
CONFERENCE REPORTS

Investment and Urban Society from the XIIIth to the XVIIIth Century

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The IXth Study Week of the Francesco Datini International Institute for Economic History in Prato was held during the week of the 22nd-28th April 1977. The subject was "Investment and urban society from the XIIIth to the XVIIIth century", and in view of the highly complex nature of the city itself, the discussion necessarily took on a distinctly interdisciplinary character. In his inaugural introduction, Prof. A. Tenenti drew attention to the fact that the theme provided a meeting point between a number of different fields of study, so that an extra effort was required from all those contributing to the discussions. Through a study of investment in urban society it becomes possible to reconstruct a whole series of aspects of the development of the city — the construction of a surrounding wall, the intensification and then expansion of the buildings themselves, for example, provide important evidence of demographic expansion, while the construction of harbours, quarantine houses, gates, etc. indicate the development of trade and commerce. A study of the investments devoted to the urban environment can, then, provide an important contribution to our understanding of the way in which urban civilization has progressed and of the development which have accompanied it. In his paper, P. Wolff claimed that: "... a city is partly defined by virtue of the type of investment which predominated in it". This was the objective undertaken by the scholars from a wide range of countries who gathered at Prato, and throughout the week gave rise to a very lively series of debates, which were also enriched by contributions from a variety of specialists in the field.

There was a particularly lively debate over the use of the term "investment", as to whether it should properly be understood in strictly

economic terms (the use of financial means to acquire fixed capital goods) or whether, as was more generally felt, the term should be used broadly in the context of a pre-industrial economy and applied to the city as an integrated whole. In the latter sense, improvement in hygienic conditions or the satisfaction of needs of security, of religious or even aesthetic demands might be considered as investments. J.F. Bergier, one of the specialist speakers, argued for example that investment was as much a habitual and behavioural fact as an economic feature. Although investment in the field of culture is designed to meet non-material, artistic and spiritual needs, it will not necessarily then serve to increase wealth. Peter Burke shared this view and argued that: "... the advantages which contemporaries expected from their expenditure in the artistic field can be described as religious, political and social". It is not then the case that an investment, be it direct or indirect, in the development of an urban community must give rise to expressly economic gains, and it was often the case that investment arose from aesthetic or status needs and was innocent of any form of economic calculation.

The problem of investment, then, provided the central theme of the discussions throughout the week. The programme was also organized so that the various papers and comments concentrated on different features of the relationship between investment and the urban economy. The topic for the first day was "Cities and Power", and attention was drawn to the role of political authority and power in urban investment. In his outstanding paper (*Pouvoir et investissements urbains en Europe occidentale et centrale du XIII^e au XVII^e siècle*) Professor Philippe Wolff discussed the investments effected by public authorities, which in the context of the feudal world was a concept that lacked precision but which could be extended to cover the sovereign — in the monarchist states such as France, England, Spain etc. — feudal lords, bishops, municipal authorities, city-state rulers and councils, and so forth. Prof. Wolff asked whether the fact that Western and Central Europe became heavily urbanized during the period from the XIIIth to the XVIIth century was in some way due to the urban investments carried out by public authorities. He argued that an analysis of the factors which made up the urban infrastructure in the period in question (fortified walls, bridges, public buildings, hospitals, schools etc.) all of which were the object of direct public investment, showed that this was indeed the case. The revival and expansion of the ancient Roman cities began with the renewal of the encircling walls and the improvement of the urban area within, and both these factors were the responsibility of the seigneurial and municipal authorities. In this case we can speak of genuine investments, which include the land granted to those coming into the city, the military and fiscal privileges bestowed on them, and the protection which they were afforded which led to the building of castles, the creation of armies and the establishment of an administrative machinery.

Other examples of urban investment on the part of noble patrons were provided during the comments made by Prof. Teresa Zarebska concerning the attempts by Chancellor Jan Zamoyski to found a model city based on a plan by the Paduan architect Bernardo Morando at Zamosc, and those by Giandomenico Romanelli on the building of the city of Alvisopoli by the nobleman Alvise Mocenigo. Romanelli argued that the construction of the city originated from a double economic choice made by Mocenigo — he wished to manage his agricultural estate directly without resorting to the system of extensive leases, and at the same time develop a mixture of agricultural and commercial and manufacturing activities, which in the case of the Alvisopoli experiment also came to include industrial activities. The speaker described the building of the city as a massive venture in urban investment, or indeed, as an “urbanization of investment”.

In his paper *Le Prince et la structuration culturelle des villes de Valachie au milieu du XVII^e siècle* Pavel Chihaita provided an example of princely investment in urban culture. He discussed the cultural interests of Prince Matei Basarab, which found expression both in the field of literature (in his attempts to revive Slav literature) and in that of architecture (especially church building and the founding of schools, including an Academy, as well as a printing works). The constructive features of these initiatives lie in the degree to which they strengthened Romanian awareness of its culture and past, and in this sense the capital expended can be seen as an investment.

