
THE HISTORIANS

Federigo Melis and the Renaissance Economy

Mario Del Treppo
University of Naples

In 1950 Federigo Melis published the first of his major studies, the *History of Accountancy (Storia della Ragioneria)*.¹ Compared with his 'Essay on the history of Accountancy' which had been published some years earlier, this was a completely new and different work.² The earlier *Essay*, itself an impressive achievement running to over 400 pages, was the fruit of a teaching career which had begun before the war and was resumed as soon as he was released from his wartime imprisonment. Written as a text-book, it provided a rounded and carefully up-to-date survey of writings and literature on the subject, and bears all those characteristics essential to a model school text. But there was little space to show the author's brilliant and original understanding of the topic, let alone his insatiable appetite for archival research. He largely followed the approach laid down by Fabio Besta and also adopted his definition of the double-entry book-keeping system. He devoted little space to accounting techniques, since he was keen not to complicate or unbalance the general picture of the subject which he wished to present.

In contrast, the *History of Accountancy* is much less homogenous and rounded. Greek and Roman accounting receive scant attention, there is no attempt to make good the gaps for the early Middle Ages (which have more recently been described by another author),³ whereas the ancient world of Mesopo-

¹ *Storia della Ragioneria. Contributo alla conoscenza e interpretazione delle fonti più significative della storia economica*, C. Zuffi ed., Bologna 1950, pp. 863.

² *Saggio di storia della Ragioneria* (corso litografato tenuto nella R. Università di Roma, Facoltà di Economia e Commercio 1945-46), Casa Ed. Castellani, Rome 1946, pp. 448.

³ VINCENZO MASI, *La Ragioneria nell'età medioevale*, Bologna, Tamari, 1975.

tamia, Crete and Egypt, and the later Middle Ages are discussed in great detail. In fact, 535 of the 800 pages of this history of accountancy from its origins to the XXth century are devoted to the latter periods — something which in a textbook or survey would indeed be disproportionate, but which in this case is more than justified by the originality and consistency of the interpretation which emerges and by the wealth of documentary discoveries which support it.

A comparison of the *Essay* and the *History* show that in 1950 Melis was concerned above all to present the results of his own original research on two quite separate geographical and historical periods. The parts of the *History* dealing with antiquity and the later Middle Ages in Italy really constitute two quite separate monographs, which cover the problems which had principally attracted the author's attention, and which were to provide the bases for his future research. He had been fascinated by antiquity since boyhood, and had already written a book on the period.⁴ But it was to be later medieval Tuscany that became the main focus of his scholarship, and to the history of which his contribution was to expand well beyond the bounds of accountancy alone.

As an introduction to the theme which we shall examine in the course of this paper, it is worth comparing what Melis had to say about later medieval accountancy in the earlier *Essay* and then later in his *History*. To explain the revival of interest in accountancy in the XVth century and the radically new forms that it was to develop, Melis in the *Essay* was content to relate the revival to the more general expansion of Renaissance Humanism, arguing that the discovery of the ancient texts and classical authors lay at the heart of what he called the 'Humanism of accounting'. 'With the recovery of the writings of the Classical era — he wrote — and especially through Cicero and the writings on jurisprudence which, even if they did not provide a theory of Roman accountancy, did at least provide descriptions and summaries of Roman account books and gave some clues to the principles on which they were based, the commercial administrators of the late Middle Ages were to come to know the *Adversarium*, from which was derived the *memoriale* and then later probably the daily ledger... That these works were known in the larger private and public companies cannot be in doubt, since many of them were operating in the principal centres of Humanist culture, while many of those great families which acted as the leading disseminators of the new classical learning (the Medici, the Barbarigo, etc.) were themselves involved in the same companies'.⁵

In the *History*, however, this line of argument is completely abandoned,

⁴ F. MELIS, *La ragioneria nella civiltà minoica. Dalle iscrizioni venute alla luce in Creta (secoli XIX-XIV a.C.)*, Casa Ed. della Rivista Italiana di Ragioneria, Rome, 1948.

⁵ *Saggio di storia della ragioneria*, cit., p. 126.

and although some trace of the page quoted above still remains, the general context has now quite changed. The new techniques of accounting are no longer seen as the result of Humanist patronage, but rather the new techniques and theories emerge from commercial practice itself and illustrate the dynamism of the Italian merchant classes who succeeded in establishing themselves on the markets of the world between the XIIIth and the XVth centuries. Turning them to the thorny problem of the double-entry system, Melis argued that: 'it evolved spontaneously and without any prior study within the commercial and banking houses of the late Middle Ages, and was the product of the administrative demands by continuously expanding trade and traffic...'⁶ At a stroke, then, all further discussion of Luca Pacioli and other pretended inventors of the system was ruled out.

Because he himself had formerly followed Besta's teaching, he was the better able to see the degree of formalism which it retained, and to show that many of the uncertainties and the difficulties which Besta had encountered in understanding the meaning and historical significance of many of the earliest accounting documents derived from this.⁷ Some mistakes and methodological uncertainty had also prevented another of the major scholars of accounting, the Belgio-American Raymond de Roover, from seeing in the Tuscan account books of the late XIIIth and early XIVth centuries (prior, that is, to the canonical year 1340) the first clear examples of the use of double-entry accounting — and indeed even to refute that this could be so, well after the fact had been fully documented and proven.⁸ Unlike Besta and de Roover, Melis was able to draw out from the wealth of commercial records and writings, every aspect of which he explored, the fundamental characteristics rather than the notional forms of commercial arithmetic. Not only did he trace their historical development, but was able to turn the theoretical principle which had originally been adopted as a criterion to guide his research — in other words, the double-entry system, as it was defined most clearly in Besta's work — into a basis for interpreting the whole historical process which produced it. In this way, for example, he pointed to the connections linking the revolution in accounting methods in the XIIIth century with the emergence of new forms of economic activity. And this deep-rooted inter-relationship which he had revealed was to prove the hidden motor of the productive mechanism which lay behind nascent capitalism.

One has only to read the marvellous pages in which he analyses, almost

⁶ *Storia della Ragioneria*, cit., p. 604.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 428-9.

⁸ R. DE ROOVER, 'Aux origines d'une technique intellectuelle: la formation et l'expansion de la comptabilité à partie double', *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* IX (1937), pp. 171-93, 270-98; IDEM, 'New Perspectives on the History of Accounting', in *The Accounting Review*, XXX (1955), p. 410.

savouring their lexical richness, the account books of the Peruzzi, the Del Benc or the Gallerani,⁹ to see how Melis's long reflection and patient research gives rise almost spontaneously to a vigorous and comprehensive interpretation. "What do we immediately notice — he asks — in the accounting records of these commercial operations? It is at once evident that they are treated in two forms: on one hand, we see their consequences for individual components of the house's capital; on the other, the final result and its affect on the capital as a whole: this is the fundamental principle of the method which is described as the 'double-entry system'. We should pay careful note to phrases such as the following: the capitalist '*deve avere per avanzi*'; the capitalist '*deve avere per guadagno, per utili di cambi, per tempo di denari*' etc; the capitalist '*deve dare per disavanzi*'; the capitalist '*ci deve dare per spese, per prode, per salari*', for these are the terms which carry the greatest weight and have the deepest significance on the pages thick with writings and calculations, and from which we see that the flag of the double-entry system has already been raised. These phrases alone bear witness to the beginnings of the rise of capitalism, and proof of this can only be found in such accounting records. They turn on three principles: the inscription of the accounts under the name of the capitalist entrepreneur for whom they have been drawn up, the *deve avere* (or *deve dare* — credit or debit) and the term *avanzi* or similar (or *disavanzi* or similar). Then the capital account is brought alongside the latter, and in the ways in which they are placed, in their flexibility and in the manner in which they develop, are encompassed the essence of capitalism. They are a tribute to the power of capital, and hence to the power of the capitalist. They are infused with the idea and the desire for profits. They express the juridical autonomy of the enterprise. They reveal the division between capital and labour. They express 'the singular strong character' of the individual. They make clear the way in which every aspect of the enterprise's business was quantified. They are the product of economic rationality".¹⁰ In this definition of capitalism and its close connections with double-entry accounting, which we shall come back to shortly, we can clearly see the influence of W. Sombart and M. Weber.

In 1955, the 10th International Historical Sciences Congress was held in Rome and offered an impressive meeting-place for historians from all over the world. In the section devoted to medieval history, the key-note papers on 'The European economy in the two final centuries of the Middle Ages' were delivered by M. Mollat, P. Iohansen, M. Postan, C. Verlinden and A. Saporì.¹¹ The papers offered a broad panorama and provided details on all

⁹ F. MELIS, *Storia della Ragioneria*, cit., pp. 405-440.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 417-18.

¹¹ See: *Relazioni generali e supplementi*, vol. VI, of the X International Historical Sciences Congress (Rome 4th-11th Sept. 1955), Florence 1955, pp. 801-957.

major new writings since the previous Congress in Paris in 1950, but they proved to be richer in questions and proposals than firmly established interpretations and they also revealed some major contradictions. Sapori discussed the commodities involved in international trade, and particularly those goods of lesser value such as foodstuffs¹² which he had already treated at the Zurich Congress of 1938;¹³ but on this occasion he dropped his habitual anti-Sombartian polemic and followed the general line adopted by his foreign colleagues.

Melis who had for some years been carrying out his systematic exploration of the immense Datini archive that had survived in the Pia Casa dei Ceppi in Prato, made two important interventions describing the nature of his research. For the first time, he gave a full description of the accounting documents used in the trade in commodities such as wheat, wine, oil, fish, dye stuffs, wool, salt etc., which in the XIVth and XVth centuries began to move freely across the gr \hat{e} at trade routes — describing their places of origin, the patterns of exchange, and the quantities in which they were carried. The other great problem discussed in this section was that of the 'economic decline of the XIVth and XVth centuries', and Melis argued that although his own research was still far from enabling him to give full proof of his assertion, he was unable to share the views of the key-note speakers and others who had all, in varying degrees, confirmed this state of economic decline and were not prepared to admit that there was any sign of real economic development between 1300 and 1500, even in the case of Italy.¹⁴

The book which was to give full expression to these theories was long in appearing. It did do in 1962, in place of the promised catalogue of the *Mostra Internazionale dell'Archivio Datini* which had been held at Prato in 1955, under the title *Aspects of Economic Life in the Middle Ages (Aspetti della vita economica medievale - studi nell'Archivio Datini di Prato)*. It was greeted with great acclaim, and also some disappointment since it proved to be only the first in a three-volume collection and referred the reader anxious for conclusions to the as yet unpublished final volume. This was one reason for the great enthusiasm and excitement aroused by a short popular study of Francesco Datini written by an Englishwoman in 1957 and immediately translated into Italian.¹⁵ Understandably, Melis was deeply upset by this and by the way in which the English writer had used some of his notes and references. In a savage review he dismissed the volume as a mere 'penny romance',¹⁶

¹² Also published in A. SAPORI, *Studi di Storia Economica, secoli XIII-XIV-XV*, vol. I, Florence, 1955, as 'I beni del commercio internazionale'.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 'Il commercio internazionale nel Medioevo', pp. 495-533.

