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Mapping the networks of the Accademia dei Nobili della Giudecca: a sous-champ of the 18th-Century Venetian Reforming Era

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Introduction

In the 18th century, having progressively fallen under the control of the wealthiest fringe of the local patriciate, the Venetian Senate took all major political decisions in the homonymous Republic (Del Negro 1998, 20). The latter's administration relied on specialised magistracies, the offices of which were staffed by secretaries and numerous other employees - the former often citizens and the latter members of the common people (Rivoal 2022, 424-425). These magistracies were then run by patricians who regularly changed posts, as their *cursus honorum* consisted of a succession of fairly short-term offices. These magistrates, who had no specific training or in-depth knowledge of the issues of government, had little impact on the running of their bureaus, as they generally contented themselves with overseeing current affairs while awaiting their next post (Galtarossa 2021, 113).

Faced with the challenges of the eighteenth century, such as the evolution of political approaches, the transformation of horizons of expectation and the shift from reform-recovery to reform-improvement (Minard 2009, 8), Venetian leaders adopted two new strategies. They created ad hoc magistracies (Bressan 2006, 344) and introduced a new training programme for impoverished young patricians destined for civil service. This led to the restructuring of the Accademia dei Nobili (AdN) in 1768, 150 years after its foundation (Dooley 2003, 95).

The exercises that were carried out at such institute were aimed to endow young patricians with the official style, refined thinking, and familiarity with administration that were expected from 18th-century Venetian government officials and statesmen. In particular, these documents were used to train students to argue and debate over political and economic matters, such as the *fideicommissum*, the sale of the commons, and agricultural reform, while accurately mirroring the workings of state magistracies. The importance of such political and economic exercises on a segment of the Venetian political elites of the late 18th century has been recently highlighted by P. Lanaro (2017, 157-158) and J. F. Chauvard (2018, 252-263), especially regarding the legal debates on patrimony and inheritance of the 1770s and 1780s. Indeed, such endeavours have easily built on the momentous interest for the internal workings of educational institutions (Lave & Wenger 1991 [1990], 27-44) and their socio-political impact (Bourdieu, 2003, 23), especially referring to eighteenth-century associationism (Caradonna 2012, 2-4). The AdN represents a prime candidate for this kind of analysis, for, as one 19th-century commentator recognised, it gathered "those young noblemen [...] who would then de facto cooperate in the government of the Republic" (Raines, 1990, 162). Accordingly, this latter relationship between the AdN and the running of the late Venetian state begs for an extensive enquiry.

Documents and Methodology: Reconstructing a *sous-champ* of Venetian Reformism

Now, the concentrated nature of primary sources confers a further advantage of this object of study. The extensive, and primarily handwritten, proceedings of the AdN since its 1768 reorganisation can be found in a comprehensive archival collection of eight volumes at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice. In particular, these comprise 119 *argomenti* (= debates, 8 are missing) and 85 *scritture* (= comments, One *scrittura* could be used for several arguments), for a total of 660 participations to 111 *argomenti* by 78 pupils. The temporal range of these exercises goes from 12th December 1768 to 16th October 1785 [fig. 1].

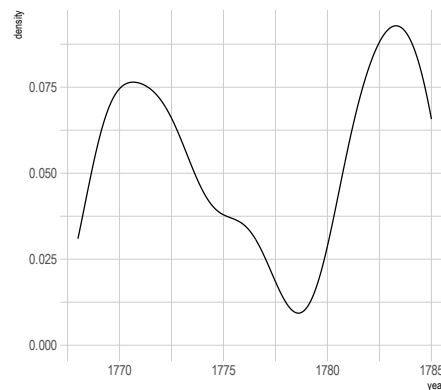


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of *argomenti* (density). Data: 91 obs. for the 119 *argomenti*, 8 missings and 20 undated.

By modelling the corpus of these *argomenti* carried out by these Venetian young patricians, it is possible to reconstruct a *sous-champ* of Venetian reformism. This analysis is based on three layers: M1, M2 and M3 (M for model), each corresponding to a different scale; each scale makes it possible to identify and understand phenomena specific to the objects studied (Morsel 2019, 136-142).

Each argument is a meeting point for individuals taking part in the exercise, in different roles (chairman, consultore, oppositore, savio or supplente), who are given a subject to discuss. Each subject is characterised by different variables. To do this, the descriptive record of the *argomento* is modelled: this is M1.

Then, for each argument, we have the documents corresponding to the contributions of each of the participants. From these documents, it is possible to access ideas and arguments on particular subjects; it is these documents that were used by Lanaro and Chauvard to understand the students' positions on the question of marriages and fideicommissum. For this dimension of the analysis (M2), we focus on the subset of 'economic' subjects in order to understand the role of the magistracies involved and the ways in which they cooperated. More specifically, we are particularly interested in the question of land ownership.

Finally, it is possible to link the objects identified by the analysis of the corpus of exercises of the Accademia dei Nobili to occurrences of these same objects in different corpora. This makes it possible to link the AdN to other institutions in the Venetian bureaucratic apparatus; to link the path of the pupils from the AdN to their political and administrative journey as members of the Great Council, the core of the aristocratic-oligarchic system of the Venetian Republic (Preto 1998, 91). This is M3.