The capital provided by the cities and their inhabitants for defence should also be seen as investments rather than as the simple cost of meeting particular urgent and immediate needs. In the middle and long term such capital becomes a genuine investment, if one considers the difference between the expenditure incurred for military reasons and the losses to persons and property which might have arisen in their absence. The second day of the Study Week was devoted to “Defence and Security”, and the previous point was made by P. Contamine in his paper *Les Villes et les Investissements Défensifs en France aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles*. He also showed that in many cities it was the building of fortified bastions, walls and other defences that brought about the establishment of an urban financial administration. By about 1300, in fact, the appearance of permanent external threats forced many French towns, which had hitherto been supported, assisted or even supervised by either seigneurial or royal authorities, to take a serious interest in defending themselves and in raising the resources to do so. In the towns which Prof. Contamine discussed, this war taxation also served to encourage the cohesion of the urban community, because the citizens agreed to pay, without regard to social status, for the building and maintenance of the fortifications, on some occasions even to work on them as well, being well aware that they provided a guarantee for their goods and lives, as well as evidence of a degree of municipal pride. The French scholar also emphasised the links between urban and military investment, and argued that the former

became more important as the latter became less indispensable, when it became possible for the municipal authorities to make use of the taxes which had been originally introduced for military purposes, and by maintaining them after the cessation of hostilities they could apply them to other purposes.

There were cases, however, in which the building of fortifications arose not for immediate military reasons, but rather for economic reasons and for prestige. This is illustrated by the fortifications of the city of Antwerp and by the building of the citadel of Parma, which were discussed by Hugo Soly (*Cités marchandes et besoins de sécurité. Les fortifications d'Anvers au XVI^e siècle: couts économiques et sociaux*) and by G. Papagno and M. Romani (*Una cittadella e una città - il Castello Nuovo farnesiano di Parma 1589-97*). The first of these papers showed that the building of the Antwerp defences had the effect of keeping a very large number of workmen employed throughout the years in question, which outweighed the disadvantages incurred by using labour in this unproductive fashion, by the amount of capital devoted to it and by the resulting fiscal pressures. Papagno and Romani argued that the building of the Parmesan citadel was designed to guarantee the city the status of the capital of the Duchy, and to provide a tangible reminder of the presence of the government and act as a symbol of the power of the Farnese dynasty.

Prof. Adam Milobedzki (*L'architecture militaire dans les villes polonaises: guerre et investissements culturels XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*) described the rather different case of the great fortress of Kamieniec Podolski, in southern Poland, which grew up from the basis of a pre-existing urban structure. It had, at the same time, been able at a specific moment to transform the economic and social activities of the inhabitants, and had helped to raise material and intellectual standards of life. This discussion provided a good link with the theme of the third day of the Study Week, devoted to urban culture and investment. There were no full-length papers but a series of shorter discussion papers, many of which were of great interest and broadened the scope of the discussion and helped develop a lively and fruitful debate.

Of considerable interest — as was always the case with the papers given by members of the Polish contingent at the conference — were the comments made by A. Wyrobisz (*Les villes privées en Pologne en tant qu'investissements culturels XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*) who pointed out that the foundation of a new city implied a cultural as much as an economic investment. A private or seigniorial city was often designed and conceived by its founder as a work of art in town planning and architecture. One need only mention the case of Zamosc, where the residences of the lord, the parish church, the convent, the town hall and other public buildings were all built according to plans made by leading and famous architects. Within these cities, the houses of the wealthy noble patrons also formed important

cultural centres. Wyrobisz claimed that it was no accident that the finest Polish schools in the XVIth century were in private, seigneurial towns.

J. Woytowicz (*Les investissements culturels dans les villes de Prusse du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècles*) also discussed the intense cultural activity which took place in the cities of Torun and Gdansk from the XVIth to the XVIIIth centuries, and the sort of investment which accompanied this. He dealt in particular with the cultural investments of the bourgeoisie, given that in this social group individuals with highly developed cultural tastes — collectors of fine books or works of art, founders and organizers of new scientific and cultural institutions, and so forth — were to be found. Not only in Torun and Gdansk, but in all the Prussian towns great interest and financial resources were devoted to creating communal grammar schools and libraries, and the schools provided an important stimulant for the cities' cultural life. They staged a wide range of cultural activities, theatrical performances, public debates, as well as publishing scholarly books. Another area which attracted considerable investment from the authorities, from municipal institutions and from private citizens was the Church, especially through the activities of local parishes. During the Counter-Reformation the Jesuits invested very heavily in building colleges and churches. The dominant feature of such investment was to symbolize the Catholic offensive against Protestantism.