¹⁴ There are very brief summaries of these papers, in *Atti del X Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche*, Florence, 1957, pp. 396-97, 407-8.

¹⁵ IRIS ORIGO, *The Merchant of Prato*, London, 1957; *Il mercante di Prato* (Italian translation by N. Ruffini, with an introduction by L. Einaudi), Milan, 1958.

¹⁶ F. MELIS, 'A proposito di un nuovo volume sul «mercante di Prato»', *Eco-*

but many Italian scholars, economic historians included, and some foreigners, argued that a comparison between the Origo Datini and the Melis Datini was worthy of serious debate. At first the enormous gulf separating the two levels of treatment was not fully appreciated. But a great debate ensued, which looking back had a rather Don Quixotic air about it, and this was partly Melis's fault since he was rather unwisely prepared to come down to his adversary's level which served to draw much more attention to her book than it really deserved.¹⁷

The real battle was between Melis and Sapori. In his work on the Bardi and the Peruzzi, Sapori had come across Francesco di Marco Datini and his archive in the years before the war. At the Zurich Congress of 1938 he had given a short biographical study of the Prato merchant along with a number of other '*mercatores italici*'. At this time of imperial fervour (which it was difficult even for an anti-fascist to remain completely free from) they were considered fitting subjects for all Italians to meditate on with pride, for these merchants 'had honoured their Fatherland (to use the capital letter then in vogue) by bearing proudly its name and prestige over the seas and beyond the Alps, and had become the conscious pioneers of civilization'.¹⁸ But after the country's political and military catastrophe, historians too began to re-examine their ideas, and in the ensuing revision the Renaissance merchant was not left unscathed. Stripped of his heroic virtues as the pioneer of a new civilization, the merchant now appeared in the light of a narrow-minded, self-seeking bourgeois, greedy to lay his hands on the wealth of society, cheating the state, indifferent to political life and unwilling to make any sacrifices for his country — the perfect incarnation of Guicciardini's characters. The merchant, in fact, became one of the main culprits for the crisis of Italian liberty.

Then as now, the problem of the economic decadence of the XIVth and XVth centuries was much debated amongst historians, especially by foreign historians who seemed particularly unclear as to the nature of the problem (was it recession, stagnation, collapse, and with what prospects for recovery?). In Italy the problem was relevant especially to the political and moral collapse of the XVIth century. Sapori was particularly keen on this theme and the earlier romantic ideas and the writings of De Sanctis were being revived by the recent discover of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks.¹⁹ In my view, it was this

nomia e Storia, VI, (1959), pp. 737-63 — he praised only the pages devoted to Datini's family life.

¹⁷ On the debate between Melis, Sapori and the Russian historian Victor Rutenburg see: 'Tre volumi sul Datini. Rassegna bibliografica sulle origini del Capitalismo in Italia', in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, (1966), pp. 665-719.

¹⁸ A. SAPORI, 'Il commercio internazionale...', art. cit., p. 531.

¹⁹ One must cite A. GRAMSCI, *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno*, Turin 1966, p. 85, where he claims to agree with De Sanctis, and especially *Il Risor-*

that led Sapori to put forward a new periodization for the Renaissance — which he did in 1952 at a historical conference in Florence, creating an immediate uproar.²⁰

The argument that the origins of the Renaissance should be back-dated to the time of the great international commercial revival of the XIth and XIIth centuries and to the revolutionary emergence of wealth and power based on trade rather than land and not limited to the centuries of Burckhardt's Renaissance, which were in fact years of economic contraction, a return to the land, a weakening of the bourgeois drive and growing political indifference, was not new. It had already been suggested by Gioacchino Volpe in a critical review of Karl Neumann, written in 1904,²¹ and can be traced to Bettinelli and even to the Risorgimento romanticism of De Sanctis and Pasquale Villari. At Florence, however, Sapori was bitterly criticised for making the error of confusing the renaissance of the economy with the economy of the Renaissance.²² But his arguments need to be looked at more closely, so that they can be better compared with those put forward by Melis.

In his paper of 1952, Sapori claimed that the pillars of the mercantile economy — which was the basis of his extended Renaissance stretching from the XIth to the XIVth century — were the commercial companies or houses, their accounting techniques, the instruments evolved for making payments, the ways in which they worked, the methods of transportation they used, etc. These were all innovations of the XIIIth century, and thereafter developed little further, which led Sapori to view the XIVth and XVth centuries in very negative terms. Nor did he show any interest in the marxist argument that at certain moments quantitative change can give rise to qualitative leaps. He

gimento, Turin 1966, pp. 3-37, where Gramsci draws a broad panorama stretching from the Communes to the Renaissance and the Risorgimento, emphasising the great impact of the cultural and political revival after the XIth century yet pointing to the corporative limitations of the city-state bourgeoisie, which never succeeded in becoming a ruling class in a modern sense or in creating a new state ('La borghesia medievale e il suo rimanere nella fase economico-corporativa'), referring to the decline in mercantile drive in the XVth century, and the tendency to return to the land. On De Sanctis's interpretation of the Renaissance, see: D. CANTIMORI 'De Sanctis e il « Rinascimento »', republished in *Studi di Storia*, Turin 1959, pp. 321-339.

²⁰ A. SAPORI 'Il problema economico' in *Il Rinascimento, significato e limiti* (Atti del III Congresso Internazionale sul Rinascimento: Florence 25th-28th Sept. 1952), Florence 1953, pp. 107-132, republished as 'Il Rinascimento economico' in *Studi etc. cit.* I, pp. 619-652.

²¹ G. VOLPE, 'La Rinascenza in Italia e le sue origini. A proposito di uno scritto di K. Neumann, *Byzantinische Kultur und Renaissance Kultur*', republished in *Momenti di storia italiana*, Florence 1925, pp. 98-127. The argument was also taken up by V. Rossi 'Il Rinascimento' in *Nuova Antologia*, CCLXVIII (1929), pp. 137-150, on which see Gramsci's interesting remarks in *Il Risorgimento cit.*, pp. 17-28.

²² See *Il Rinascimento, significato etc.*, cit. Florence, 1953, pp. 132-146.

was not prepared to recognise that certain apparently similar changes or innovations taking place within a given structure can bring about a sudden break in continuity and hence lead to qualitative as well as quantitative changes. As Melis' research was to reveal, such qualitative change was in fact to result from the following innovations: the division of the mercantile enterprise into separate parts, as opposed to the undivided enterprise, even though the two had the same institutional status; the double-entry system, as opposed to the duplication of accounts, even in its advanced form; the specialisation and exclusive activity of the entrepreneur's office in the XVth century, even given the high levels of technical and methodical expertise evident in previous centuries. So far these were developments on which Sapori had also touched, but others, such as the introduction of the system of endorsement and the use of cheques, the revolution in chartering methods, the changed style of life and subsistence which accompanied the greater circulation of goods, or the development of postal services, were all discovered and given their significance in the process of economic expansion by Melis alone. But the contrast between the flourishing and the declining phases of his Renaissance became ever clearer when Sapori went on to contrast the daring and heroic qualities of Scaglia Tifi, Benedetto Zaccaria and Arnolfo Peruzzi with Francesco Datini, who became the representative both of all the typical vices of our bourgeoisie, and of the decline of all the ancient Italic virtues.

Twelve years later Sapori developed these same arguments in an essay written for the *Nuove Questioni di Storia Medioevale*. He again contrasted the early and later phases of the economic parabola which characterised the period, attempting to show how the political, cultural, religious, artistic, and intellectual development of the period were all ultimately determined by this matrix.²³ This had already been implicit in his paper of 1952, but under the new influence of the *Annales* and the French historians he explored these links further in the context of so-called 'histoire totale'. It must be said, however, that the manner in which Sapori interpreted this, and the contradictions that resulted, more than justified the suspicion with which this new methodology was originally greeted in Italy.²⁴ But Sapori appealed to the French model

²³ A. SAPORI, 'Medioevo e Rinascimento: proposta di una nuova periodizzazione' in *Nuove Questioni di Storia Medioevale*, (Milan 1964) pp. 597-621.

²⁴ Sapori's discovery of the *Annales* and the French masters, especially L. Febvre who became a close friend, came after 1950 — see: M. DEL TREPPO, 'La libertà della memoria' foreword to M. CEDRONIO, F. DIAZ, C. RUSSO, ed., *Storiografia francese di ieri e di oggi*, Naples 1977, p. XXI. Acquaintance with the works of L. Febvre, J. Dhont, P. Jeannin, and J. Le Goff enable Sapori to develop his own argument further and incorporate more satisfactorily into it the cultural, psychological, behavioural and structural aspects of the problem, as is revealed in the critical reviews collected in the third volume of *Studi di storia economica* (Florence 1967), pp. 91-96; 35-148; 297-98; 337-52; 353-63; 365-79. Sapori came back to the problem of the dating of the Renaissance in various

of 'histoire totale' to demonstrate what he believed to be the errors of the economic interpretation adopted by Melis.²⁵ We shall come to this in a moment.

First, it should be said that the parallelism between economic, social, cultural and artistic development claimed by Saporì was entirely mechanical, and their coming together was treated in very superficial terms — the longer the chronological periods dealt with, the more he lost sight of the differences and changes, and all the internal pushes and counter-pushes which give history its drive become quite lost in vague long-term tendencies. History becomes fixed on a single line of progress, just like the links between its component parts. Everything becomes shrouded in the 'spirit of the times', which becomes the explanation of everything. It was not the claim that the economy was the basis of everything else that was crude, but rather the notion that the apex of the structure was represented by the high-points of intellectual and artistic production, and vice versa. The notions, too, of "economics for economics' sake", "politics for politics' sake", "art for art's sake", were based on the *modern* (rather than the *Renaissance*) criterion of the compartmentalisation and separateness of the different spheres. Perhaps more accurately, it involved turning history on its head and confusing the point of arrival with the point of departure, since in the Renaissance itself what men sought was not a break with the epistemological unity of medieval learning, but rather to establish a method of political action (Machiavelli), a specific type of economic behaviour (Leon Battista Alberti and Benedetto Cotrugli), and an aesthetic norm (again L.B. Alberti).

