and dangerous nationalism, in a social context that coincided with the most glowing times in the political history of an impoverished Europe, hard and endless conflicts since the beginning of the eighteenth century. After the internal struggles that arose in the name of the policy of continental equilibrium within the framework of the Austrian succession, all the nations involved began to be physically and mentally exhausted. England entered into secret peace negotiations with France between the end of 1747 and the beginning of 1748, victorious in Holland, and showed a certain coldness towards Austria (Maria Theresa) and Sardinia (Carlo Emanuele III), countries which, according to the English, were part of the agreements and treaties and that did not exert any military pressure on the south of France.

¹ The collection of Hume's writings on his engagement in political practice, which is just as important as his theory because of his conception of politics as a descriptive and non-logical science, is finally available in Hume 2019, which includes: *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, late Lord Provost of Edinburgh* (1748); *Account of the Descent on the Coast of Brittany and the Causes of its Failure* (1746); *Journal of the British Embassy to the Courts of Vienna and Turin* (1748); *Dispatches of a British Diplomat at Paris* (1764-65); and *Correspondence of an Under-Secretary of State* (1767-68).

² The only exception, although it relates only to Turin and excludes all other Italian cities visited by Hume, is Mazza and Piccoli (2011).

In this context, the story of the British embassy in the courts of Vienna and Turin is inserted, which has the dual purpose of strengthening the alliance between Great Britain, Austria and Sardinia against France. In 1747 the war did not go well for Britain and her allies. The French were victorious across the country. In the last campaign, Austria and Sardinia could not invade southern France as agreed; and the Ministry intends to review the actual continuity of the troops the Austrians and Italians have provided for the ongoing war against the provisions of the Hague Convention of 26 January 1748 for that year's campaign. General St. Clair's was commissioned the inspection compliance with the agreements on the basis of the publications of the General Secretariat of the Paymaster's Office (Duboin 1820-1868; Bianchi 2002). His commission, in other terms, «directed his attention to this deplorable state of affairs and instructed him to proceed at once to Vienna and to impress upon the Queen Empress the absolute necessity of living up to her agreements with Britain, and then to advance to Turin to do likewise with the King of Sardinia» (Mossner 1980, 209).

Visiting the rulers of these countries on the British military staff was no ordinary military officer, but a «man of letters», as he liked to call himself, one of the most famous and representative of the British cultural world: David Hume. He wants to gain new experience and knowledge, but also out of gratitude to St. Clair, who selected the philosopher by refusing to accept a ministerial secretary addressed to him by his superiors (Hume 1932, 1, 111).

St. Clair and his officers set sail from Harwich on 16 February and land at Helvoetsluys in Holland the next day. Their route leads from Breda to Nimeguen, Cologne, Frankfurt and Regensburg, where they change to a boat and sail down the Danube. The route is to reach Vienna through the territories of Holland and Germany and Turin through Lombardy. They make, in Hume's words, «a very pleasant journey, or rather voyage, with good weather, sitting at our ease, and having a variety of scenes continually presented to us and immediately shifted, as it were in an opera, a pleasant voyage» (Hume 2019, 125).

The mission should be carried out with full awareness of the usual dangers of a military enterprise, but this does not seem to be the case: Hume never mentions the secrecy of the intelligence mission in which he was involved but describes everything meticulously and with the care taken for the social and political scientist typical objectivity. His *Journal* is more reminiscent of that of the classic English traveller in peaceful foreign territories than that of a member of an armed expedition; in examining some types of war operations, his tone is that «of a historical critic, and never that of a person who may find his safety or comfort compromised by them» (Burton 1846, 1, 269).

A brief glimpse into future theories

In the *Journal*, for the first time in Hume's intellectual production appears his vision of political institutions, his conscientious social analysis, his careful observation of the character of the princes at the European courts, the identity of nation and custom of the people, the nature of cities and landscapes, and his study of the causes of the productivity and misery of countries.

In addition, Hume's text contains significant anticipations of some of the theories that he fully elaborated in his economic policy analysis, which he will elaborate and publish in the *Political Discourses* (1752) immediately after his return home. It cannot be ruled out that, thanks to the empirical impressions that he will gain in the two years on the most important economic and political realities in Europe, Hume will be able to devote himself with greater competence to writing essays on trade, luxury, money, interest, trade balance, balance of power, taxes, public credit and others.