Another important example of cultural investment was given by A. Armbruster, who discussed the cultural activities of Samuel von Bruckenthal, who was one of the greatest statesmen of the Saxon community in Transylvania in the XVIth century. Von Bruckenthal spent huge sums of money on founding libraries and printing-presses, in creating collections of fine books, coins, antiques and rare minerals, and so contributed to an interest in conservation and in the preservation of the native character of Transylvania. His library was of decisive importance in enlivening the cultural life of the town of Sibiu, and his mineral collection helped spread and develop the study of minerology in Transylvania.

The discussion on cultural investment was developed in considerable detail during the third session, and was taken up again in the paper and subsequent comments on "Art and the City" on the fourth day. In his paper on *Republics and Courts in Italian and European art of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries* H.G. Koenigsberger discussed the changes in the sphere of creative activity — painting, sculpture, music, theatre, etc. — in relation to changes occurring in the urban structure, and argued that from the XIVth to the early XVIth centuries figurative arts were influenced directly by the nature of the Italian city state. For the most part, this art was public and was created for the urban community. He also claimed that the same relationship obtained in the cases of the Dutch and South German artistic movements of the XVth and early XVIth centuries.

Peter Burke was also concerned with the links between art, investment in art, and the nature of the town. He discussed three sample cities — Rome, Amsterdam, and Paris. In all three a great deal of money was invested in art, but by very different types of people, for very different reasons and with very different results. In the case of Amsterdam, the investment was almost purely economic in motive, whereas in Paris and Rome it took on a more symbolic and ritualistic function.

In an extremely lively and interesting paper Maria Bogucka discussed *La place des investissements culturels dans l'économie de Gdansk XVI^e-XVII^e siècles*. Thanks to this paper it becomes possible to take a further step in the analysis of the links between art and the city, because Prof. Bogucka illustrated the nature of the relationship between cultural investment and the development of the urban economy. The Polish scholar used the figures on annual expenditure by the principal treasury in Gdansk for the period 1530 to 1616 to identify the amounts devoted to cultural investment which she then compared with the figures indicating the city's general economic development, and reached some interesting conclusions. Changes in the economic climate did not have a direct impact on the volume of capital devoted to cultural purposes or to the embellishment of the city. A relative decline in the sums spent for cultural purposes only occurred when political events, in particular the threat of war, intervened. Prof. Bogucka also claimed that private cultural investment was important in inverse proportion to the city's economic growth. In the early XVIIth century there was little commercial investment, and private capital sought other forms of employment in Gdansk, such as the acquisition of land, fine art, the building of town houses, and so forth, to the extent that Prof. Bogucka argued that the city's cultural development prejudiced its economic growth. She also emphasised the fact that the cultural investments of the bourgeois patrons originated from social antagonisms; the latter encouraged cultural investment as an expression of prestige and power.

G. Labrot also took up the problem of the psycho-social motives for cultural investment in his paper *L'aristocratie à Naples: investissements, violence, déprédations 1503-1734* given during the fifth session, on "Investment and Social Groups". He described the spectacular expenditure of the Neapolitan aristocracy on building palaces and chapels, and emphasised that, in taking so much care to make their residences and whole tenor of life extraordinarily sumptuous, they were seeking what he described as an "ideological income". In competing with other social groups, the aristocracy was more concerned to gain prestige than money.

M. Fanti (*La Fabbrica del S. Petronio di Bologna*) argued, however, that political motives lay behind the building of the Basilica of S. Petronius at Bologna. The building of the church meant that the Commune achieved a decisive step forward in appropriating the saint for the city, and hence

in strengthening both the public spirit and the independence of the citizens of Bologna. In addition, its building was motivated by the desire to compete with the cities of Milan and Florence which had already undertaken similar projects, and so prestige was partly a motive too.

The final day of the conference was devoted to "Investment and Economy", and again there were only short-length discussion papers, although they were of considerable interest. The topic proved to be highly thought-provoking, and the discussion which developed gave some indication of how and to what degree public investment could benefit the economy, especially in times of difficulty or crisis.

D. Molenda and A. Laube showed that in mining towns recovery was entirely dependent on public investment. Also in the case of Swiss towns in the early XVIth century the public sector was of considerable importance, and M. Koerner (*Investissements publics urbains en Suisse au XVI^e siècle, repartition sectorielle*) discussed the links between public investment and national gross product — the more the Swiss cities invested in economic factors, the more the economy grew. In the period in question the cities possessed sufficient capital to finance undertakings of public utility, and they also took on the function of bankers by lending money. The result was that in times of recession they were able to revive companies in difficulties. Prof. Koerner argued that the Swiss cities possessed the financial means to combat recession through "guided investment".

The papers which were delivered and the comment papers and discussions which followed them certainly will ensure that the IXth Prato Study Week will become an important point of reference in our understanding of the issues relating to urban life and history. It included, as can be seen, a number of widely ranging studies dealing with often distant points in time and place, yet having a common denominator in the central problem of investment.