The analysis of the continuities and change in the relationship between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages was given much profounder treatment by F. Chabod in the famous historiographical essays which he wrote in response to the so-called "Medievalists' revolution".²⁶ Although he too looked at these issues in terms of *Weltanschauung*, he carefully avoided the sort of global interpretation employed by Saporì which was based on a pretended unity of every aspect of history and on the identity of achievement in every aspect of

other works published between 1952 and 1964: 'Economia e cultura nel Rinascimento' in *Il Risparmio. Rivista delle Associazioni fra le Casse di Risparmio Italiane*, III (1965), pp. 1975-81; 'Moyen Age et Renaissance vus d'Italie', *Annales E.S.C.* XI (1956), pp. 433-57; 'Medioevo e Rinascimento: spunti per una periodizzazione' in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CXV (1957), pp. 135-164; 'La Renaissance: son esprit et ses limites chronologiques' in *Université de Belgrade. Recueil des travaux de la Faculté de philosophie*, t. 6, 1962, n. 2.

²⁵ 'Tre volumi sul Datini etc.', in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, L (1966), p. 712.

²⁶ F. CHABOD, 'Il Rinascimento nelle recenti interpretazioni', paper to the VII International Congress of Historical Sciences, (Warsaw 1933), republished in *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Turin 1967), pp. 7-23; 'Il Rinascimento' in *Problemi e orientamenti storiografici*, ed. E. Rota, Como 1942, and later in *Questioni di Storia Moderna*, Milan 1948, I, pp. 53-99.

human endeavour at a given moment. He presented instead a picture of the Renaissance which was not uniform, carefully flattened out and equal in all its components, but shot through with fissures and cracks. But as V. De Caprariis noted, Chabod was clearly unhappy with the composite nature of the entity which resulted, the blind-alleys and the contrasts which it contained (and in his survey of Italian writings he particularly emphasised the divorce between political and economic studies on one hand, and literary and cultural studies on the other). Here again we can see a yearning for the unity of interpretation that had been characteristic of Risorgimento romanticism.²⁷ In fact, even the global interpretation which Sapori had attempted to create also drew its origins from this same romantic tradition, with its organic vision of historical epochs — a unity derived from the spirit which pervaded their every feature. Sapori's attitude towards Italy's decline in the Risorgimento copied not only the terms but also the methods which had been used by De Sanctis.²⁸

Sapori's attempt to redate the Renaissance would probably have received less favourable attention had it not been taken up by Delio Cantimori, a historian of great skill and proven commitment to 'Periodisierung'.²⁹ He welcomed the proposals made by his fellow economic historian, even though he had no difficulty in perceiving their conceptual limitations and crudeness. How could one argue for the identity of economic and cultural phenomena when even the historians of the XVIIIth century had shown that the intellectual flowering of the Renaissance did not coincide with the flourishing of the economy, but rather with its decline? There were no scholarly grounds for the claim that every aspect of historical reality simultaneously enjoyed a comparable level of development or creativity.

Cantimori had read the brilliant essay by Lopez which had first appeared in 1952, in which he sought to refute the older theological and sociological generalisations and replace them with a more complex and dialectic notion of the relationship between economics and culture — a relationship which under different circumstances and at different moments might lead to quite different results, as indeed occurred in the early Middle Ages and in the Renaissance.

²⁷ F. CHABOD, 'Il Rinascimento' with a note by V. DE CAPRARIIS in *Nuove Questioni di Storia Moderna* (Milan 1968) I, pp. 203-209.

²⁸ A. SAPORI, 'Medioevo e Rinascimento' in *Nuove Questioni di Storia Medievale*, cit. p. 608. See: F. DE SANCTIS 'L'uomo del Guicciardini' in *Saggi Critici*, Vol. III, ed. L. RUSSO, Bari, 1952, pp. 8 and 22.

²⁹ D. CANTIMORI, 'Il problema del Rinascimento proposto da Armando Sapori', in *Studi in onore di Armando Sapori* (Milan 1957), II, pp. 935-47. Cantimori had also written on the problem of the dating of the Renaissance two years earlier, but without reference to Sapori's proposal: 'La periodizzazione dell'età del Rinascimento nella storia d'Italia e in quella d'Europa', in *X Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche* (Rome 4th-11th Sept. 1955), vol. IV, *Relazioni. Storia Moderna*, Florence 1955, pp. 307-334.

In the first case, the commercial revolution had created a spiritual reawakening and cultural progress: but in the Renaissance, economic decay followed by restabilisation at a lower level not only did not give rise to a similar cultural decline, but in fact produced artistic achievements of the highest order. But these now took on a deeply contradictory form: psychologically they were marked by a deeply divided vision of the world, some optimistic, others pessimistic, but both lacking any faith in the inevitability of human progress.³⁰

Cantimori attempted to find an answer to these problems in his own and more detailed study of the historical development of what he described as the 'Age of Humanism', which through successive progress and regression, expansion and contraction, struggles and divisions, had shaped the face of Italy and Europe from end of the feudal era to the beginnings of the capitalist age between the XIIIth and the XVIIth centuries. In his effort to preserve the threads of continuity and the unity of his period and to reach a 'universal' understanding of the inter-relationships between economic, social and religious developments, Cantimori rejected the notion of their simultaneous and identical rise and fall, but tended to fall back on an interpretation of chronologically successive developments in the different spheres of social life, which ran the risk of introducing an element of 'post hoc propter hoc' reasoning.³¹ While this amounted to a useful, although hardly difficult, critique of Sapori's work, it also led to a curious reductionism of the issues which Sapori had raised, and did not provide any real solution to the methodological problems involved in distinguishing between continuity and change, structure and development.

In the debate on the medieval Italian merchant and the economic decline of the Renaissance period, the contribution made by Federigo Melis owed more to solid archival research and discovery than to the fine points of methodological innovation. The publication of Origo's book lit the fires, since it included some discussion of Sapori's thesis. Sapori did not let the opportunity slip to return to the picture of Francesco Datini which he had drawn in 1946. Now using new biographical details and anecdotes drawn from Origo's study, he re-emphasised his earlier portrait which in his view embodied the changing attitudes that reflected the decline in the XVth century from the heroic age of the mercantile revolution and the onset of the moral decay and economic stagnation which typified the Renaissance years.³²

³⁰ R.S. LOPEZ, 'Hard Times and Investment in Culture' in *The Renaissance: A Symposium*, New York 1953, pp. 19-32, republished in *Problems in European Civilisation. The Renaissance: Medieval or Modern*, Boston 1959, pp. 50-61.

³¹ D. CANTIMORI, 'Il problema del Rinascimento etc. art. cit. p. 945.

³² In addition to the pages in *Mondo finito*, (cit. pp. 259-60), Sapori referred to Datini in the following writings: 'Economia e morale alla fine del Trecento: Francesco di Marco Datini e ser Lapo Mazzei' in *Studi Senesi*, LXIV (1952), (later in *Studi di storia economica*

In his *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* Melis devoted only a few detailed pages to describing the personality of Datini, both as a man of his day and a businessman, but throughout the massive volume he described the manifold aspects of his extensive activities. In portraying Datini's character he was mainly concerned to refute the picture drawn by Origo and Saporì, as well as the evidence used to support it, and too often adopted an apologetic tone which was not the best manner of countering the denigrating attitude towards the merchants of the period, in itself the product of unwarranted moralism and political conformism. This was essentially a tactical error, because the overall strategy of his study was perfectly sound, since the merchant can only be understood by looking at the way in which he worked. Since his activities were primarily economic this also justified, at least initially, examining them on their own. 'We can only say that we have come to know Francesco Datini — wrote Melis — if instead of dwelling on the guardianship entrusted to him and his brother, or his relations with his wife, or the public offices which he held or turned down, or his religious sentiments, or his relations with his peers, or his acts of generosity or greed, or the generous bequest with which he ended his life, we go inside the various companies which he created and look at the mechanisms which bound these different companies and activities together. Only once we have understood the capillary ramifications of this integrated system, through studying the network of correspondents and agents, and when we have identified the origins of the vitality which bound the whole together, can we then finally judge this man against what was for him far and away the most important field of activity, to which he devoted the better part of his life and energies. And this can only be done on the basis of a careful and informed study of all the different sections of his correspondence and account books. Only when all this has been done will we be in a position to make a serious and sound appraisal of Francesco di Marco Datini, the representative of the Renaissance businessman in Italy'.³³

He also believed that it was quite wrong for 'the economic historian to draw any distinction between the man and the merchant which becomes so total that his commercial activity is lost sight of',³⁴ and against the views of Pirenne and Febvre, to whom Saporì had appealed, he defended the need for a more rigorously and sectoral approach to economic history. This, he claimed, was the only way to increase understanding of the technical processes involved — much as this might displease Saporì and other converts of 'histoire totale' and raise the eyebrows of those who considered any form of specialist erudition, technical expertise or statistical manipulation to be threats to the

cit. I, pp. 155-179); 'Un nuovo tipo di mercante' in *Studi cit.* III (Florence 1967), pp. 223-231.

³³ F. MELIS, *Aspetti della vita economica... cit.* p. 79.

³⁴ Letter from Melis to Giuseppe Martini, dated Florence 5.3.1967.

eternal human values of history, which they themselves preferred to preserve in empty generalisations.

In my view, the contrast which Sestan claimed to detect in the two studies by Melis and Origo never existed. Sestan argued that they revealed 'two different ways of approaching both research and the problems of economic history: Melis, on the one hand, exemplifies an extreme technical approach which shuts out everything not directly connected with the economic event, an approach which reflects something of his own past as an accountant; Origo's approach, on the other hand, is much broader and she seeks without distortion to set economic events against the wider social, moral and intellectual life of their age to which they contributed and by which they were in turn influenced'.³⁵ Yet there is but a single road to both these ends: an understanding of social, moral and economic life as a whole is never reached by those who deal simply with superficial generalisations, and reject more specialised studies. Indeed, one can argue that it is only by using the most advanced and refined technical knowledge and methods that any really profound analysis can be attempted — and only through such analysis in depth can we come to understand the totality. What creates this totality are the ties of inter-dependence between discrete phenomena and also the gaps and discontinuities, the contrasts between ways of thinking and ways of doing. But Sestan's criticism of the technical nature of the Melis approach becomes less surprising, perhaps, when we remember that a leading economic historian with considerable technical expertise like Luzzatto was prepared to grumble about the use of 'averages' and 'medians' in the book.³⁶

Luzzatto was the indisputed leader of a style of economic history which was still too closely rooted in the late XIXth century disputes between those who considered that economic history should be the handmaiden of political economy or sociology, and those on the other hand who saw it as only one aspect of a more general process of historical development. In the desire to free economic history from schematism, generalization and the doctrinaire ideas which rightly or wrongly reduced the significance of particular historical events,³⁷ they tended to reject out of hand the traditional style of generaliza-

³⁵ E. SESTAN, 'Necrologio di Federigo Melis' in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CXXXII (1974), p. 133.