To mention one of the most emblematic cases, some of Hume's more generous remarks on economic policy issues will transcend the doctrines of his time, which tend to see a nation's wealth as the primary cause of the misery of its neighbours. After visiting countries like Germany, Austria and the Italian peninsula, which are close to each other, sometimes even bordering one another, but are so far apart in terms of prosperity, institutional organization and population welfare, he can strongly criticize mercantilism. In his *Political Discourses*, which will not by chance attract the attention of his compatriot Adam Smith, Hume emphasizes the importance of exchanging a nation with neighbouring peoples who are seen as competitors and jealous imitators in a relationship that fosters the development of the arts and science, whatever is desirable, notably in a free government.

The direct perception of challenges in the following phases of his intellectual career became the subject of innovative theories that enabled Hume to make personal acquaintances with some of the most powerful sovereigns of the time, with whom he had official visits to the most important European courts. His encounter with the Prince of Orange, the sovereign of Holland, a decadent nation in which the republic is rather uncertain given the dominance of the dynasties and the prince is appointed head of government after an uprising of the merchant bourgeoisie, is striking.

In Hume's eyes, William IV is a man «of great humanity and moderation», who enjoys popular favour and finds himself at the head of a nation «undoubtedly ruined by its liberty, and has now a chance of being saved by its prince» (Hume 2019, 112-113). Hume also expresses his amazement at the forms of government that deviate from the monarchy and warns with his usual ironic streak: «Let republicans make the best of this example they can» (Hume 2019, 113). But the more politically interesting feature that Hume captures in this sovereign is that he is the only legally divine monarch that exists

in the world. At the end of the meeting he notes with equal irony, typical of his political scepticism: «I believe since the time of Germanicus, deservedly the darling of the Romans, never was a people so fond of one man. Surely there entered not the smallest intrigue of his own into his election» (Hume 2019, 114).

On his journey to Turin, Hume visits the Prussian cities of Kleve, Breda, Cologne, Frankfurt, Regensburg, Bonn and Nuremberg and receives positive impressions from the Germanic nation, which he describes as «a very fine country, full of industrious honest people; and were it united it would be the greatest power that ever was in the world» (Hume 2019, 125). While sailing on the Danube, he observes: «There are great advantages in travelling, and nothing serves more to remove prejudices. For I confess I had entertained no such advantageous idea of Germany; and it gives a man of humanity pleasure to see that so considerable a part of mankind as the Germans are in so tolerable a condition» (Hume 2019, 125).

The humorous interest of the historians is evident during his visit to the battlefield of Dettingen, where on 27 June 1743, thanks to the pragmatic army of British, Hanoverians and Asians under the command of King George II, over the French troops in the War of the Austrian Succession. Hume reconstructs the prominent phases of this battle by interviewing generals and using the models of rapid vision and succinct expression of his favourite classics.

The admiration for Venetian politics

Vienna is reached on 7 April. To Hume, this city appears a little small as the capital, but overpopulated and immersed in an atmosphere somewhat obscured by Empress Maria Theresa, who created a kind of chastity court from which libertines and atheists are excluded. Hume claims: «A court of chastity is lately erected here, who send all loose women to the frontiers of Hungary, where they can only debauch Turks and infidels. All whore-masters are punished as they deserve, that is, very severely. The promotion of several offices has been stopped by aspersions of this nature» (Hume 2019, 128).

In this leaden atmosphere, Hume proves his profound knowledge of Italian culture, art and music. He writes: «I have been pretty busy since I came here and have regretted it the less, that there is no very great amusement in this place. No Italian opera; no French comedy; no dancing. I have however heard Monticelli, who is the next wonder of the world to Farinelli» (Hume 2019, 129).

With a lyrical and agile voice and great acting skills, the Italian soprano Angelo Maria Monticelli made a significant contribution to spreading the music of the theatre music author Giovan Battista Pergolesi in Europe (Mancini 1777: 37, 234, 248; Croce 1891: 311-440). He began his career in Venice in 1728 and later moved first to Milan and then

to Rome. For ten years he appeared in smaller roles throughout Italy (Venice, Treviso, Padua, Verona, Pavia, Vercelli, Alessandria, Brescia, Naples, Florence, Genoa and Lucca) before becoming «primo uomo» for London (1741-46). According to Horace Walpole, Monticelli was infinitely admired at the King's Theater (Heriot 1956, 188-190). He was considered one of the best sopranos of his time. The Viennese court employed him from 1740, but his only confirmed public appearances date from 1748, the year in which he was heard by Hume in the Austrian capital. Between spring 1748 and Carnival 1749, he stayed in Vienna himself, thanks to his friendship with Empress Maria Theresa.

