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Public happiness: when Italy joined the European Enlightenment

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Robert Mauzi, who dedicated a landmark study to the idea of happiness in French literature and philosophy in the 18th century, did not hold back when he talked about the essays and treatises on happiness that flourished at that time: ‘Rien de sincère, rien de neuf, rien de chaleureux, rien où l’on sente l’âme. Toujours la même prédication prudente’ (Nothing sincere, nothing new, nothing heartfelt, nothing soulful. Always the same cautious preaching).¹ Fortunately, there is nothing of the sort in Pietro Verri’s *Meditazioni sulla felicità* (*Meditations on happiness*) a short text – no more than 29 pages – inaugurating a season of exceptional vitality in the history of *Illuminismo* when it was published towards the end of 1763.

Alongside the journal *Il Caffè* (1764–1766) and above all Beccaria’s [On Crimes and Punishments](#) (1764), these meditations constitute one of the manifestoes of what Voltaire termed the ‘École de Milan’.² The value of Verri’s work lies in its ability to combine a range of theories and motifs drawn from contemporary debates (Hutcheson, Locke, Helvétius, Maupertuis, La Mettrie, Rousseau, the ‘Preliminary Discourse’ and the early volumes of the *Encyclopédie*) in an expressive Italian language free of rhetorical flourishes. Verri aimed to integrate the Italian intellectual elite into the European Enlightenment, to guide the action of the Habsburg monarchy and to usher in a new era of reform for the peninsula, or at least for Lombardy under Austrian tutelage.

Verri defined happiness – a concept which had so far been confined, especially in Italy, to the field of moral philosophy or religion – as a political objective, a concrete model of economic development and a regulating principle of social relations. Happiness depends on the capacity of individuals to assimilate the principles of civic virtue: a happy man is an honest man who understands the correlation between the search for individual happiness and the demand for collective felicity, and who tends to satisfy his desires only within the limits imposed by civil and moral laws. Happiness also depends on the capacity of the state to guarantee the rights and freedom of each individual through the establishment of just legislation, and to curb the desire of the strong to dominate the weak, in accordance with the principles of the social contract. In a society that abides by the values of the social contract, the supreme aim of the ‘art of governing’ is therefore to ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number (‘la maggiore felicità possibile divisa colla maggiore uguaglianza possibile’).³ Here Verri resorts to

¹ R. Mauzi, *L’Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIII^e siècle* [1960] (Paris, 1965), p.9.

² According to Alessandro Verri writing to his brother Pietro from Paris on 13 March 1767, ‘Mons[ieur] Voltaire ha stampato o scritto o detto ad alcuno, non so poi come, che *l’École de Milan fait des grands progrès*. Così chiama la nostra compagnia’ (P. and A. Verri, *Viaggio a Parigi e Londra, 1766-1767: carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro Verri*, ed. Gianmarco Gaspari, Milan, 1980, p.361).

³ P. Verri, *Meditazioni sulla felicità* (London [Livorno], 1763), p.750 and 751.

Hutcheson's famous aphorism, which Beccaria in turn took up in *On Crimes and Punishments*⁴ – and whose long European circulation was traced in an important article by Robert Shackleton in 1972.⁵

A strong intellectual kinship and several direct textual echoes united Verri's *Meditations* and Beccaria's treatise, the two writers being close friends and collaborators. It was soon rumoured that both texts were by the same author! One of Beccaria's most virulent opponents, the Venetian monk Ferdinando Facchinei, was convinced that the *Meditations* were a new production by that 'socialist' (he was the first to use the word in Italian to denigrate a supporter of contractualist theories) and published an annotated reprint of the work to decry it. Facchinei, who also perceived the echoes of utilitarian and materialist thought in both *On Crimes and Punishments* and the *Meditations on happiness*, fulminated against 'the author of these two monstrous twins', in which he saw 'the Rousseau of Italy'.⁶

The reception of the *Meditations* in French-speaking European countries was more benign. In 1765, D'Alembert wrote that he had found the 'morceau sur *Le Bonheur* [...] plein de raison et de vues philosophiques' (piece on *Happiness* [...] full of reason and philosophical views).⁷ The Vaudois pastor Gabriel Mingard, one of the main contributors of the Yverdon *Encyclopédie*, published a French translation, *Pensées sur le bonheur*, in 1766. Pietro Verri's text, in an elegant edition divided into chapters, enjoyed a second life thanks to this fairly wordy rendition of his spare prose, reaching a wider audience than the one it was initially intended for. But its reception, briefly helped by Beccaria's growing fame, was soon overshadowed by the triumph of *On Crimes and Punishments*. Unlike Beccaria's treatise, which has been widely read and commented on since its publication, from *Voltaire* to Foucault,⁸ Pietro Verri's text remained little known outside of Italy, and had not been republished in French since Mingard's original translation. Yet his *Meditations on happiness* is a valuable document to reconstruct the intellectual genesis of *On Crimes and Punishments* and to measure Verri's sensitivity to the words and themes that nourished the intellectual debate of the second half of the century, until the Revolution: humanity, friendship, equality.