³⁶ Letter from Melis to R. de Roover dated 25.11.1967: 'Luzzatto too made some similar comments, and told me that he expressly avoided using terms such as 'medians', 'modal values' and so forth, as well as the lengthy type of notes which I had used to explain the methods used for analysing industrial costs. Yet if one is dealing with statistics, these methods and these terms do have to be used'.

³⁷ On this controversy, see Luzzatto's essays collected in *Per una storia economica d'Italia*, Bari 1967, and 'Un tentativo di storia psicologica. A proposito dello scritto di K. Lamprecht, *Zur jungsten deutschen Vergangenheit*', in *La Scienza Sociale*, Sassari 1903,

tion which often involved applying judgements and conclusions based on particular instances and developments to much broader geographical and chronological contexts than those from which they had originally been drawn.

The cohabitation of economics and economic history proved difficult, but divorce was ruled out. And while the historians who enjoyed the greatest prestige were on the whole those who had no particular specialisation, they did little to help their colleagues in economic history, but rather continued to accuse them of being overly technical in limiting themselves solely to areas of economic activity.³⁸ But when they did venture beyond discussing individual facts, they were immediately attacked. Although himself ready to acknowledge Croce's contribution to historical studies, Luigi Einaudi gave a fine description of the predicament facing the economic historian: "Once again Croce has forced the proud to bow their heads and hold back from generalisations. Nowadays, anyone interested in economic history is immediately put on guard when he comes across a study which is based on any form of general or definitive thesis, or which seeks to reveal the mechanisms which lie behind the sequence of events, and such books are rejected in favour of detailed monographs devoted to gathering documents and information on minor events of little significance. But this — Einaudi staunchly affirmed — is not enough: every historian must use his brain to try to understand the men and the events which he is describing in wider terms".³⁹

Federigo Melis had little interest in broad theoretical debates, and unlike Luzzatto and Saporì belonged to a generation which had not been involved in these polemics. He set out to reconstruct the personality and the activities of the merchant of Prato on the basis of the sources best suited to the purpose, using the skills learned in his training in accountancy. What carried him through this exhausting labour was the conviction that Datini was a perfect representative of the period which he described, reflecting the uncertainty of other economic historians, at times as medieval and at others as Renaissance.⁴⁰ And when Melis insisted on the representativeness of the Prato mer-

pp. 80-86, and 'Tendenze nuove negli studi di storia economica' in *Nuova Rivista Storica* XXXV (1951), pp. 306-17. On Luzzatto's writings see M. BERENGO, in *Rivista Storica Italiana*, LXXVI (1964) and B. CAZZI, in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, XLIX (1965).

³⁸ See D. CANTIMORI, 'Note sugli studi storici in Italia dal 1926 al 1951' in *Storici e Storia* (Turin 1971), p. 270. Chabod, however, argued that the economic history of the XIVth and XVth centuries and the price revolution had been studied using very up-to-date methods and ideas, and argued that Luzzatto and Saporì were largely responsible for this: see 'Gli studi di storia del Rinascimento' in *Cinquant'anni di vita intellettuale italiana*, cit. I, p. 222.

³⁹ L. EINAUDI, 'La scienza economica. Reminiscenze' in *Cinquant'anni ... cit.* II, p. 333-35.

⁴⁰ W.K. FERGUSON, 'Orientamenti recenti nella storiografia economica del Rinascimento' in *Interpretazioni del Rinascimento* (Bologna 1971) p. 225 - he rightly remarks

chant, he was not referring solely to the geographical breadth of his commercial operations or even to the vast information contained within the archive that had survived him.

For Melis, Datini typified the businessman of his day. He did not believe that Datini was a mere sample, which would limit the value of any generalisation once one went outside the areas depicted in the sources studied. Through Melis's interpretation, Datini emerged as a truly exceptional figure whose potentials had been fully realised in the economic and historical context of his day. And by tracing the ways in which these activities were embedded in this context, Melis was able to illuminate a whole structure which must otherwise have remained hidden. He was able to do this because the focus of his attention was directed primarily to 'the merchant company, which means examining the ways in which economic activity was moulded by the influence and energies of a range of individuals as we trace them from their conception (which in both general and detailed terms was the responsibility of the director) to their realisation. And by working in this fashion — Melis pointed out — we can come to understand not only the nature of the 'great' merchant (who is normally the only model) who was in many respects exceptional, but also the resources and the contribution of those more minor figures on whom the functioning of the company depended'.

In practice, this methodology meant that everything that was merely anecdotal or episodic was set in proper perspective and lost any claim to being representative. This immediately disposed of the earlier debates which had been based on generalisation about Datini's vices and virtues drawn from chance statements or deeds. As Melis wrote: 'We cannot form any opinion about the virtues of Francesco Datini simply by looking at apparently individual actions: there is no alternative to studying his actions within his commercial houses, for despite the often considerable distances which separated him from many of these, it was in them that his whole life was immersed'.⁴¹

A good example of a purely episodic and anecdotal detail is provided by the case of the slave girl whom Francesco had fathered out of wedlock, and then took into his house and entrusted to his wife (although Melis in fact plays the game of Datini's denigrators by trying to justify this). But whatever its moral significance, this in itself was a purely individual fact, and if it is to be used to make any judgement about merchants in general in the XIVth and XVth centuries (and why only merchants?) would need to be

that: 'Economic History Review and other journals frequently use a periodization that places a division between the late Middle Ages and the start of the modern period around the year 1500, and use either term to apply to the economic history of the Renaissance. Even when historians give the term Renaissance precise chronological dates, they simply add to the confusion, given the widely different chronological periods to which the term is applied'.

⁴¹ MELIS, *Aspetti della vita economica*, cit., p. 118.

supported by much wider research and by much wider sources. But many of the views and attitudes expressed in Datini's correspondence lose this casual and incidental character, since Melis is able to demonstrate how they typified the entrepreneur's way of thinking and way of acting, as well as the ways in which the system in which he operated functioned.

When Francisco wrote to one of his partners, for example, that '...from this morning onwards Istoldo and I have done nothing but read, pausing only to pray and eat — and there is still so much left to read that it will take us at least two days'; or on another occasion 'I cannot write more because it is already 6 o'clock and I must still write to Simon and Tomaxo di ser Giovanni, and I would also like to get a bit of sleep';⁴² this was not merely the result of one particularly exhausting day, but rather an authentic picture of the working habits of the new style of entrepreneur-director who lived permanently surrounded by correspondence. And when another correspondent wrote telling Datini that he needed 'a boy of about 12 or 14 to place in the haberdashery or leather goods shop, one that is without a father or mother or brothers so that he may the more fully devote himself to the work of the shop'⁴³, this had little significance as far as the morality of either merchant was concerned, but it does tell us much about the way in which the Italian and Tuscan economy of the XIVth and XVth centuries functioned.

The different themes which had been brought together in the study of the 'Datini years' thereafter became individual research topics which Melis pursued for the rest of his career. None of them was ever given up, each became steadily fuller and more detailed, be it the merchant himself, his commercial enterprise, its systems of accounting, transportation, banking, manufactures and even, although to a lesser extent, agriculture too. But this research never became reduced to a series of individual research topics, and nor in Melis's mind did it constitute the essential parameter of any exhaustive or complete study of economic history. Although it was rarely made explicit, his research was always related to a more general structure of theory and interpretation. The themes to which he increasingly devoted detailed research were all part of a closely inter-related argument. By looking at the individual components, what he sought to reveal was the nature of the links binding them together and the ways in which these developed. In fact, the individual themes are revealed to be the dynamic components of what might be described as an explanatory model of medieval capitalism, at least in the areas and periods covered by Melis's research. They have only to be detached from their immediate context and placed in logical order, something which is neither difficult nor arbitrary since Melis was concerned not with every conceivable aspect of a given theme, but rather with those which were rele-

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

vant for understanding how it was connected with, and how it inter-related with, the others. Between the merchant, his business house or his methods of accounting there could be no atomistic separation, just as there could be no separation between the context in which the merchant operated and the methods he used. Melis was very well acquainted with Sombart's concept of the economic 'system', and he even jokingly used the term in the title of what was a genuine gourmet's handbook (*Come bere il vino nel sistema dei cibi*).⁴⁴

The theoretical premises which lay behind his research can easily be traced back to Werner Sombart and Max Weber. It was from the writings of the author of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* that Melis drew his theory of economic activity, of the rationality of monetary calculations and of the particular ways of calculating capital, the significance of the distinction in accounting between the 'house' and the 'firm', as well as the more general interpretation of capitalism as a form of economy rationally orientated towards the generation of continuous profits through forecasting the needs of the market.⁴⁵ At the same time he was not prepared to consider the other political, scientific and religious factors which form part of Weber's complex sociological theory, and which converged to produce those forces of rationality which were to produce the modern world. And as well as a number of important concepts, Melis also drew from Sombart the principal arguments running through the second edition of *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*.

But Melis was also able to make a number of original contributions of his own. This is evident in the way that particular themes and concepts which both Weber and Sombart described and applied over broad sweeps of history (such as rationality and entrepreneurial talent, as classifications of the morphology of capitalist culture), became in Melis's writings the specific components of a particular economic system, that of later medieval Tuscany. This is clearly shown in the way that he applied the Sombartian equation of capitalism and double-entry book-keeping. 'The German historian — Melis wrote — first asserted what I would describe as the *partnership of double-entry book-keeping and nascent capitalist enterprise*. (...) But, for lack of documentary evidence, he extended over too long a period the development of this method and was unable to assign its origins to any particular place or time'.⁴⁶ Not only did

⁴⁴ In *Atti della 2ª Settimana dei vini tipici e pregiati* (Siena 15-23 June 1968), Siena, pp. 61-81.

⁴⁵ MELIS closely studies *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* while writing his *Storia della Ragioneria* in which he cited the Tubingen edition of 1922 (corresponding to the section between pp. 86-385 of the Italian translation *Economia e Società*; Milan 1961, vol. I).