The Apulian Carlo Maria Michelangelo Nicola Broschi, known as Farinelli (Heriot 1956, 95-110), for some of the most famous singers in history, stayed in England for three years from 1734. Despite the strong rivalry with the London theatre companies sponsored by King George II, his fame in Britain, as Hume's words testify, was immense.

From Vienna, Hume expressed his disappointment that the itinerary did not include a stop in Venice: «We set out tomorrow, but go not by the way of Venice, as we at first proposed. This is some mortification to us. We shall go however by Milan» (Hume 2019, 128).

The displeasure is understandable when one considers Hume's level of interest, shown in his political writings, in the political and institutional history of Venice, whose bourgeois manners and traditional aristocracy he admired. Hume particularly appreciated the «stability and wisdom of the Venetian government, through so many ages», as he claimed in *That Politics may be reduced to a Science* (1741) (Hume 1987, 24). And when explaining the discrepancies between the Polish and the Venetian aristocracy, he wrote that an aristocracy that possesses all the legislative power of a state, like the Venetian, is better than that in the case of the Polish government, in which every noble person has a distinct hereditary authority over his vassals: «The different operations and tendencies of these two species of government might be made apparent even *a priori*. A Venetian nobility is preferable to a Polish, let the humours and education of men be ever so much varied» (Hume 1987, 17).

As an acute historian of European political institutions, Hume demonstrates his profound knowledge of Venetian society. For example, he did not hesitate to recall Castellani and Nicolotti when arguing his thesis that political factionalism was unavoidable as a natural attitude of the people. Castellani and Nicolotti were the «two mobbish factions in Venice, who frequently box together, and then lay aside their quarrels presently» (Hume 1987: 58 n. 4)³.

In an impressive note in Hume's *Memoranda* (1729-40), a collection of notes and comments on his readings during his formative years, Hume reveals the source of his

³ For the history of these two opposing parties, factions of no importance but which constantly led to fights and irritations under the mob, see Daru (1834, 360-61); Galibert (1850, 2, 197).

knowledge of the two mobbish factions: *La Ville et la République de Venise* (1680) written by the French knight Limojon de Saint-Didier (Mossner 1948: 514), who stayed in Venice from 1672 to 1674 together with the minister Giannantonio di Mesmes, Count d'Avaux, ambassador of the King of France (Morolin 1841, 4, 14, note 1).

Religion and politics in Trento

Through curious sociological and anthropological observations, Hume describes Styria and Carinthia as countries inhabited by terrible people. From Knittelfeld in Styria (April 28), Hume wrote: «As much as the country is agreeable in its wildness, as much are the inhabitants savage and deformed and monstrous in their appearance. Very many of them have ugly swelled throats: idiots and deaf people swarm in every village; and the general aspect of the people is the most shocking I ever saw» (Hume 2019, 130). He finds Tyrol more acceptable, not only because «the inhabitants are there as remarkably beautiful as the Styrians are ugly», but also because «an air of humanity and spirit and health and plenty is seen in every face» (Hume 2019, 131). About half a mile later he observes the beginning of the Adige, the river that flows into the Adriatic, and finally «a new aspect of spring», «gradations of that beautiful season» that sinks deeper into the valleys, «from its first faint dawn till its full bloom and glory» (Hume 2019, 132).

On 8 May, Hume is «in Italy, at least – he immediately adds about the fact that Italy is not yet a unified nation-state – the common language of the people is Italian» (Hume 2019, 132). He stays precisely in Trento, in the upper Adige, and describes the city with these words: «This town is not remarkable, neither for size nor beauty. It is only famous for that wise assembly of philosophers and divines, who established such rational tenets for the belief of mankind» (Hume 2019, 132).

