

**Del Pensiero Come Principio d'Economia Publica
(Intelligence As a Principle of Public Economy)
Carlo Cattaneo**

Edited and with an Afterword by Marco Vitale

Foreword by Carlo G. Lacaïta, Milan, Italy: Libri Scheiwiller, 2001

American Edition: Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003;

Foreword by Michael E. Novak

During the late 1970s, just after graduating from the Argentine Catholic University, an independent scholar told me, "Alex, what is not written in English is not written at all." The fact that an author as important as Carlo Cattaneo (1801–1869) can be almost totally ignored outside Italy seems to prove the theory. The release of *Del pensiero come principio d'economia publica* in a bilingual edition is a welcome contribution to the world of ideas and especially to economic personalism.

The essays by Lacaïta and Vitale, almost the same length as *Del pensiero*, are also valuable. They provide an important description of the roots and the setting of Cattaneo's economic thought. Vitale shows that "Cattaneo's economy is the economy of free trade and of the diffusion of knowledge, and it is always dynamic." His stress on the importance of human capital as the central factor of economic development makes him a precursor of sound development theories. Some of his roots can be found in the work of John Locke in England, Abbé Condillac in France, and especially Gian Domenico Romagnosi in Italy. The attacks by Antonio Rosmini on all these authors, and especially on Romagnosi, prompted a passionate defense by Cattaneo, who was a disciple, friend, and admirer of the latter.

For those who are trying to rebuild economic science and policy based on a correct understanding of the human person, Cattaneo's work needs to be considered as an important contribution. By putting human thought (*pensiero* or "knowledge") at the center of economic science, he reaches conclusions full of common sense and valid lessons.

In other works, Cattaneo explained how human thought and psychology are influenced by the "association of minds," showing the social element in his work. Cattaneo was a champion of a benevolent form of globalization, observing that "every man has an interest in the culture of mankind as a whole." "Lucky is the country," he continues, "that will deserve the confidence of Europe through a good and fair system of corporations and will attract those masses of cosmopolitan capital that waver in uncertainty, ready to move wherever a small margin of greater advantage or greater confidence invites them." He did not ignore some of the challenges of development, such as the potential destruction of forests, but he was intelligently optimistic about the creativity of the human person, who had the means to reverse any potential degradation: "If man can lightheartedly destroy forests, he can, after all, restore them."

His optimism is reflected in his sentence “Man cannot imagine the changes that chemistry and legislation can bring on the surface of the earth.” By “legislation” he did not mean that government laws in themselves could create wealth. Instead, he understood that laws provided the framework for the actions of people with intelligence and the will to embark on new ventures.

Man is not only capable of the most extraordinary industrial creations, Cattaneo remarked, but also the “modification of animal races” for the benefit of mankind. Genetic engineering is not a new development.

Cattaneo believed that the reason that some countries are rich and others poor is “not to be found in economics but in the dark sources of theology” (*nelle oscure fonti della teologia*). He argued that Islamic views could hinder development: “And as late as this century the reason why lovely areas of Turkey and Syria are barren wilderness must go back to the notion of the right of property held by [Muhammad].”

Entire nations, he wrote, reflect the ideas of men, especially the ideas of the leaders. “Nothing happens in the sphere of wealth that does not reflect the sphere of ideas” (87). “Even those who boasted that they despised ideas, like those who during his time were attacking the property of the Church, were also representing a triumphant idea” (87).

Cattaneo did not fall into the trap of thinking that all self-interest is good. He defines “interests” as “those impulses that drive will to the acquisition of goods” (87). It is natural to want to have more goods but sometimes a person decides “to seek an increase of his portion by decreasing or wasting other portions and the total volume in general.” He concludes that such “is the interest of any lawless individual as well as of any privileged individual.” That type of interest becomes an obstacle to the peaceful and orderly production of goods. *Privilege-seeking* might be a better term to describe the phenomenon that economists call *rent-seeking*.

Cattaneo thus explained that regions with extraordinary natural “wealth” stagnate due to the vested interests of bureaucrats, local industrialists, or the interests of backward cultures. “Indeed, nature offers its wealth in vain,” he wrote, “when human will forbids its exploitation as a result of a partial and overbearing interest” (89). This observation led him to conclude that “any new treatise on political economy should formally classify Intelligence and Will among the sources of the wealth of nations...” Cattaneo continues: “Genovesi’s words ‘the wealth of a nation is always *in proportion to the sum of efforts* [fatiche] were therefore inaccurate. More accurately, it is in proportion to intelligence and work *combined*, and every time that an act of intelligence reduces effort and increases the yield, wealth can grow in *an inverse ratio* to the sum of efforts” (63).

Cattaneo’s views are especially relevant during these early stages of the twenty-first century when human capital, embodied in intellectual property rights, constitutes one of the most important motors of production and sources of wealth.

—Alejandro Chafuen
Atlas Economic Research Foundation