

Ligatures of European Economic Culture: Social Market Economy and Civil Economy under Discussion

Conference proceedings of Villa Vigoni Dialogue,
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Contents

Introduction

Giuseppe Franco and André Habisch

Opening lecture

Francesco Forte

Röpke and Einaudi: from the *Civitas* of Persons to the Idea of Europe

Forum I: Historical perspectives

Giuseppe Franco and Peter Nickl

A Certain Seminal Character of Profit which We Commonly Call "Capital": Peter of John Olivi and the *Tractatus de contractibus*

Roberto Lambertini

The *Monti di Pietà* in the Middle Ages from a Privileged Point of View: the Marches

Marco Bartoli

Theft in Case of Need: Reflections on the Ethical–Economic Lexicon of the Middle Ages

Markus Krienke

Antonio Rosmini's Social Ethics and his Relationship to German Thought

Forum II: Theoretical foundations

Stefano Zamagni

Luigi Sturzo and Civil Economy

Maria Guadalupe Martino and Christian Müller

Reciprocity in the Civil Economy: a Critical Assessment

Ursula Nothelle-Wildfeuer

Catholic Social Teaching as a Pillar of Social Market Economy

Flavio Felice

Civil Economy in the Social Market Economy: a Theoretical Perspective

Forum III: Applications and perspective for the future

Friederike Welter

The Mittelstand: a Specific Entrepreneurial Profile of the Social Market Economy

Elmar Nass

Why the Microlevel determines the Future of the Social Market Economy?

Luigino Bruni

Capitalism and its New–Old Religion: a Civil Economy Perspective

Giuseppe Franco and André Habisch

Wilhelm Röpke and the Role of “Moral Capital” for the Social Market Economy

Beate Jochimsen

Federalism in Germany, Italy, and the European Union: History, Characteristics, and Perspectives

Introduction

Market economy is more than just an exchange of goods and services. Rather, it represents a cultural and social process that is characterized by intellectual traditions and ethical principles embedded therein. In this sense, the “Soziale Marktwirtschaft” (= social market economy) in Germany and the “Economia civile” (civil economy) in Italy represent two important and powerful attempts to embed economic exchange and institutions in more comprehensive socio-ethical and sociopolitical concepts. As ligatures of European economic culture, both concepts are characterized by Christian anthropology and claim to formulate fundamental statements on the conditions of human economy.

This anthology documents the conference discussion, which resulted from the Villa Vigoni Dialogue of the German–Italian cooperation in the field of humanities and social sciences. “Villa Vigoni is a bilateral association, which was founded by the German Federal Republic and the Italian Republic. Its aim is to foster the relationship between Italy and Germany in the fields of scientific research, higher education, and culture. Villa Vigoni fosters the Italian–German dialogue and opens this bilateral dimension toward a European and international dimension.”¹ Supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Villa Vigoni – German–Italian center for European excellence – announces annually a program (conferences, workshops for PhDs, and postdocs, “close reading”) focused on issues aimed at a better understanding of the European culture, history, and society.

This successful conference, in which the signatories organized together with Professor Luigino Bruni (Libera Università Maria Ss. Assunta [LUMSA], Rome), took place at Villa Vigoni, Lovenjo di Menaggio, Lake Como, from 1 to 3 March 2017. The conference, which was devoted to the topic “Ligatures of European Economic Culture: Social Market Economy and Economia Civile under Discussion,” was attended by 25 participants from Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Switzerland; professors and postdoctoral students had contributed actively and productively to the discussion. It represented an attempt to address

the common theme from different disciplinary perspectives: Theology; Philosophy; Economics; History; Social Sciences; Management; Economic Education; Social Ethics and Political Science. Focusing on the common topic from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives opened up new research perspective: a process, which also found its expression in this anthology.

The overall goal of the Villa Vigoni Dialogue was to grasp important aspects of the common European economic culture – through its manifestations developed in Germany (as “Social Market Economy”) on the one hand and in Italian-speaking countries (as “Civil Economy”) on the other. Moreover, by starting a dialog between economists and cultural scientists, it was simultaneously intended to perceive the two economic, normative and social traditions in their comprehensive historical and conceptual references. Consequently, the interdisciplinary discussion aimed at re-framing the European economic culture represented in the ligatures – and to raise a general awareness of it. For this purpose, an integrative and interdisciplinary approach was chosen, which should enable the participants to understand the challenges of the present and derive perspectives for the future.

In Italy, since the financial crisis in the 2007–2010 period, a (critical) appraisal of Ordoliberalism and the social market economy has emerged. This is reflected in recent translations of the basic texts as well as new research dealing with these traditions. On the other hand, the Italian civil economy in Germany was “discovered” by the German translation of the book “Economia Civile” by Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni. Nevertheless, the scientific community in both countries so far lacks a systematic dialog and a critical appraisal of the two approaches, which could also strengthen existing mutual misunderstandings. This obvious deficit therefore motivated our plan to organize the “Villa Vigoni Dialogue”.