Trento's lack of attractiveness is likely due to the fact that it is a military town of Roman origin and sits on a main military road. It was christened Tridentum, meaning «town of the three teeth», perhaps because there were three hills near the city that resembled three teeth, or because there were three rivers that formed a trident. Between 50 and 40 BC, it became a Municipium. At the time of Hume's stay, Trento was still a military city, made up of fortifications, towers and defensive architectural elements, devoid of the architectural beauties and monumental attractions with which the urbanized centres are endowed. These will be realized in later centuries. Hume must have seen not only the bridges of medieval origin that were built to replace the Roman ones and cross the Adige and the Fersina torrent but also the civil architecture such as the Renaissance and Late Gothic palaces, some of which are representative residences. Near the Cathedral of San Vigilio, built in the thirteenth century and where Emperor Maximilian I of Hapsburg have crowned Emperor of Holy Empire on 4 February 1508, there are some frescoed houses and several Renaissance churches,

such as the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, where the third period of the Council of Trent (April 1562 - December 1563) took place and others of medieval origin. The beautiful fountains that will later decorate the city's squares have not yet existed. The Fountain of Neptune, one of the most important monuments, was built a few years after Hume's stay, precisely between 1767 and 1768, for the health and decency of the city. Trento lacks precisely this propriety, and Hume notices it when he does not mention remarkable (Bellabarba and Olmi 2005; Gorfer 1995).

The city's governor is Dominico Antonio Count of Thunn, who gave the Principality of Trent respect and public veneration on 18 December 1730, and whose government was «full of dignity and vigour, and such as to demand respect and public veneration» for the first ten years. But after the death of his brother, Count Augustine, whose wise advice owed the good administration of the principality, «the scene suddenly changed» (Barcacovi 1823, 169, my translation), and the city fell into a state of abandonment, which is most likely the negative image presented to Hume. This is what the chronicles of time say: «After the death of Count Augustin, Dominico Antonio gave himself a completely different life than the first. He just wanted to amuse himself between booths, parties and amusements of all kinds: he greeted entertaining and playful men and fools at his court: songs, sounds and banquets and pastimes were all his worries and occupations. He [...] charged the canteen or the bishops' chamber with a not inconsiderable amount of debt, and he graced everyone, including those who have committed the most serious crimes. [...] Ecclesiastical discipline was severely limited in such a condition and many serious disturbances and inconveniences were noted» (Barcacovi 1823, 169-70, my translation). The only notable initiative of this baroque prince is the erection of the magnificent new high altar adorned with four columns in the cathedral (Barcacovi 1823, 171).

The «wise assembly of philosophers and divines» to which Hume is alluding is the Council of Trent, convened in response to the spread of Protestant reform in Europe and held from 1545 to 1563 under the pontificate of four popes. Charles V, whose imperial plan was aimed at pacifying Germany and reforming the Church, wanted to be called up. The work of the Council began in December 1545 under the leadership of the papal legates and without the participation of the Protestants. Pope Paul III, who was «a man of outstanding intelligence» (Jedin 1936, 1, 289), immediately pushed through reflections on Catholic doctrine, against any kind of understanding with the reformed world. The Council made several declarations in support of Catholic doctrine that Luther challenged, and in doing so, the Catholic Church responded to the doctrines of Calvinism and Lutheranism. The historical tradition of the Roman Church thus has the same meaning as the Holy Scriptures; the doctrine of justification by faith was condemned and the efficacy of the seven sacraments was confirmed. The disagreement with Charles V caused the Pope to move the Council to Bologna in March

1547 on the pretext of an epidemic. After long negotiations between Pope Pius IV, France, Spain and the Empire, the Council met again in Trento on 18 January 1562. The majority of the prelates at the Council were jurists and not theologians; hence the legal character of the «Tridentine reforms» (Prosperi 2011, 60-61). Rules for the diocesan order were dictated between the great contradictions, connected with the different conceptions of the Church, the papocentric and that resulting from an episcopal vision, which among other things stipulated the residence obligation of the bishops, listed their tasks and finally prescribed the establishment of seminars for the formation of the clergy. Rules were also laid down for provincial and diocesan synods, which were to be held at close intervals and accompanied by visits to the dioceses (Jedin 1936; Sforza Pallavicino 1962; O'Malley 2013).

What Hume puts down in a few lines describing the Council of Trent as an assembly which established such rational principles for the faith of mankind is substantiated by some of his greatest historians, who to this day have spoken about an evaluation of the development of canon law and church doctrine at the turn of the Middle Ages and of their transition into the modern era (Jedin 1936).

