

**Renata Sabene**, *Lavoro e privilegio nella Città Eterna. Condizioni di vita e potere d'acquisto a Roma nel Settecento*, Broni, Edizioni Altravista, 2018, pp. 322.

According to René Baerhel, *there is no valid history without the history of prices*, on the implicit condition that the historian is able to overcome the intrinsic difficulties of quantitative history: the lengthy process of document collection, data reliability, the inevitable omissions as well as *historical timing*, to use Fernand Braudel's handy expression. In fact, there are questions of timing set by local conjuncture, by the market, by false permanent structures, seemingly impervious to the gradual social, juridical and economic changes. Each of these matters of timing comes with its own data system, mainly numerical: sets of prices, sets of wages, mortality tables, production cycles, levels of trade, crime reports, and so forth. Numerical series, or better, quantitative history, gives historians the chance to quantify the daily actions of the overt dimension of social life: numbers that compose series, series converted into curves, curves that represent attitudes, actions and trends, curves that it is the historian's privilege to read and interpret in order to reconstruct the social history of humankind. Numbers, that is, are what give the essential indications for determining living conditions in the societies of the past.

Practically the sole concern of ordinary people in ancient and medieval times was feeding themselves, day-to-day subsistence. According to Braudel, until the mid-nineteenth century the main element in European diets was wheat, and hence bread. Even so, by the eighteenth century wage labor enabled city dwellers to obtain the necessary food. If Braudel and Spooner maintained in their work on the history of prices in Europe that sources for Rome are scanty, Renata Sabene's *Labor and privilege in the Eternal City. Living conditions and purchasing power in eighteenth-century Rome* shows, instead, that the well-defined documentation on wheat prices in eighteenth-century Rome constitutes a valuable asset, on a par with those on wage rates. This new series

enables historians to construct a continuous series and provides sufficient elements for comparison with other sectors, such as charitable organizations, public or private officers, productive enterprises, artistic bodies, and so on.

In practical terms, a helpful start to this survey is the *Fabbrica di San Pietro*, the committee responsible for the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, the subject of a brilliant previous monograph of the author's. From the start of the sixteenth century the committee oversaw the construction, maintenance and management of the Basilica.

The great merit of this new study of Sabene's is to bring Rome again to the forefront of this historiographical debate while greatly increasing our knowledge of eighteenth-century Rome. Equally important, this work takes account of seasonal cycles and the variable impact of production cycles, as well as secular movements; the author interprets and contextualizes each of these movements *iuxta sua propria principia*. But if numbers are the crux of the work, they certainly do not exhaust it. Every single data item is situated in relation to the real lives of men and women, their activities as workers and consumers.

The data documents employees' career patterns, pay levels, and the various activities carried on in real estate, administration, fiscal affairs, assistance, the professions, logistics and more. As regards food supply, the wheat market is analysed in conjunction with normative developments, the policies pursued by the government (specifically the *Annona*, responsible for food distribution and rationing), the general interests of parties involved in distribution, weather, and the impact on production. The wheat price is observed from various points of view: the different sellers involved in the sales chain, the purchasers, and the State, a privileged actor and observer. To comprehend the economic system one must first understand the proper function and actions of each unit within it. And the problems have to be considered from a twofold perspective, global and individual. Adopting the microeconomic standpoint, the author analyses the behavior of actors within the distribution chain by distinguishing the actions of each single consumer.

Taking all of these elements into account, Renata Sabene depicts a society with its own pace and rules; in addition, she deflates prices over the long run so as to assess the evolution of the purchasing power of the real wages of various kinds of employees. This analysis leads to an important conclusion: measured in wheat equivalent, starting in the mid-eighteenth century the real salaries (purchasing power) of most middle-level working categories declined. The higher-salaried positions did not suffer too much in real terms, and the lowest earners benefited from some forms of public material support, as the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* documentation shows. The middle categories, however, suffered greatly and became impoverished. The great volume of data collected and careful analysis of the city's dynamics enable the author to determine which instruments were most effective in coping with the rising prices and which strategies could successfully optimize the make-up of the food basket.

In short, Sabene's book is the end result of a complex research project involving long, patient collection, purification and systematization of the data; and the Appendix offers a truly useful foundation for future analysis of purchasing power in Rome. This monograph, that is, traces the market dynamics and the interacting forces of eighteenth-century Rome, where ultimately consensus and social peace were among the prime policy objectives of the Holy See.

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