⁴⁶ F. MELIS, *Aspetti cit.* p. 394. Sombart (see Italian edition trans. by G. Luzzatto, *Il Capitalismo moderno*, Florence 1925, pp. 252 ff.) followed up his illuminating general argument with some very inaccurate examples, as, for example, when referring to the public origins of the new accounting system in Italy, when attributing the invention of the double-entry system to L. Pacioli, and when describing the uniform and unilinear

he provide new documentary evidence on the origins of this process, as we have seen, but he also reaffirmed the constructive and progressive consequences of this partnership, above all in the first stages of capitalism, in the period of its origins (since thereafter the double-entry system quickly became standard practice and can be found even in the accounts of humble farm managers). He revealed the full significance of Sombart's famous phrase 'in the beginning there was the account book'.⁴⁷ This concurred perfectly with Melis' own argument: the new impersonal structure of the Tuscan commercial firm found its essential expression in the system of accounting, the double-entry system whose origins were coterminous with those of capitalism, of which it was neither creator nor product, as Sombart had rather ambiguously concluded.⁴⁸

It was this historical perspective that led Melis to put his finger on the qualitative leap which broke through the bonds of historical continuities. But this is not the only example of the close conceptual agreement and empirical divergence between Melis and Sombart. Saporì's critique of Sombart's work had been based on refuting specific aspects of his description of medieval Italian capitalism (the rudimentary methods of calculation used, the lack of specialisation in commercial activities, the relatively low value of the goods traded and the largely artisan character of medieval commerce etc.).⁴⁹ In the case of Melis, however, his criticism of particular assertions made by the German economist is balanced by a convinced commitment to the broader outlines of the thesis which he had constructed, and which his own historical research fully supported. It was Schumpeter who remarked when comparing Sombart and Marx that: 'Sombart sows ideas and leaves them to their fate. Marx was concerned with answers, Sombart with questions... Sombart was

stages of development from the appearance of the *ratio* in the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, the balancing of debits and credits in the account books, the capital account, the appearance of the profit and loss account, and finally the commercial inventory, without attempting to see how these were related.

⁴⁷ SOMBART, *Il Capitalismo Moderno*, Italian ed. transl., Florence 1925, p. 253.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258: 'one may ask whether capitalism created for itself in the double-entry accounting procedure a means for increasing the activities of its own forces, or whether it was in fact the double-entry system that itself created capitalism'. The way in which Sombart linked double-entry accounting with rational economic behaviour has been questioned by B.S. YAMEY, 'Accounting and the Rise of Capitalism: Further Notes on a Theme by Sombart' in *Studi in onore di A. Fanfani* (Milan 1962) VI, p. 833; *Id.*, 'Notes on Double-Entry Book-Keeping and Economic Progress' in *Journal of European Economic History* IV (1975) pp. 717-723. Yamey's argument had been contested by F.C. LANE, 'Double Entry Book-Keeping and Resident Merchants' in *Journal of European Economic History*, VI (1977) pp. 177-91 who also examines various recent interpretations of the concept of the double-entry system.

⁴⁹ On Saporì's attitude towards Sombart, see in particular: *Studi di Storia Economica* cit. I, (Florence 1955), Preface; and 'Werner Sombart (1863-1941)' in *Studi etc.* II, pp. 1083-1111.

prepared to try out new ideas and new interpretations, the main value and purpose of which was often to encourage counter-reactions...'.⁵⁰ I think that few scholars have studied as closely as Melis the vast range of questions which arise from Sombart's writings and have attempted to provide the answers they call for.⁵¹

To understand the nature of the model used by Melis, we must start with the businessman. What we find is not *homo oeconomicus*, animated by a capitalist spirit in the sense of a limitless appetite for profit. Melis rejects the reductionism of economic activity to the kind of psychological motivation found in the writings of Pirenne or the early Sombart (even though this recurs in his later work as well).⁵² Nor did Melis believe that an adequate definition could be found in the principles of rationality which guided such activities.⁵³ The search for profits is stripped of its original psychological and subjective content, and becomes instead the key-stone of the new mechanism, the commercial firm or enterprise, for this constituted its substantial form. Although at a particular moment in its development it had been the merchant who had created the commercial firm, the businessman in turn became a product of the firm as it developed, for with the evolution of its double-entry system the merchant became the agent who was to receive in proportion to the capital he had invested and the profits which resulted, and was to give in proportion to the losses incurred by the enterprise as a whole, corresponding with the *deve avere* and *deve dare* of the impersonal accounts. The true economic agent, therefore, became the firm itself (the *Geschäft*), the abstract form assumed by the capitalist enterprise — this was what lay at the centre of Melis' attention,

⁵⁰ Quoted by A. Cavalli in his introduction to W. SOMBART, *Il Capitalismo moderno*, Turin 1967 p. 21, n. 21.

⁵¹ Melis's studies on the accounting systems of the Tuscan commercial enterprises are a direct response to the question posed by Sombart in *Il Capitalismo moderno*, Florence 1925, p. 264: "it is precisely on this issue that we need more information: to what extent and to what degree were the commercial enterprises of this period managed along lines that conformed to the precepts and concepts of the theoreticians of commercial science".

⁵² Even in the 2nd edition of his book (*Il Capitalismo moderno*, Florence 1925 p. 210) Sombart again said: "There can be no doubt that capitalism was the achievement of individuals of exceptional gifts... In the beginning there was the 'creative activity' of the individual, of a single bold and enterprising being, who bravely took the decision to break away from the rut of traditional economic activity and strike out along new paths. The history of the origins of capitalism is therefore the history of individuals".

⁵³ Criticising Saporì's interpretation of Datini, Melis wrote in the *Nuova Rivista Storica*, L (1966) p. 696: "Certainly Saporì did refer to 'rationality' and 'depth of technical expertise', and to the qualities of mental clarity, order and logic evident in, and fitting to, his 'business activities', yet this alone is not enough and does not fully comprehend the problem of the businessman".

and this radically altered a perspective that had hitherto been focused on the figure of the entrepreneur alone and the 'italici mercatores' of traditional historiography. Here again we can detect a direct debt to Sombart. 'Men are the movers of economic activity, but not men on their own or by themselves, but in partnership with wealth, and the ways which they devise to direct it and influence its production, circulation, distribution and consumption. Albeit in ways that may differ, men concert their individual energies to combine them with the material energies of wealth, the two forms merging and amalgamating'.⁵⁴ Eventually the firm itself attains a degree of autonomy which seems 'in most cases to have happened — as Sombart wrote, although the statement would seem to fit Melis's argument even better than his own — without either the awareness or the wish of the businessmen themselves'.⁵⁵

No-one before Melis had tried to analyse the working of these commercial firms from inside, and from this history from inside was to emerge a whole series of new themes and problems, ranging from the organisation and ramifications of the firm to the ways in which its personnel was recruited, the nature of their tasks and their careers.⁵⁶ Saporì had, of course, begun to move in this direction,⁵⁷ and it was he who introduced the concept of history from inside, even though he was not fully aware of its significance.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ F. MELIS, 'La civiltà economica nelle sue esplicazioni dalla Versilia alla Maremma (sec. X-XVII)' in *Atti del 60 Congresso Internazionale della Dante Alighieri* (Livorno 13th-17th Sept. 1970), p. 22.

⁵⁵ W. SOMBART, *Il Capitalismo moderno*, cit., p. 245.

⁵⁶ F. MELIS *Aspetti*, cit. p. 125: "by the term the 'inside history' of a firm, we mean the history of the organism of which it consists, both in itself and for itself: in other words, the constituent components, the individuals and the assets, and the different forms of personal energy which it attracts to itself (both the permanent and the temporary staff); the siting of its headquarters and its various ramifications, both in their original and their subsequent forms; its duration and the ways which it was in theory subdivided, and the results of its various component measured in terms of profit and loss. Essentially, what we are studying are the individuals and the assets which were brought together in a certain place and in a certain context of commercial activity, and not only with the management ... we then find ourselves, as it were, inside the walls of the firm — or rather in the 'executive offices', rather than in the workshops where the bustle of day-to-day management went on".

⁵⁷ Melis himself was aware of this, and when he tackled the new procedures he wrote asking Luzzatto for his opinion, who replied: 'As far as your question about the use of the term 'inside history' is concerned, I can only say that I had never come across it before Saporì adopted it. And since I think that I have read virtually everything that has been written on the commercial firms of the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, can be reasonably certain about this" (letter from Luzzatto to Melis, Venice 17.1.1957).

⁵⁸ Saporì had taken up the problem, in *La crisi delle compagnie mercantili dei Bardi e dei Peruzzi* of 1926, but in *Una Compagnia di Calimala* (1932) he described as 'the external history of the company' a series of themes (the partners, commercial contracts,

Once the mechanism had been set in motion, its evolution followed a logical pattern. The single firm (*azienda indivisa*) gave way to the firm composed of separate agencies (*filiali*), so to a system of firms (a plurality of legal entities, but single economic organism), then to the limited partnership company (*compagnia per via di accomandita*) and eventually at the very end of the XVIth century to the simple joint-stock company (*società in accomandita*).⁵⁹ The contributions made by Melis to the understanding of many aspects of this development, in the identification of specific commercial institutions, the dating of their origins, and in the course of debates with other historians, proved definitive.⁶⁰

We have already explained how the attention devoted to methods of accountancy was not merely a brilliant innovation, but revealed the essential element in both the functioning of the commercial firm and the rationality of the entrepreneur. The same was true of what Melis called the culture that was fundamental to the system's mechanism. The definition of the merchants' culture which resulted from his analysis completely did away with the older type of studies which attempted to trace the psychological forces underlying economic behaviour. But even though commercial correspondence provided ample illustration of the literary and spiritual values which infused the new attitudes and forms of production, Melis argued that these were not in themselves sufficient to evaluate their practical influence on economic activity. Nor was it enough simply to show that the operators were able to read and write or do their sums accurately — the arguments on which Sapori's polemic with Sombart had been exclusively based.⁶¹ Nor could a merchant culture be deduced from the type of education available in a particular city or town although this was another of the topics explored in the pioneering studies of Pirenne, Fanfani and Sapori. Among the scholars who had preceded him.

the employees, the warehouse, the features of the firm), which he distinguished from others (presumably the elements of its 'inside history') such as its commercial operations, its administration and its accounting methods. But in the essay 'Storia interna della compagnia', dei Peruzzi', of 1934, in *Studi etc. cit.* (1955), pp. 653-94, he gave the term its correct meaning.

⁵⁹ F. MELIS, 'Le società commerciali a Firenze dalla seconda metà del XIV al XVI secolo', in *Troisième Conférence Internationale d'Histoire Economique* (Munich 1965), Paris 1974, pp. 47-62.

⁶⁰ For example, with the claim made by both de Roover and Sapori that the Medici company but not the Datini company anticipated a sort of holding company, or with Sapori's claim that the *società in accomandita* dated from 1408: A. SAPORI, 'Dalla "compagnia" alla "holding"', in *Studi etc.*, III (Florence 1967), pp. 121-133; DE ROOVER, *Il banco Medici dalle origini al declino (1397-1494)*, Italian edn Florence 1970, pp. 2 and 89.

⁶¹ A. SAPORI, 'La cultura del mercante medievale italiano', in *Studi cit.*, I, pp. 53-93.