In truth, Hume's assessment will be somewhat different in his later *History of England* (1754-62). He will speak of an official correction of abuses: «The Roman pontiff, with much reluctance and after long delays, had at last summoned a general council, which was assembled at Trent, and was employed, both in correcting the abuses of the church, and in ascertaining her doctrines» (Hume 1983, 3, 344).

The bibliographical source from which Hume derives his judgments is likely the work of Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623), who was the first great historian of this event. In his response to Walpole, who will criticize in 1758 for failing to provide references to sources from the history of Great Britain, Hume will explain that he was «seduc'd by the example of all the best historians even among the moderns, such as Matchiavel, Fra Paolo, Davila, Bentivogli» (Hume 1932, 1, 284-5). Precisely, Hume will refer to the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *Il Principe* (1532) and *Istorie fiorentine* (1532), Fra' Paolo Sarpi, author of *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* (1629), Enrico Caterino Davila, author of *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia* (1630), and cardinal Guido Bentivoglio, author of *Historia della guerra di fiandra* (1632). The *Storia d'Italia* (1537-40) by Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), which is not on this list, was mentioned by Hume in Book II of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and one of his 1739 letters to Francis Hutcheson (Hume 1932, 1, 33-4).

Moreover, as recently suspected, Hume finds Sarpi's portrayal of the Council of Trent particularly sympathetic, as it depicts men who are obviously unable to understand and handle the events in which «they find themselves caught up, at the mercy of forces

outside their control, and not responsible for their own success or failure» (Harris 2015, 323).

Sarpi followed the steps of the European sovereigns in an effort to influence religious renewal and the efforts of the bishops to gain more authority in their dioceses. Instead, the Roman Curia succeeded in subordinating the Council to papal interests and building a centralized monarchy. The result was the so-called Counter-Reformation Church. Sarpi, who became an advisor to the Republic of Venice, was convinced that the papal authority established by the Council had finally abolished the distinction between spiritual and secular authority. It was precisely the events of the Council of Trent that enabled him to explain how this change had taken place, which could affect the political action of modern states; therefore, his *Istoria* could be an instrument of struggle in defence of secular power. Unsurprisingly, his work, published in London in 1619, immediately attracted the attention of all cultured Europe and was soon translated into French, English, German and Latin. The English translation appeared in London under the title *The History of the Council of Trent* and the pseudonym Pietro Soave Polano, which readers soon saw as an anagram of Paolo Sarpi Veneto, recognized with one “o” too many (Polano 1620; Yates 1944). However, Hume likely read all of these books in their original language with the help of an Italian edition of his works.

After all, Hume can speak Italian very well; he reveals that he learned it as a young man and that it was a knowledge of «the most liquid, smooth, and effeminate language that can possibly be imagined» (Hume 1987, 209). This familiarity with the Italian language enabled him to use typically Italian expressions in his letters and to see Italian writers as the best historians even among the modern, such as Matteo Maria Boiardo, to whose *Orlando innamorato* (1483) he also willingly turned: «I am now in a course of reading the *Italian Historians*, and am confirmed in my former opinion, that that language has not produced one author who knew how to write elegant correct prose, though it contains several excellent poets» (Burton 1846, 2, 459). But there is more. When he moved to Paris to take up the post of British Vice Ambassador to the French capital, he told his friend Hugh Blair that he had only brought four books with him, «a Virgil, a Horace, a Tasso, and a Tacitus» (Hume 1932, 1, 401), and that was not surprisingly.

Lombardy, Virgilio, and taxes

On 11 May, an ecstatic Hume stays in Mantua, where he kisses the land from which Virgil was born and admires the fertile lands that the Latin poet celebrated: «We are now in classic ground, and I have kissed the earth that produced Virgil, and have admired those fertile plains that he has so finely celebrated: *Perdidit aut quales felices Mantova campos*» (Hume 2019, 132).

Virgil was one of Hume's early loves. As a student at the University of Edinburgh, David had an insurmountable aversion to anything beyond his knowledge of classical literature, and the nature of the academic environment forced him to leave that city without a degree in 1725 to consider entering the legal profession to taking pleasure in his family and following in the footsteps of his father, who was a good lawyer. But his career as a lawyer had not even begun: while his family – he will confide in his autobiography – «fancied I was poring upon Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the authors which I was secretly devouring» (Hume 1987, xxxiii).