For these three models, the core operation is the same: data is extracted from text (non-automatic processing for the moment, because of heterogeneous hands). Depending on the type of data, different tools are used, including network analysis, to understand both the ways in which individuals participate and the characteristics of given subjects. This network analysis is also supplemented by factorial analyses in order to compare classification results, but also to explore the texts using a semantic approach. (Moretti 2013, 179-240) This combination and comparison is a key element in the reconstruction of this *sous-champ* of Venetian reformism (Romele 2020).

The Three Models

Modelling the notices of each *argomento*, the activities of the *Accademia dei Nobili* are reconstructed as a network linking individuals (with different roles), subjects (and therefore interests and concerns - here the *scritture*), references (e.g. Montesquieu (1748), *L'esprit des lois*, one occurrence; Sandi (1772), *Principi di storia civile della Repubblica di Venezia dall'anno del N.S. 1700 sino all'anno 1767*, 36 occurrences), and institutions (responsible for dealing with this or that subject). The identification of magistrates and the classification of subjects is still in progress, which is why they are not further detailed in Figure 2.

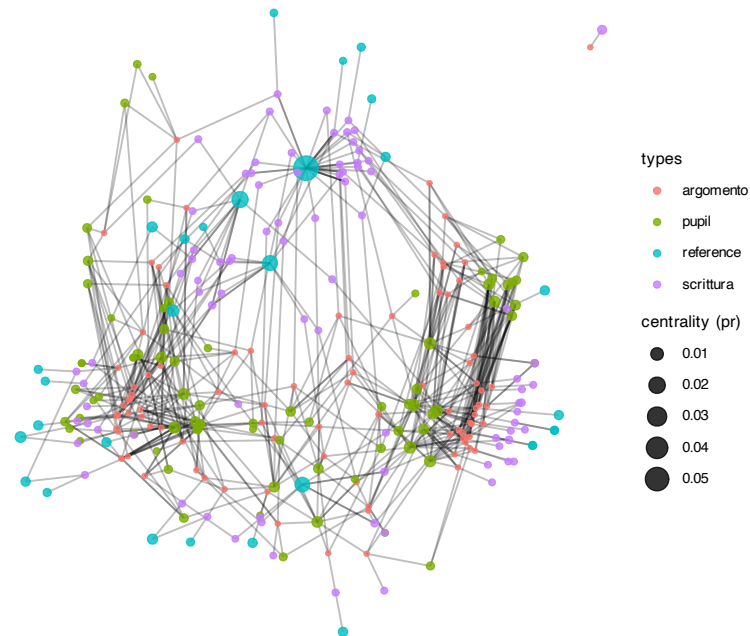


Figure 2. Network of the objects provided by the analysis of the notices. Notes: multidimensional scaling algorithm is used to map nodes' position and page rank centrality to define their size (Pedersen 2024; Csardi 2024).

Schematically, this graph (fig. 2) can be split into two halves, in order to study both interpersonal and thematic networks. For example, concerning the former, individuals do not all collaborate together and their presence is limited in time (fig. 3a and 3b). It is therefore possible to identify three types of participation: one-off, or even individual, participations; intense participations in terms of the relationships they generate, but short in time; and, regular participations over a certain period of time. This is due in particular to the roles played by the individuals during each *argomento*.

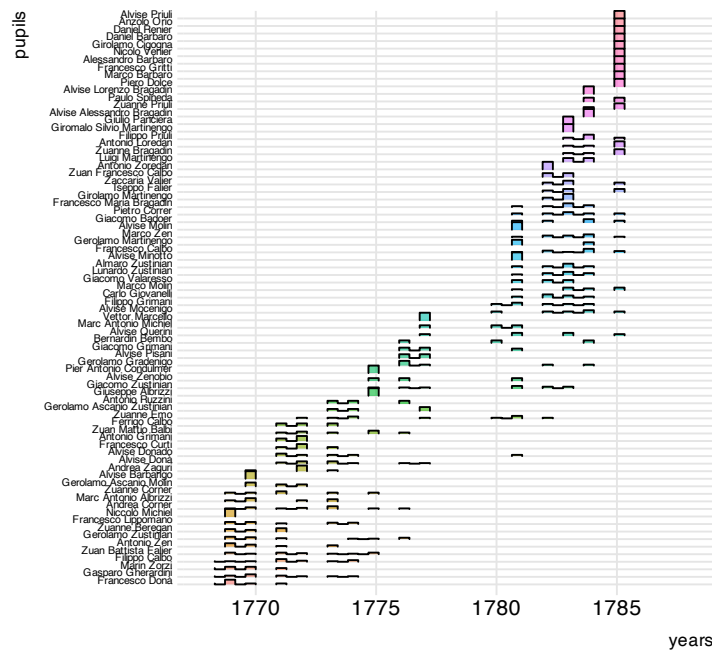


Figure 3a. Temporal distribution of the pupils' participation in exercises. Data: 78 pupils participate in 111 *argomenti*.