Melis was closest to de Roover,⁶² and like him he was convinced that the culture of the merchant must be seen in terms of his professional training and the particular skills and techniques which this provided — first of all, the skills of accountancy. Yet again the account books and the commercial records become the primary and indispensable source. In addition, Melis argued that a mercantile culture could first be identified when economic activity became raised to the status of a subject of inquiry and study in its own right.

The culture of the merchants of the XIVth and XVth centuries, therefore, became a specific aspect of the new form of enterprise and was a direct product of the evolution of the commercial firm which enabled the entrepreneur to devote himself exclusively to the management and study of economic phenomena. The knowledge which resulted was systematic and rational, consisting of 'know-how' — as Luigi de Rosa perceptively remarked⁶³ — and information. The accumulation of knowledge was both parallel to the accumulation of capital and consubstantial with it, and was apparent in these centuries wherever the Florentine merchants operated. The transoceanic voyages of Da Verazzano, Columbus and Vespucci and the great geographical discoveries of the age were the fruit of the dual process of accumulation.⁶⁴

In the great commercial firms, and in them alone, Melis argued, the pure manager emerged. No longer involved in day to day business, he could devote himself entirely to study, and so create around him an ever richer armoury of methods and techniques, be it by extending the network of his correspondents or by moving on from simple generalised accounting (balance sheets, profit and loss accounts, capital accounts) to tackle more analytical

⁶² R. DE ROOVER, 'Aux origines d'une technique intellectuelle...', *art. cit.*, although despite its title and the fact that it was published in the *Annales*, it does not deal with the history of 'mentalities'.

⁶³ Speech delivered in the Aula Magna of the University of Florence, 29th Dec. 1973, in tribute to F. MELIS, published in *A Federigo Melis*, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence, 1976, p. 16.

⁶⁴ Melis presented this argument at the seminar on Amerigo Vespucci held at Florence in 1954 and at the conference organised by the Chamber of Commerce at Pistoia in Dec. 1966 on 'Giovanni da Verrazzano and the development of Tuscan navigation', neither of which papers have been published, although he did touch on the same argument elsewhere, see: 'Uno spiraglio di luce sul finanziamento del primo viaggio di Giovanni Da Verrazzano', in *Giovanni Da Verrazzano*, Florence 1970, pp. 24-54; 'La participación toscana en la navegación atlántica', paper read at the IX *Coloquio Internacional de Historia Marítima* (Seville, 24th-30th Sept. 1970) now republished in F. MELIS, *Mercaderes italianos en España (siglo XIV-XV)* with an introduction by F. Ruiz Martín (Seville 1976, pp. 167-175; 'Il commercio transatlantico di una compagnia fiorentina stabilita a Siviglia', in *V Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón* (Saragossa, 4th-11th Oct. 1952), *Estudios*, III, *Fernando el Católico e Italia* (Saragossa, 1954), pp. 129-206.

methods of accounting, which would enable him to introduce continuous improvements, and to obtain increasingly accurate information on local conditions and situations in an economic world that was ever expanding, or on the innumerable people with whom the firm found itself dealing. Through such information the great merchant was able to give shape to the world in which he operated.⁶⁵

In the nature and development of this culture, the subjective and spiritual characteristics are carefully related to those of organisation and structure, and one new element begins to stand out clearly — trust. Seen not so much as a value in its own right, but rather as a prerequisite for obtaining financial credit (in that sense similar to what Weber called the 'honesty' of the capitalist), trust was looked on as a socially useful virtue (in the Aristotelian sense). It became the ethic determining the merchant's practical behaviour, and replaced the values of an earlier age, substituting in public opinion the *fides publica* of the notary.

The systematic and organic nature of Melis' interpretation is best shown by the congruence which he revealed between the type of businessman and quality of his activities. Given that the merchant and his firm were primarily concerned with marketing, or in other words distribution, the problem is to discover to what extent these activities also spilled over into other fields, such as agriculture, banking or manufacturing. If it can be shown that as a result the merchant's actions were to have decisive and determining effects on the development of medieval and Renaissance society, then any criticism of the restricted and sectoral nature of Melis' interpretation would be undermined. And following from this there is also the problem of the way in which these activities were conducted, and whether they did, or did not, contribute to social tension and conflict between opposing groups.

Melis was keenly aware of the relationship between distribution, production and consumption, but he claimed that it was in the field of distribution alone that the great innovations which were to have such major consequences in this period are to be found. The merchant's control stretched across the arc from production to consumption, since not only was he in control of transportation, but through careful study and application was able to build up a formidable body of information and practical techniques, such as analytical cost accounting, which could be used to influence and shape the economic world in which he operated in ways that would not otherwise have been possible had the relations between production and consumption simply been left to the initiatives of the producers and consumers. One example of this

⁶⁵ See the splendid essay by MELIS, 'Intensità e regolarità nella diffusione dell'informazione economica generale nel Mediterraneo e in Occidente alla fine del Medioevo', in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel*, I, *Histoire économique du monde méditerranéen: 1450-1650* (Toulouse, 1973), pp. 389-424.

was the reorganisation of shipping charters, so that the originally rigid structure of tariffs became more varied and elastic, more closely related to the value of the goods carried.⁶⁶

The entrepreneur and the great mercantile firms had to find ways of levelling out the financial shortages which were created in the course of their operations, and as far as initial and supplementary investments were concerned the problem was solved once recourse to short and long term loans became common mercantile practice. Taking demand as a starting point, a mechanism was again created which could not have been brought about by supply alone. Wealth lying idly in bank deposits was drawn into the productive cycle, so that neither the capital of the merchant or of other savers remained inactive for a moment. Thus was commercial credit born, and the forms in which it was drawn became increasingly flexible and straightforward (the *giro-conto*, the cheque, the *girata fuori dal titolo* and the *girata cambiaria*).⁶⁷

We have arrived at what Melis described as the modern bank, which financially supported and assisted the activities of the mercantile firm without flagging. These were quite different from the amortized loans made to princes and rulers in the hope of acquiring political privileges, gaining access to difficult areas or obtaining fiscal exemptions, which although marked by a Weberian criterion of acquisitiveness still represented a politically orientated form of capitalism. But when operating credit began to be provided through uncovered loans, which the expansions of commercial trust made possible and which was effected by means of written bills, then the evolution of modern banking was very nearly completed.⁶⁸

So, on one hand, the structure of charter tariffs became differentiated and more related to cost, and, on the other, the previously complex systems of credit were simplified and tailored to the needs of specific operations, each form attaining its own financial autonomy. But the effects of these changes in systems of transportation did not only affect the circulation of commodities in the commercial sector — they had equally important consequences for both

⁶⁶ F. MELIS, 'Werner Sombart e i problemi della navigazione del Medioevo', in AA. VV., *L'opera di Werner Sombart nel centenario della sua nascita*, Milan, 1974, pp. 86-149.

⁶⁷ See particularly: F. MELIS, 'Sulla non astrattezza dei titoli di credito del basso Medioevo', in *Studi in onore di Giuseppe Chiarelli* (Milan, 1974), IV, pp. 3686-3701.

⁶⁸ Melis first examined the problem of the medieval bank in his *Note di storia della banca pisana del Trecento*. (Pubblicazioni della Società Storica Pisana, n. 1, Pisa 1955, pp. 265 and came back to it in greater detail in his later works: 'Origenes de la Banca moderna', in *Moneda y Credito*, n. 116 (1971), pp. 3-18; 'Motivi di storia bancaria senese: dai banchieri privati alla banca pubblica', in *Note Economiche*, V (1972), pp. 47-64; *Guida alla Mostra internazionale di Storia della Banca, secoli XIII-XVI* (Siena, 1973), pp. 231; and in the as yet unpublished paper given at the *IV Settimana di Studio* (Prato, 14th-21st April 1972), in 'La grande conquista trecentesca del "credito di esercizio" e la tipologia dei suoi strumenti fino al XVI secolo'.

production and consumption. Once the great merchants succeeded in breaking down the absolute and traditional ties binding the producer and the consumer, which had meant that every effort was devoted to producing as many necessities of life as close to the centres of habitation as possible, they set in motion a major process of agricultural development. It now became possible to devote land to the crops to which it was best suited by geography and climate, and this led to the abandonment of infertile land, to crop specialisation and selection (with consequent increasing regional diversity), and the expansion in the trade of the lesser value agricultural products (wines, oil, and rice) or of those which had previously played little part in commerce (like fruit). It was the merchant, again, who studied the particular propensities of given areas, designating as good 'wine-growing areas' ones that had not previously been so considered, or which would have found it difficult to establish such a reputation on their own, and who was prepared to invest a part of his profits in purchasing such land. There was no 'rush for land' or return to the soil in the sense of a search for safety at a time of commercial crisis.⁶⁹ The consolidation of commercial trust and personal reputation had rendered static investment in land as a security unnecessary, and landed investment now took on a new capitalist significance. It meant acquiring a new source of production, in combination with commercial investment, by those who had the means to exploit it. As a result, the different branches of potential economic activity began to be integrated.

Above all it was in the relationship between commerce and industry that Melis was able to reveal the peculiarities of the economic system that he had studied. As in the case of agriculture, it was the great merchant who broke the ties binding the artisan producer to the consumer, separating the two by a new and greatly expanded area of commercial activity. And although the motive may have been the pursuit of profit, the role played by the merchant was not that of a mere parasite, but led to the creation of a totally new form of economic organisation, which Melis described as "*l'economia dei grandi spazi*". First, the merchant introduced an industrial section in the system of the firm, although it remained nonetheless primarily a commercial and banking organisation, and then this took on a more specific and independent form with the creation of the '*arte della lana*' or the '*arte della tinta*', separate wool or dye workshops, within the system of the firm itself. At the same time a separate banking organisation was also beginning to take shape within the same structure. Yet the merchant's involvement in these activities retained

⁶⁹ Although Melis only touched on certain aspects of agriculture, see: 'Produzione e commercio dei vini italiani (con particolare riguardo alla Toscana) nei secoli XIII-XVIII', in *Annales Cisalpinnes d'Histoire Sociale*, I (1972), pp. 107-133; "Note sulle vicende storiche dell'olio d'oliva (secoli XIV-XVI)", in AA. VV., *Dell'olivo e della sua cultura* (ed. Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, Florence, 1972), pp. 11-21; 'La bonifica della Versilia del 1559', in *Rivista di Storia dell'Agricoltura*, X (1970), pp. 19.