In Virgil, Hume, as he told Michael Ramsay in 1727, found a state of mind which he had tried to imitate, namely «peace of mind», a «liberty & independancy on fortune, & contempt of riches, power & glory», and «every thing is placid & quiet in both; nothing perturbd and disorderd» (Hume 1932, 1, 10). He argues that some verses from the *Georgics*⁴ provided «nothing short of the Instruction of the finest Sentence in Cicero», and he adds that this «is more to me as Virgil's Life is more the Subject of my Ambition, being what I can apprehend to be more within my power» (Hume 1932, 1, 10).

In Hume's eyes, the «singularly beautiful» (Hume 2019, 132) plain of Lombardy contrasts with the lush poverty of the urban areas above. During his visit to Cremona, Hume, comforted by the words of Virgil of the *Eclogues* (I, 70-71), cannot help but exclaim: «Alas, poor Italy! *Impius haec tam culta novalia miles habebit, barbarus has segetes?*» (Hume 2019, 132).

Hume lets this classicist quote be followed by a modern quote. Always following the brevity of the italics, he takes up the idea of Joseph Addison's *A Letter from Italy* (1709), which he will in all probability take with him as a guide on his journey: «The poor inhabitant starves in the midst of nature's plenty curst; and in the loaded vineyard dies for thirst» (Hume 2019, 132)⁵.

Cremona belongs to the state of Milan. After the events of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), the state of Milan passed from the Spanish Habsburgs to the Austrian Habsburgs in 1707: this was the beginning of Austrian rule, which was sanctioned by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1714 and except for the French occupation from 1796 to 1814 until the unification of Italy in 1861.

When Hume arrives in Cremona, preparations are in full swing for the visit of the new Governor-General of the Duchy of Milan, Ferdinand Bonaventura von Harrach (1708-78). Since his appointment as Governor-General of the State of Milan in August 1747 and arriving in Milan in September of that year to take over the leadership of the new

⁴ Virgil, *Georgics*, II, 467 ff.: «*At securae quies, et nescia fallere vita, Dives opum variarum; at latis otia fundis, Speluncae, vivique lacus; at frigida Tempe, Mugitusque boum, mollesque sub arbore somni Non absunt*».

⁵ Hume is quoting from Addison (1709, 7).

governor, von Harrach has found himself in a state extremely impoverished by the excessive taxation imposed by his predecessors and the ravages of the wars so that the very survival of the Austrian government itself seemed in doubt. He was consequently concerned with free trade from the unnecessary tax yoke, in particular by giving preference to the food industry. He signed treaties with neighboring states that no longer became places of refuge for criminals who then poured into Lombardy, reducing the risk of crime.

However, despite the efforts of the new governor, the economic situation in the Milan area remains very critical. And there can be no clearer picture than that which Hume suggests in his diary to illustrate the unfortunate scenario of the entire Po Valley, which is going through its worst crisis.

For several decades this area was traveled far and wide by the armies, first in the War of the Polish Succession (1733-35) and then in the War of the Austrian Succession. From 1730, Cremona was converted into a large barracks, in which troops were housed in various monasteries, in which there were stables, straw and stubble stores. Between January and February 1734, Cremona housed 15,000 soldiers, almost 30,000 in the province, with 7,000 horses. A memorial sent to the government council in early October 1735 well described the dramatic situation in this area, in which many taxpayers in serious economic difficulties were repeatedly threatened with execution because they had been deprived of all property, including money. They had plunged into poverty from the constant ordering of wagons, oxen, shelter for the troops, the clearing of hay and stubble, and the obligation to buy hay for the army outside of town. Most of the harvest was also carried out by the troops before the grapes were ripe. Unable to take care of them, the animals were sent out of town. An animal disease from the Veneto region exacerbated the situation.

The city is awakening from the nightmare of a new war that only came true a year earlier, when new taxes were used to fund other military endeavours. When the Peace of Aachen came on 18 October 1748 and Maria Theresa as the legal heir to Charles VI. and her husband Franz Stephan of Lorraine was recognized as Grand Duke of Tuscany, the citizens breathed a sigh of relief. Lombardy would have enjoyed 48 years of uninterrupted peace after nearly half a century of continuous warfare that had seriously affected the region's economy. Nevertheless, in January 1746 a new supply of wheat was requested for the troops, a collection of wagons to supply Piedmont with salt, a new supply for the fortress and the fields of Pizzighettone and again a collection of mules for the army for fear of a new outbreak of rinderpest (Capra 2009).