To his last legal battles in the Milanese Council, Verri's political and intellectual career was dedicated to public happiness, which he deemed inseparable from the defence of freedom, rights and the dignity of citizens. However, Verri's ambition to extend the possibility of happiness to all individuals remained, as it was for many of his contemporaries, counterbalanced by a form of caution as to the possibility for each individual to reach it, in a world deeply marked by inequalities, by the memory or the experience of military

⁴ 'La massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero' (*Edizione nazionale delle opere di Cesare Beccaria*, vol.I, ed. Gianni Francioni, Milan, 1984,p.23).

⁵ R. Shackleton, 'The greatest happiness of the greatest number: the history of Bentham's phrase', *SVEC*, vol.90 (1972), p.1461–82.

⁶ 'Mi sembra che l'autore di cotesti due mostruosi gemelli, si sforzi di addivenire, e che sia realmente, il Rousseau dell'Italia' ([F. Facchinei], *Lettera di N. N. al riveritissimo signor A. Z. S. V.*, in *Meditazioni sulla felicità. Con un avviso e con note critiche*, [Venice], 1765, p.4).

⁷ D'Alembert to Paolo Frisi, 9 July 1765, in C. Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, ed. Franco Venturi (Turin, 1994), p.313.

⁸ And has been the object of two recent important translations into French: C. Beccaria, *Des délits et des peines*, transl. Philippe Audegean (Lyon, 2009); *Des délits et des peines*, transl. Xavier Tabet and Alessandro Fontana (Paris, 2015).

devastations, persecutions, massacres, epidemics and natural disasters – let us bear in mind the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. Bronisław Baczko invited us to ‘embrace both the imperative and impatient demand of the Enlightenment to reduce the number and the intensity of the misfortunes suffered by humankind, and its anguished indignation at the persistence of evil, despite the progress of the intellect and the advancement of science and the arts. The irreducible gap between the promises of happiness and the inevitability of evil was measured by the Enlightenment’s obstinate search for the means to reduce it’.⁹

We are the heirs of the Enlightenment’s restlessness. Since the 18th century, our societies have been driven by an ideal of progress based largely on economic growth, industrial development and scientific and technical innovation. That faith is now being shaken by a highly unequal distribution of wealth and access to resources, by the worsening of conflicts, including in Europe, and by the destructive effects of climate change. How can the notion of happiness be founded or rebuilt in this new context? Verri’s *Meditations* outlined a number of principles for thought and action for us to ponder in order to stem the ‘inevitability of evil’. First of all, if happiness is not to be an empty word but a living constitutional principle, the state must be its custodian for each individual, through its public action; secondly, there is no lasting happiness other than ‘the happiness of the greatest number’, and any unequal society bears the seeds of its own disintegration; finally, there is no other place where we can build happiness than the one that we inhabit, and each one of us is invested with the duty of nurturing it. ‘Le paradis terrestre est où je suis’, wrote Voltaire in *Le Mondain* (1738 version). This paradise already seemed fragile to Enlightenment thinkers. The challenges of the 21st century invite us to meditate on that lesson from the past: to protect steadfastly both the right to happiness and the place where it can be achieved.

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⁹ ‘Il nous faut, pour ce faire, embrasser conjointement, dans les Lumières, tant leur exigence, impérative et impatiente, de réduire dans leur nombre comme dans leur intensité les malheurs dont souffre le genre humain, que leur indignation angoissée devant la persistance du mal, malgré l’essor de l’esprit et les progrès des sciences et des arts. L’écart irréductible entre les promesses du bonheur et la fatalité du mal, les Lumières le mesurent à l’aune de leur quête obstinée des moyens censés le réduire’ (B. Baczko, *Job, mon ami : promesses du bonheur et fatalité du mal*, Paris, 1997, p.12–13).