its commercial character — as in the case of shipping, he was concerned only with organisation, acting, as it were, from above without becoming involved directly in manufacturing to the extent that he became exclusively engaged in it. His concern was to bring into the firm someone with expertise in, say, wool production who could manage dealings in such commodities. The firms interested in wool production and dyeing remained fairly small. Following the structure of decentralised production of the time, most of the work was done in centres that were outside, and independent of the firm itself. Only the most straightforward and elementary processes were carried out in the workshops, and these required little in the way of plant or tools (at most a trellis for handling the fleeces, scissors for trimming the wool and combs for combing it). These operations were performed by very few workers, who were paid for their particular skill rather than on a piece-work basis.⁷⁰ When the operations became more complex or when the workers were unwilling to leave their homes, neither men nor materials nor tools were seen any longer in the workshops.⁷¹ The only ones to be paid on the basis of time worked — hence the only wage earners — were those who performed an apparently humble and modest job, but one that was extremely characteristic of these companies: those responsible for maintaining contact between the

⁷⁰ On piece-work and payment by task Melis made a number of interesting observations suggested by the Italian edition of R. DE ROOVER, *Il banco dei Medici cit.* (in which the phrase 'paid by the piece' on pp. 241-77 was translated as 'a cottimo' instead of 'a compito') in which even greater stress was laid on the importance of wage-earners in the Florentine textile industry, than in the original. "The *cottimo* presupposes a fixed relationship between the worker and the firm, although payment is made according to the work carried out; remuneration by *compito*, however, does not presuppose any fixed relation of labour — and in this case one cannot, therefore, talk of wage-earners — since it always takes only the work carried out as the basis for remuneration" (letter from Melis to de Roover, 6.4.1971). "Although there are similarities in the ways that the remuneration is measured (in terms of the work actually done), there is a complete distinction when it comes to the dependence of the worker. In the case of the *cottimo*, the latter is a fixed employee; but in the case of payment by *compito* we are dealing with workers who moved from firm to firm according to the demand for labour. And in the firms connected with the *Arte della lana* there were no fixed employees, neither on a piece-work nor a time basis (the only genuine wage-earners, in other words those paid by the hour, were those who maintained contact with the different outworking shops and who delivered semi-finished goods and then later collected the worked articles, so acting as the physical links between the different stages in the cycle of production)" (letter to Girolamo Arnaldi from Melis, 13.3.1971).

⁷¹ F. MELIS, 'Gli opifici lanieri toscani dei secoli XIII-XVI', in *Produzione, commercio e consumo dei panni di lana (Atti della 2 Settimana di Studio dell'Istituto Internazionale "F. Datini" di Prato: 10th-16th April 1970)*, Florence, 1976, pp. 237-243. As well as in *Aspetti cit.*, pp. 445-494, he also discussed the same problem, in 'Sulla disseminazione dell'opificio laniero pratese del Trecento', in *Prato. Storia e Arte*, I, (1960), pp. 19-24.

shop and the places outside where the cloth was produced. These were the *stamaioli* or *lanini*, who delivered the semi-worked cloth and later collected the finished product, thereby linking and uniting the different stages of production. Since this was something that had to be done quickly to take advantage of the labour available, these runners became permanent employees, as Melis described in his last posthumous work on the subject (outlined in his paper at the second Prato study week in 1970). In this he also restated more categorically his argument on the negligible role of wage-earners in Tuscan manufacturing, which had previously given rise to a major polemic with the marxist historian Victor Rutenburg.⁷² His conclusions went quite against his own earlier expectations, but were the fruit of that ceaseless archival research which he never abandoned but always laboured to widen and deepen.⁷³ The expanding manufacturing firms did not, then, bring about the complete subordination of the workers, nor did they produce an urban proletariat. Instead, as they expanded they radiated out into the countryside, first into the areas closest to the towns but then they reached out so the more distant valleys of the Apennines to make contact with the peasant artisan working at home with his looms.⁷⁴

The claim that production developed without bringing about what the Marxists call alienation, which Melis presented with the backing of massive documentary evidence (and not without a trace of ideological pleasure), may

⁷² 'Tre volumi sul Datini etc.', cit., in *Nuova Rivista Storica* (1966), pp. 675 ff. and 707 ff.

⁷³ F. MELIS, 'Gli opifici lanieri toscani...', cit., p. 238: 'I had always thought that the commercial firms gradually succeeded in subordinating the workers in the different branches of wool production, but even when I extended my research to the XVth century as well, when the Tuscan economy had been in decline for a full century, I discovered that there was in fact no change whatsoever, even in the largest workshops, throughout the whole period'. (p. 239): 'I thought that over time the firms would have acquired if not machines for fulling and milling at least a number of looms for weaving; but in fact this never happened, with the exception of a few looms and even then the weavers were out-workers who only came in when requested. In the dozens and dozens of cases I have studied, I have yet to come across a wage-earning weaver who was a fixed employee of the company, even in the cases where it did possess its own looms'; p. 240 'I expected to find a fair number of wage-earners attached to these external agencies of the companies... yet to my complete surprise in this particular agency (the Datini's, *Arte della Tinta*), there was only one fixed wage-earner, and he was the technical assistant director'.

⁷⁴ F. MELIS, 'Momenti dell'economia del Casentino', in *Mostra d'armi antiche cit.* p. 20: "The manner in which the medieval workshop spread was one of the clearer, examples of the function played by the city... In contrast to what happens today, the city did not cause the depopulation of the countryside. As I have said, it increased wealth in the countryside, raised living standards, and thereby augmented the population and so encouraged them to devote more time to agricultural labour".

well upset the custodians of marxian orthodoxy. But it should be remembered that the modes of production in the phases of the transition and early accumulation of capital are concepts that still remain to be demonstrated in empirical terms, no less than in methodological terms, and are at present perhaps more of a hindrance than a help.⁷⁵ Nor should Melis' conclusions be rejected out of hand without further scrutiny simply because they contain no mention of either alienation or wage-earners.⁷⁶

Since it is far from easy to avoid the moralistic implications which intrude on both sides in the debate on the decline of the late medieval economy, it is perhaps best to follow what Melis had to say about the undeniable progress made in Florence and Tuscany in the XIVth and XVth centuries.⁷⁷ The multiform impetus provided by the activities of the great merchants led to an increase in the movement of men and goods,⁷⁸ an increase in individual consumption, and a considerable improvement in living standards — even the fashion of taking hydrotherapy cures and visiting the thermal baths began to assume mass proportions, in relative terms.⁷⁹

While there can be little doubt over the conclusions which arise from Melis' research, there are still many problems that need to be studied and quantified, and it would be wrong to give the impression that he simply wished to replace the old myth of the XIVth and XVth centuries as a black

⁷⁵ For a recent review of the Marxist debate see *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (essays by Sweezy, Dobb, Takahashi, Hilton, Lefebvre, Procacci, Hobsbawm, Merrington, with an introduction by Rodney Hilton) London, 1976; the same issues are examined from another perspective in J. HEERS, 'The Feudal Economy and Capitalism: Words, Ideas and Reality', in *Journal of European Economic History* III (1974) pp. 609-653.

⁷⁶ Attention should however be paid to the development of a certain class of employees as a result of the development of the great commercial enterprises, and to their job prospects, living standards and culture: Melis touched on these themes in *Aspetti cit.*, pp. 151-61, 179-85, 205-10, 229-31, 265-9, 295-321.

⁷⁷ In a letter to Melis, Braudel referred to the polemic with Sapori as follows: "It is clear that the prosperity and elan of Florence did not end in the mid-XIVth century, and that the particular fortunes of the Bardi were of no greater significance than those of, say, the Fuggers and Welsers of Augsburg. But it would be interesting to calculate a series for the total revenues of Florence, if this were possible, and to see whether there are the elements needed for a history of prices, as Earl J. Hamilton has claimed". (Braudel to Melis, letter dated Paris 6.8.1967).

⁷⁸ On the hitherto unprecedented increase in the movement of men, see: F. MELIS, 'Movimento di popoli e motivi economici del giubileo del 1400', in *Miscellanea Gilles Gérard Meersseman*, Padua 1970, I, pp. 343-67.

⁷⁹ F. MELIS, 'La frequenza alle terme nel basso Medioevo', in *Atti del I Congresso italiano di Studi storici termali* (Salsomaggiore, 5th-6th Oct. 1963), p. 6; Id., 'La storia delle terme nel mondo: aspetti economici e sociali', in *Atti del I Congresso di Storia della Medicina*, Montecatini, 1962, p. 19.

period of stagnation with a new golden age, or to continue that process of simply over-throwing established judgements for the pure pleasure of swimming against the tide. But whatever the outcome, the results of Melis' labours will not be quickly forgotten.

But I want now to turn to a different problem, which relates to Melis' interpretation of history. Although in his general studies⁸⁰ he depicted the inter-relations between the different phenomena which he had studied, which we summarised when describing his 'model', I strongly doubt whether Melis himself would have been prepared to fully agree with this interpretation. In order to indicate the method which informed his practical research, I wanted to emphasise the nature of the objective and impersonal links which he saw within the complex economic phenomenology of this period. But in doing so, I inevitably drew on the approach which he developed most clearly in his earliest works, such as the *Storia della Ragioneria*. In his later writings, however, we find an increasingly decisive rejection of any structural approach, and a growing tendency to account for all changes or innovation in the structure or organisation of the mercantile firm in terms of the exceptional character of the individual merchant concerned, who is now seen in more humanistic and idealistic terms. The following passage illustrates the point: 'For the delicate and complex machinery of these companies to function well, men of energy and drive were needed (and when they were not to be found, their companies fell into decline and with them the entire economic fabric of the country).⁸¹ Looking at the creators of the Renaissance economy, and admiring their intellectual vigour, he was led to compare them to their great contemporaries who with equal vigour had raised up the great monuments of art and poetry, whom Boccaccio had heralded: 'aevo nostro ampliores a coelo venero viri... quibus cum sint ingentes animi, totis viribus pressam relevare [poesim] et ab exilio in pristinas revocare sedes mens est...'⁸²

As Melis' interest came to focus increasingly on the men themselves, he began to abandon the concept and definition of capitalism with which he had set out, as though the existence of an objective and determinant structure and system might threaten the initiative and freedom of the individual as creator. In the *Storia della Ragioneria* of 1950 the term capitalism occurs frequently. In 1953, in his communication at the International Conference of Renaissance Studies, he referred significantly to the *Sviluppo del binomio sombartiano* "Capi-

⁸⁰ See especially F. MELIS, 'Industria, commercio, credito', in *Un'altra Firenze: l'epoca di Cosimo il Vecchio* (essays by C. Greppi, M. Masso, G. de Rossi, F. Melis, G. Ugolini, P. Ugolini, M. Adriani) Florence, 1971, pp. 141-280.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 261: he went on "I would like to repeat that the climate of the Renaissance created exceptional men in economic life as well, and raised economic affairs to the dignity of a field of study".