Concerning the landscape of the Po Valley, which Hume admired during his stay in Lombardy, the region of Cremona, according to some studies, specialized in the development of irrigation meadows and pastures as early as the eighteenth century,

«one of the most characteristic consequences of the penetrations of capitalistic and commercial relationships into agriculture, which expressed itself in a regional specialization of cultivation and investment of capital into works of irrigation and land improvement» (Sereni and Litchfield 1997, 262-3). And although the proportion of vineyards and fields with vines is decreasing compared to the last two centuries, this type of planting remains the main source of agricultural production in this region.

As it turned out, during his stay in Cremona, Hume noticed the paradox of the poverty of the inhabitants amid lush nature: «The taxes – he writes – are here exorbitant beyond all bounds» (Hume 2019, 132).

In Hume's view, there is a mismatch between taxation and people's real standard of living. What can be the reason? The enormous war debts must now find new sources for income in a state whose fiscal constraints are largely exhausted (Quazza 1971; Carpanetto and Ricuperati 1986; Prato 1908). As conclusive studies show, the state of Sardinia, in particular, was dependent on «foreign subsidies», often coming from France and also from England (Quazza 1957-58, 217-18; Storrs 2003, 245-46), which were «among the main achievements of Savoyard diplomacy in times of war and which the allies of the Savoyard state-granted because they valued what that state seemed to offer» (Storrs 2008, 102). In addition, «the Savoyard state has accumulated a high level of the national debt, largely due to its wars» (Storrs 2008, 101), which inevitably led the government to raise ever-higher taxes. For example, in Turin, just a few days before Hume's arrival, «an *editto di Sua Maestà* had confirmed all the extraordinary wartime taxations established since 1743: *la fedelissima città di Torino* was subject to an *imposta straordinaria* of 200.000 Lire, for the sixth consecutive year» (Mazza and Piccoli, 78).

In observing the incongruities of taxation on Italian soil, Hume anticipates the theme of the theories on the delicate relationship between taxation and collective welfare that he propounded in *Of Taxes* (1752). In this discourse, he states, among other things, that «the most pernicious of all taxes are the arbitrary», which «are commonly converted, by their management, into punishments on industry; and also, by their unavoidable inequality, are more grievous, than by the real burden which they impose» (Hume 1987, 345-346).

Turin, Montesquieu, and the characters of the nations

On 12 May, Hume writes from Cremona that «we lye tomorrow at Milan» (Hume 2019: 132), but he does not write anything about Milan, although he spends a whole day in this city, nor does he write about Turin, where he comes at the end a trip that St. Clair describes in one of his dispatches confirming the extremely precarious state of the Italian infrastructure as being severely delayed «by the breaking of Wheels & Bad Roads» (Mossner 1980, 213). On 16 June, Hume wrote to his brother from Turin: «It is

though the general will be sent as public minister to settle Don Philip⁶ so that we shall have seen a great variety of Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish, and French courts in this jaunt. *Qui mores hominum multorum vidit et urbes*⁷. I say nothing of Milan or Turin or Piedmont because I shall have time enough to entertain you with accounts of all these. Though you may be little diverted with this long epistle, you ought at least to thank me for the pains I have taken in composing it. I have not yet got my baggage» (Hume 2019: 133).

In Turin, St. Clair and his staff are suspended until the end of November, even if their mission soon turns out to be useless as the peace process between England, France and Holland is well advanced. In the Sardinian capital, the British nationals «form a small and highly mobile community; mostly diplomats, travellers, or academists, generally rich (except for their servants, of course, that sometimes follow them from Britain), they scatter throughout the city in hotels, rented apartments, and exceptionally, whole palaces; if their passage is not too brief, they hire local personnel for their daily needs, they rent or buy, horses and coaches, they go to see their (generally Genevan, and protestant) bankers, who sometimes rent houses for them» (Mazza and Piccoli: 100-1).

In Turin, Hume meets the young Irish aristocrat James Caulfeild, later Lord Charlemont, Irish statesman, first President of the Royal Irish Academy (O'Connor 1999), who tells of an illness that affected the Scot at the time with a severe fever and an unrequited love a young noblewoman, presumably the Countess of Duvernay (Mossner 1980, 214-16).