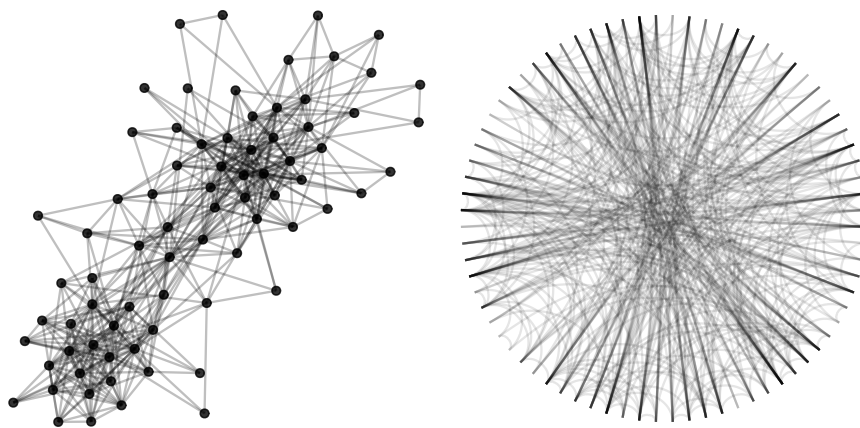


Figure 3b. Network of co-participation. Data: two representations of the relationships between the 78 pupils of the AdN. The first one has been obtained through the graphopt layout algorithm and the second one corresponds to a chord diagram (Pedersen 2024; Csardi 2024).

Then, we put aside the notices and narrow down the corpus to the writings of each *argomento* in detail. Here, it is possible to reduce the scale of analysis to look at what is happening at text level. We choose here to focus on a subset of *argomenti* in order to carry out an in-depth study of the developed arguments regarding economics, and more specifically land ownership (sale of ecclesiastical property, communal property, agricultural reform, etc.).

We have to admit that it would be very interesting to be able to compare this subset to all the texts in order to identify their specificities, but given the time cost of acquiring new data, and in the absence of a fully automated pipeline, this operation has been set aside for the time being.

Nevertheless, this limited analysis allows us to enter into the complexity of the arguments developed by the students. They put forward arguments that do not appear in the official productions of the courts they emulate, such as poverty regulation.

Finally, within the context of the HNR Conference 2024, the last stage of the project is to be understood as a declaration of intent, rather than a completed section of our research. This *ouverture* points to a future connection to be established between the interpersonal and thematic networks (M1), and the knowledge production (M2) proper of the AdN with actual coeval Venetian magistracies. In particular, references to most financial-economic bodies of the late Republic are regularly found in the *argomenti*. These include the *Savi del Consiglio*, the *Magistrati alla Provision del Denaro*, the *Provveditori alle Monete*, the *Savio Cassier*, and the *Deputati all' affrancazion della Zecca*. Yet, it is our intention to focus primarily on the *Deputazione ad Pias Causas* (internal to the *Dieci Savi alle decime*) and the *Deputazione all'agricoltura* (internal to the *Magistrato a' Beni Inculti*). Respectively instituted in 1766 and 1768, these two deputations played indeed crucial roles in the delineation and implementation of reforms concerning land ownership in the later years of the Venetian Republic.

As mentioned, the repeated implementation of network analysis, factorial analysis, and semantic analysis, in order to map the relationship between the AdN and the Venetian magistracies, should enable an assessment of the former's impact on the reformist policies of the latter. In fact, it shall provide answers to a number of interrelated questions on the modes of transfer of people and themes from one institution to another (replenishment? creation of new magistracies? *ad hoc* selection of individual pupils? *en bloc* transfer of pupil cohorts?), and, more generally, on the integration of new actors and ideas into government institutions, which have been traditionally accused of immobilism. This may also amount to both a reconstruction of the *cursus honorum* and the careers of former students of the AdN, and an exploration of changing Venetian governance practices towards specialisation.

Conclusions

Our study aims, indeed, to contribute both to the historiographical revision of a much-maligned polity, such as the 18th-century Venetian Republic; and, more widely, to the thriving scholarship on the transition from theory to practice and from knowledge to policy within early modern and modern statehood and associationism.

In this respect, the reliance on historical network analysis proves as useful as ever. Through the quantitative modelling of the post-1768 corpus of the Accademia dei Nobili in Venice we are able to establish clear relationships between all chosen items of the analysis. Their mapping and clustering allows for the production of a relational structure and holistic view, which would have been otherwise unattainable through other, more analogue means. In fact, such an approach enables us to take into consideration the diversity of analysable items - people and texts in all their roles and types - inherent in the object of study. And the same holds true for the consequent need for different scales of analysis - texts, themes, interpersonal connections, interinstitutional links, etc.

Thus, provided that the successful translation of ideas into policies never equates to the successful implementation of said policies (Garner 2005, 204) - and even more so in the case of a country destined to disappear just three decades after the first drafting of such ideas - the present study investigates, nonetheless, a potential linchpin between economic thought and governmental practices in the late Venetian Republic. The replicability of its methods and results, however, could reach far beyond its lagoon.

Documents

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