⁸² Quoted by F. CHABOD, 'Il Rinascimento', in *Questioni di Storia Moderna*, Milan, 1948, p. 55.

talismo-Partita Doppia, alle origini".⁸³ In 1962 in *Aspetti della Vita Economica Medievale* and in his subsequent writings the abstract term capitalism began gradually to give way to the more specific 'capitalist', which Melis used to describe both the entrepreneur and his enterprise. Then in his final statement on the subject (*Consideration of some aspects of the rise of capitalist enterprise*) in 1972, he rather ostentatiously abandoned all these terms, disassociated himself from all those who had previously attempted to define the term (including Sombart), and almost defied his reader to define the economy, methods and attitudes of this period in any terms other than 'new'.⁸⁴ Although seemingly vague, this was for him an adjective with deep significance. Our purpose, however, is not to criticise Melis for abandoning an abstract term laden-down with anachronisms (and which we are forced to use on the whole for want of something better) which he chose to give up in the interests of more accurate analysis, but rather to show the particular reasons which lay behind it.

In the new perspective which Melis had adopted, man stands alone and dominant at the centre of the economic system. He wrote:⁸⁵ 'A very small group of men succeeded in controlling from above commercial companies of great size and complexity, which in turn impinged on many other subsidiary institutions. Bearing in mind that it is the logic of the property system that there is always someone 'bigger', then we can see that the dominant position was eventually concentrated in the hands of a single individual. It was he who was the ultimate ruler of this world, and who possessed limitless opportunities for moving into other fields of activity, among them the one that normally impresses us most, politics'. The ruler, the figure who dominated this world, was the great merchant, the man who thought and acted on a grand scale and who gave life to the new forms of economic activity, just as the artist gave life to his creations. We have arrived at business as an art form. Indicative of this is Melis' use of the adjective great, which he also applies to the purely quantitative aspects of their economic activities as well — the size of the companies, the scale of their operations, the levels of investment: factors which can only give rise to qualitative change once they have

⁸³ This was published separately (Florence, Sansoni, 1963, pp. 7), and had been given as a paper for *Il Rinascimento, significato e limiti (Atti del III Convegno Internazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, Florence; 25th-28th Sept. 1953) Florence 1953*. When Melis came to this argument in *Aspetti* he replaced the phrase 'capitalism' with 'capitalist enterprise'.

⁸⁴ In *Studies in Economics and Economic History: Essays in Honour of Professor H.M. Robertson*, London, 1972, pp. 153-186: "The reader will decide whether those subjects (the firm, but always, above all, the men who constituted it) and the environment itself, merit the definition *capitalist*: my object was limited to the mere description of an economic 'world' which was totally and surely *new*, at least to the extent that it saw the rise of 'new' societies...".

⁸⁵ *Un'altra Firenze, cit.*, p. 155.

attained a certain order of magnitude. The adjective contains an unmistakable moral judgement, which is implicit in the 'greatness' of the merchant and is reflected in all his creations.

Yet in the reduction of the collective, social and structural aspects of his subject to the individual alone, Melis did not fall back on the type of psychological interpretation which had ascribed all the great economic innovations of the XIVth and XVth centuries to the pursuit of profit or to other spiritual and religious drives. They are seen as the result of the merchant's remarkable ability to devote himself to research, so that the rationality of his business activities and the rationality of his accounting methods intertwave and find their ultimate cause in a sort of *ratio studiorum*: '... it is in that research and study — Melis wrote — that I always see the *causa causarum* of the great merchant was such because he was part of the general climate of his age — he was Renaissance man, since the revival in the *studia humanitatis* which lay at the base of the moral and scientific progress of the age also lay at the base of its economy'⁸⁶. 'The great effort that went into creating new institutions (starting with the commercial firm) and into commercial expansion, came from the new attitudes of the Florentines of the day. At first they were driven by the desire to make money, but this soon took on a more noble form (expressed and reflected, for example, in the reciprocal nature of many of the new activities, such as banking and insurance) which certainly owed much to the Humanistic culture of the time and which, among other things, transformed the accounting room into a centre of learning and study — its influence expanding and growing until it came to infuse all knowledge and ways of thinking'.⁸⁷

So, the merchant and businessman in the end falls fully into line with the prevailing changes affecting all other sectors of social life. Since Melis's discoveries about the nature of economic activity in the period give rise to a whole series of questions about the social, political, religious and psychological aspects and consequences of these same activities which he himself did not explore further,⁸⁸ we cannot yet say how complete was this fusion and identity. Such problems now need to be studied more closely, using both the methods developed by Melis himself and, more especially, the documentary sources which he used and discovered. Only on that basis can we attempt to build up a new and more convincing picture of Alfred von Martin's *Physiognomik und Rhythmik burgerlicher Kultur* (Physiognomy and Rhythm of Civic

⁸⁶ F. MELIS, 'I rapporti economici fra la Spagna e l'Italia nei secoli XIV-XVI secondo la documentazione italiana', in *Mercaderes italianos en Espana*, cit., p. 187.

⁸⁷ *Un'altra Firenze*, cit., p. 264.

⁸⁸ Even for the collective volume entitled *Vita privata a Firenze nei secoli XIV e XV* (Florence, 1966), for which he wrote a chapter on 'Il mercante' (pp. 91-109), Melis preferred to limit himself strictly to economic issues.

Culture). In so far as he was interested in these issues, Melis was able to claim that he had discovered in the field of economic activity the same changes and patterns which the historians of art, science and politics had been describing previously -- perhaps for too long, since it was with Michelet and Burckhart that Melis liked to associate himself. 'Our conclusions -- he wrote -- take us to the final years of the XIVth century, to that all important period of history that bears the title of the Renaissance. Just as the historians of art, literature, science and so forth have examined and studied the new features and forms which emerged in their respective fields by distinguishing between the influences which brought them into being and the ways in which these changes themselves impinged on the process as a whole, so the economic historian, whose field of study is primarily but not exclusively material activity, will ask whether the merchant and businessman of the period assumed new features which derived from the pervading climate of the age, and whether such innovations enabled him to embark on new forms of activity which were to bring about major changes as a result of his actions'.⁸⁹ And, naturally, the answer for Melis was yes.

The chronological picture was also perfect. Melis had set out by refuting the economic decline of the XIVth and XVth centuries. He saw its positive features in the multitude of astonishing innovations in the structure of production, and claimed that the appearance of the new flexible tariffs for ship-charters around 1380 should be seen as a genuine economic revolution. This revolution might in turn be related to the profound economic changes which had resulted from the commercial revolution of the XIIIth century, itself the legacy of the earlier agrarian 'revolution' brought about by the reorganisation of the manorial system and the expansion of production. But this was not the case. In his later works, Melis was concerned more and more to present the Renaissance as a well defined and specific period of economic history which stood out alone, its originality and innovations contrasting sharply with the background of the Middle Ages. By giving greater emphasis to the features of innovation and by abandoning all reference to capitalism (which not only did away with conceptual ambiguity but also clearly implied a rejection of those stages of development linking the present to the past and the future, typical of both Pirenne's and Marx's notion of capitalism) Melis took the decisive step which led him to claim that the economic and cultural renaissances were chronologically coterminous. It was indicative that he should have ended by stressing the methodological importance of chronology: 'in the same way we are equally sure of a collateral factor, which can never be neglected: the chronological factor, since all these elements can be placed in the same period of time which plants its roots at the end of the XIVth century and achieves, then, its vastest and most definite expression in the second

⁸⁹ *Un'altra Firenze, cit.*, p. 149.

half of the next century, in full coherence — noting the beneficial effects which spread over all society — with the historic period of the Renaissance.⁹⁰

Melis's economic Renaissance coincides with the traditional chronology of the artistic and cultural Renaissance, stretching from 1380 to the mid-XVth century and the onset of economic decline.⁹¹ Its inspirational nucleus, however, lay in the years around the end of the XIVth and the beginning of the XVth centuries — the age of both Francesco Datini and Coluccio Salutati. These were the years in which the most important economic innovations took place — the birth of banking and the credit note, the appearance of differential transport costs, insurance premiums etc. — making the matrix of the modern world, and cutting it off completely from the past.⁹² As Melis wrote, what we see is the passage from the 'ancient' to the 'modern' world.⁹³

In his general studies, then, Melis sought to draw together the threads of his own research and to demonstrate its broader significance and scope.

⁹⁰ F. MELIS, 'Consideration of some aspects of the rise of capitalist enterprise', in *Studies... H.M. Robertson, cit.*, p. 179. The phrase 'at the end of the XIIIth century' is clearly a printing error.

⁹¹ The 'decadence' of Florence and Tuscany is now moved forward to the mid-XVth century, and is seen mainly in moral terms ("La civiltà economica nelle sue esplicazioni dalla Versilia alla Maremma", in *Dalla Versilia alla Maremma: storia e cultura*, Atti del LX Congresso Internazionale della Dante Alighieri (Livorno, 13th-17th Sept. 1970), Rome, 1971, p. 51. Melis sketched an interesting economic explanation for this, which was related to the process of development begun in the XIVth and XVth centuries. The revolutionary differential charter tariffs once extended to land transport as well brought about a revival and improvement in internal transport and communications (after their decline following the opening of the sea-routes through the Straits of Gibraltar at the end of the XIIIth century). This in turn led to the revival of the great international fairs — first at Geneva then Lyons. Although the Florentines were at first able to dominate these, there was subsequently a weakening of Florence's 'maritime power', and its control and domination over the sea-routes had been the basis of its commercial prosperity.

⁹² It seems to me that this is confirmed by a hand-written note by Melis: "Capitalism and the individual; Medieval man wanted to free himself and wanted to break free by creating something new — he wanted to assert himself, and found that he could do this by getting to know other men — why should he be slave to a deposit bank (*banco di scritta*)? Once he had succeeded in asserting himself and making himself known, then it would be he who gave orders to the banker and the businessmen who were involved in the same type of activity and who used his bills and orders: as a result, the written bill triumphed'.

⁹³ F. MELIS, "Gli aspetti economici e mercantili dei prodotti dell'agricoltura e dei vini toscani in rapporto al loro commercio nel mondo (sec. XIV-XVI)", in *Atti del Secondo Convegno dell'Accademia Italiana della Cucina* (Siena: Florence 9th-11th May 1969), Milan, 1971, p. 23.

They reveal that the purpose of his immense archival endeavours was to provide an answer to the question which had been posed at the 1952 Florentine Conference on Renaissance studies — what was the relationship between the intellectual splendour and the economic decay of the period? He could well claim that he had studied *l'economia del Rinascimento*, where others had simply looked at the *Rinascimento dell'Economia*, although some today might argue that what Melis described was more accurately the *economia rinascimentale* — in other words, the brilliant and progressive features of the economy of the period. But even if the absence of the author may make it easier to make such claims, it is clear that such an interpretation of Melis's work is unjustifiably reductive.