BOOK REVIEW:

“THE ACCADEMY OF FISTICUFFS. POLITICAL ECONOMY AND COMMERCIAL
SOCIETY IN ENLIGHTENMENT ITALY” BY SOPHUS A. REINERT

REVIEWED BY

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Sophus A Reinert, *The Accademy of Fisticuffs. Political Economy and Commercial Society in Enlightenment Italy* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 668. ISBN: 9780674976641.

The author decided to attract and excite readers' curiosity adopting an eccentric title which is the English translation of the Italian nickname –*Accademia dei Pugni*– used by the intellectual circle which collected the best brains of the Lombard Enlightenment. The subject of the book is the group of scholars which, in the Milan of 18th century, arose on the initiative of Pietro Verri and Cesare Beccaria and published “*Il Caffè*”, one of the most representative journal of the age in Europe. The aim of Sophus Reinert is to recover and show the relevance of the historical contribution that the Milanese authors gave to the European Enlightenment and above all to the growth and institutionalization of political economy.

The subtitle explicitly reveals what is the interpretative key of the book: the Italian economists were involved in the process of building “commercial society”, that model of well arranged modern society founded on market, human rights, and a fair and efficient legal justice which was the dream of “*Philosophes*” in every corner of Europe. Indeed, the idea of commercial society –using the effective expression of Adam Smith– is the core of the public debate of the 18th century and the source of inspiration for the great season of reforms which characterized the European history of the age.

Really, the Italian Enlightenment –with the school of Naples and Milan– is one of the main protagonists of the eighteenth-century culture and its most representative authors, Cesare Beccaria, Ferdinando Galiani and Gaetano Filangieri, enjoyed international success which had few comparisons. Yet, if its contribution to economic, legal and political theories is well known and valued, it remains less studied than Physiocracy or Scottish Enlightenment. Without doubts, Italian authors are penalised by the linguistic obstacle of the declining knowledge of Italian abroad, above all from the 19th century. An obstacle which doesn't discourage Sophus Reinert who shows an amazing mastery of Italian language and culture.

Therefore, the main merit of the book consists in introducing the international audience to the knowledge of the Italian Enlightenment and particularly of the Lombard school. A knowledge which goes far beyond the mere comment of Beccaria's masterpiece “*Crimes and Punishments*”, a work translated in all languages and known all over the world. Instead, Reinert explores the entire literary production of the “*Fisticuffs*” considering both the published and unpublished works of each member of the group, also those of the less famous among them. The result is a detailed description and analysis of Italian economic and political thought within a great attempt of contextualization of ideas and theories to institutions, laws, politics, arts, customs and mentality of the Italy of the time,

The work –which with its almost 700 pages results very voluminous– consists of seven chapters written with a style alternating narration and analysis. The topic of each section is always developed connecting it with a great variety of historical facts, public figures, constitutional frameworks, personal relations and human psychology. The first chapter is a detailed description of the historical context of Lombardy in the 18th century which introduces the reader to the political, intellectual and human background in which *Accademy of Fisticuffs* was born. The following one presents the reformist agenda of the group which ranged from criminal law to commercial rules. The third chapter is devoted to Henry Lloyd, the only foreigner member of *Fisticuffs*, a Welsh military and scholar, brother in army of Pietro Verri, whose intellectual contribute has been too long neglected. The successive one, through the political and social emergency of banditry, shows the concrete problems that the process of building a commercial society met in Italy of the age. The fifth chapter deals with the eighteenth-century meaning of the word “socialism” which was used by the opponent of *Fisticuffs* to stigmatize theirs secular view of society. Chapter six is the core of the book since it deepens the economic thought of Beccaria, Verri and *Fisticuffs* focusing on the

social aim of reforms which characterized their political economy. The concluding chapter observes how successively from the negative critique of “socialism” the Italian culture of the age reached towards the positive concept of social science inclined to the reform of society.

Reinert’s book is doubtless well argued, carefully documented and endearing, above all for non Italian readers. The only critiques which it is possible to address are two. First, the author lingers too much in historical digressions on fact and characters –some of them almost unknown also by an Italian historian– which often results in anything but explanatory for the understanding of the book’s thesis. Second, Reinert insists so much on the issue of “eighteenth-century socialism” which instead for the history of economic thought really appears less significant than the author believes. At the same time we can highlight the chapter on Llyod is so interesting and rich in informations and analysis which also standing alone deserves to be read.

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