More specifically, the conversation pursued the following and more precise objectives:

- 1) An interdisciplinary exchange between Italian and German scientists;
- 2) A contribution to the common knowledge about ligatures of a pan-European economic culture;

¹ (http://www.villavigoni.it/page.php?sez_id=10&pag_id=2&lang_id=2). For more information see homepage.

- 3) An analysis of the historical context and the theoretical foundations of both concepts – also designing future perspectives for them;
- 4) A reassurance of the role of economic cultures and of their (potential) contribution to shape a humane economic and social order in Europe.

In view of the conference discussion as well as the definitive list of participants, the speakers were asked to submit an English summary of their presentation in advance, which served as a basis for discussion and orientation. This initiative proved to be particularly fruitful, because all participants were able to familiarize themselves with the program schedule and the content of the respective presentations, thereby providing a common basis for discussion. Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach of the conference proved to be decisive for a truly holistic understanding of the socioeconomic interdependences. For this purpose, the conference discussion, as well as the current volume, was structured in three thematic steps:

- a) Historical perspectives
- b) Theoretical foundations
- c) Applications and future perspectives

Within each section, brief presentations were provided, followed by discussion and exchange. In addition, two keynote lectures should reflect the overall theme of the conference and reflect German–Italian relationships in a European spirit. Consequently, the conference discussion facilitated the dialog between scientists from different cultural backgrounds and intellectual traditions. Regularly returning to the base of a common European economic culture was particularly important in the course of the debates; even more so, the relationship not only between Italy and Germany but also between the other member states of the European Monetary Union is contemporarily not always free of conflict. Bridging the gap between prominent representatives from Germany and Italy, as well as between different disciplines and scientific cultures, paved the way to enrich each other and to reveal not only commonalities but also differences. In addition, it has become obvious that the historical point of view in particular is indispensable for understanding not only the past but also the present. Thus, the historical part of the conference discussion proved to be especially productive and indispensable also for providing a grounded analysis in economics, business and social science. Moreover, it became clear that, to solve contemporary economic and social problems, a common mental frame for tedious problems is required.

A central question discussed at the conference was whether the concept of Civil Economy represents an *alternative* model to the social market economy or whether it should rather be perceived as a *further development* of some of their components – due to its emphasis on civil society or virtue ethics. In particular, like a thread running through the conference was the debate, whether the concepts of fraternity, reciprocity, and sympathy should be located in the political/ civil society area only or whether they also play an important role for understanding the day-to-day business reality. In this perspective, the discussion enabled us to clarify some objections against the civil economy – formulated from the perspective of social market economy proponents. Needless to say, however, that for reasons of time, many aspects had to remain unanswered and still require more in-depth investigation and research.

A real dialog will perceive not only commonalities but also differences. Therefore, it was important to the participants that a fruitful discussion was possible even among very different basic convictions. The discussion also confirmed, that a common Humanistic basis with similar cultural roots exist for the traditions of the social market economy on the one hand and the Civil Economy on the other. Both concepts were thus repeatedly “rediscovered” as ligatures of a common European economic culture. Both traditions were – each in their own way – conceived and discussed as result of the common aspiration for a humane economic and social order. Both have the potential to provide orientation for the current challenges in Europe.

Moreover, the interdisciplinary character – enabled by the large number of disciplines represented – dominated the conference and framed its unique timbre. The diversity of methodical perspectives also stimulates concrete and innovative proposals for European policy making.

In the light of the aim of the Villa Vigoni Dialogue and the German–Italian cooperation in science, education, and culture, the conference recalled the role and significance of common ligatures of European economic culture, which gradually emerged over centuries. The participants voted in favor of this result: against the backdrop of current turbulences in the West, but also in neighbor regions of Magreb and Middle East, linking cultural traditions of practical wisdom with market economy mechanisms represents an important opportunity to humanize economic practice and preserve political and social stability.

The final discussion raised questions that should be subject of further research projects and conferences – most participants expressed their willingness

to continue participating. This volume as well as the underlying process of corrections and revisions is the first concrete prove of it.

As organizers of the Villa Vigoni Dialogue as well as the editor of this volume, we would like to express our gratitude to all the participants and speakers for their fruitful participation in the Villa Vigoni Dialogue. Moreover, we are grateful to Prof. Dr. Christian Müller for his willingness to publish these results as a special issue of the *Journal of Markets and Ethics* (JoME).

We hope that the publication of the volume does not only serve as a documentation of the discussions at Villa Vigoni; rather it may also trigger further research and additional constructive dialogs between German and Italian scientists. Together and individually both partner nations may strive to strengthen the contribution of their respective economic cultures toward shaping a more humane economic and social order in Europe.

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