The other certain news of Hume's stay in Turin concerns his intellectual activity. During this time, he considered revising some of the philosophical questions dealt with in the *Treatise*. He also has the opportunity to read Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) and to record a series of observations that he will send from England to the French author, whose climate theory he contrasts with the thesis of the moral origin of national identities. While in Turin, Hume writes the essay *Of National Characters* to print it in the third edition of *Essays, Moral and Political* (Hume 1987, 197-215)⁸. In this essay, published in November 1748, Hume states, among other things, that a nation contributes to the moral interaction between compatriots, to the sharing of emotional ties, to the linguistic and geographical boundaries, and to the historical, psychological and cultural facts that determine the formation of different governments in different countries. Therefore, differences between nations, despite their real consequences in everyday life, rarely lead to the isolation of a nation when the most fruitful relationships and exchanges prevail. Hume emphasizes the idea of a foundation of natural diversity.

⁶ Don Philip (1720-65), son of Philip V of Spain and Elizabeth Farnese, became Duke of Parma by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748).

⁷ Horace, *Ars poetica*, 142.

⁸ On the analogies and differences between Hume and Montesquieu within the national character theory, see Chamley (1975, 274-305); Turco (2005); Sebastiani (2013).

This aspect is explained in a footnote added in 1753-54, in which Hume suggests a polygenetic distinction between human groups. This note refers to a passage in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) that probably naturalizes the historical superiority of Europeans over other peoples. Hume's essay on national characters laid the foundation for a sociological discussion of the differences between peoples, which, however, was limited to the context of the European nations. He claims: «The great superiority of civilized Europeans above barbarous Indians, tempted us to imagine ourselves on the same footing with regard to them, and made us throw off all restraints of justice, and even of humanity, in our treatment of them» (Hume 1983 [1748], 26). Hume's evocation of an element of natural diversity is reminiscent of Voltaire, who, while maintaining the primacy of moral causes, is an active, enlightened advocate of primitive formations separated by races which he places under historical analysis (Gliozzi 1979; Garrett and Sebastiani 2017, 38-9).

The other certain news of Hume's stay in Turin concerns all of his intellectual activity. During this time, he pondered intensely on the resumption of some of the philosophical subjects dealt with in the *Treatise*, the unexpected failure of which, in his opinion, depended «more from the manner than the matter, and that I had been guilty of a very usual indiscretion, in going to the press too early» (Hume 1987, xxxv).

It is no accident that in 1748, while he was still in Turin, his *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, a work that later change its name to *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and the text of which was a reformulation of the theses of the first book of the treatise and the third edition of the successful *Essays, Moral and Political*, were published anonymously in London. Finally, in Turin, Hume deepened his knowledge of the social, economic and cultural reality of Italy and its main production centres, so that he could make specific observations like these in the essay *Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations* (1752): «Italy, however, it is probable, has decayed: But how many great cities does it still contain? Venice, Genoa, Pavia, Turin, Milan, Naples, Florence, Leghorn, which either subsisted not in ancient times, or were then very inconsiderable?» (Hume 1987, 457).

Thanks to his familiarity with Italian customs, economics and society, he can write in *Of the Balance of Powers* (1752), for example, that «the want of industry and commerce renders at present the papal dominions the poorest territory in all Italy» (Hume 1987, 326).

General St. Clair's audience with the King of Sardinia brought little more than the expected confirmation that the united armies had raised too few troops. The English embassy is interrupted because peace has come in the meantime, signed on 18 October 1748 in Aachen and Italy under the name «Peace of Aquisgrana», the Latin and Italian name of Aix-la-Chapelle.

With the peace, Austria gets back the Netherlands, Great Britain the colonial territories and Savoy a portion of the Milanese. Although all the warring powers are completely dissatisfied with the peace, the mission has lost its *raison d'être*. St. Clair immediately wrote to London asking for further instructions and permission to break off the journey home with a visit to Italy (Mossner 1980, 213). On 16 June Hume completes the journal with the remark: «I believe we shall make the tour of Italy and France before we come home» (Hume 2019, 133).

St. Clair and his collaborators left Turin on 29 November 1748 and, after a short stay in Paris, arrived in England. Hume can be satisfied that he has finally achieved the financial autonomy that he could not have obtained by selling his first works and that he has had enriching experiences that will bear fruit over the next fifteen years, during which he will have further important ones that will bring to light writings for an understanding of his empiricism: in addition to the *Political Discourses* mentioned above, the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), the *Four Dissertations* (1757) including *The Natural History of Religion*, and the colossal *History of England* (1754-62).

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