Presentation

Medieval Economic Rationalities

Apresentação

As racionalidades econômicas medievais

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The question of rationality has been present in the humanities and social sciences since the 19th century and it is at the same time inescapable and full of pitfalls. It finds its highest expression in the study of economics, supposedly the ideal domain in which the rational actions of *homo economicus* flourish. Until a few years ago, it seemed rather difficult to identify this economic and rational man before the modern era. New perspectives in textual and material culture analysis, postcolonial studies, and advances in econometrics, even if they didn't quite foster the triumph of the idea of a medieval *homo economicus*, have considerably undermined the primitivist approaches associated with the Middle Ages. However, this important historiographical turning point has not yet

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been the subject of an inventory, even a partial one, and that is what we propose to do in this special issue. In this sense, the articles published here, by dealing with different sources and issues, address the nature of economic rationality in the Middle Ages, the place that historiography attributes to this phenomenon today, as well as the main research possibilities on the subject.

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To present a clearer picture of the problem, it is necessary to define our theoretical and methodological choices. The practical rationality of actors can be approached at two distinct levels: 1) from a perspective external to the actors under study ("Were the ends pursued by men in the Middle Ages the best for them?"), which we leave aside in this special issue; thus, there is no room for reflections based on a contemporary notion of rationality, which would tend, for example, to consider sumptuary devotional practices as "irrational"; 2) from the perspective of the actors themselves, i.e., by asking the question of the articulation between their means and their ends ("Were the actions of the actors the most likely to achieve the ends they were aiming for, whatever they were?"); this is the Weberian notion of rational action in relation to ends, in which the means are chosen according to their capacity to achieve a given objective. It is this second level, that of "subjective utility", that we favor here, in an openly historicist approach, but seeking to go beyond the individual level of observation and extend it to the economic system that we are considering. One of the possible approaches to rationality is indeed that of the efficiency of the medieval economy, that is to say, its capacity to create efficient techniques of production and management of goods: the effort to obtain the maximum possible with the minimum possible means.

For a long time, historians and economists believed that the medieval man lacked this kind of rationality. It was the economic anthropology of the first half of the 20th century that gave rise to the idea that the *homo economicus*, whose actions were inspired by a rational conception of self-interest, did not exist before the modern era. This "primitivist" approach to premodern societies is at the root of the negative image of medieval economics. Although they recognise that in the Middle Ages people could act in pursuit of their own ends, these authors believe that the imperative of salvation limited any possibility of rational action (which they associate with material satisfaction). Hence the idea that the ultimate goal of the medieval economy was not the production of wealth, even if this was possible. More importantly, the relationship to goods would be established in such a way that there would be no real concern with money's value. For example, the polyptychs have sometimes been seen as exclusively memorial texts, theoretical writings detached from the practical needs of management. Intended to fix forever the status of men and land in the various *villae* of an estate, these texts would thus have a perennial character, ignoring the evolution of the economic situation – Robert Fossier (1978) – and giving, of the rural world, an ideal vision rather than a realistic one – Georges Duby (1973, p. 99-100), referring to the polyptych of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, speaks of a "dangerous (…) indifference to economic realities".[1] Since it could not escape the imperative of salvation, the medieval economy was imprisoned by non-economic principles.

The primitivist approach is still very present in medieval historiography: it manifests itself, for example, in the belief that the medieval man was incapable, at least until the 13th century, of developing rational accounting. This perspective has led, for example, Jacques Le Goff to declare not only that capitalism was not born in the Middle Ages, but that it was not even a pre-capitalist era. Yet Le Goff (1964, p. 18-19) himself wrote, in *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, the founding book of historical anthropology: "Like the primitives, the men of the Middle Ages often seem irrational to us, but, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown, savage thought has its reasons: other, but often stricter and more

1 Freely translated by the authors: "dangereuse (…) indifférence aux réalités économiques".

constraining than our supple reason".[2] A "reason" which apparently did not, however, extend to the field of economic action. Le Goff believes that medieval men were driven by complex social and traditional motivations in the field of work, but that the objectives they pursued were not intended to satisfy immediate needs nor to pursue utilitarian ends.

In *Le Moyen Âge et l'argent*, Le Goff (2010) argues that money is a product of modernity; that it is not a central value of the medieval period, neither from an economic point of view, nor from a psychological and ethical point of view. According to him, the history of the Middle Ages was a phase of regression when it came to money, because of the fragmentation of its use and, above all, because of the attitude that the dominant religion, Christianity, preached in relation to it and its uses. The only notion of economy that would apply to the medieval period would be that of "domestic economy", inherited from Aristotle. The absence of a medieval notion of money would correlate with the absence of a specific field of economics as well as with the absence of economic theses or theories. It would therefore be anachronistic to attribute economic thought to the scholastic theologians or the mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans. The use of money in the Middle Ages was hence part of a gift economy: money was part of the general subordination of men to the grace of God. Both the influence of Jacques Le Goff's theses on medieval studies and the progress made on this question can be measured thanks to the numerous works of Giacomo Todeschini – let us at least mention his *Richesse franciscaine* (2008) –, which showed in particular the role of the Franciscans in the formation of a conception of wealth and a lexicon of the economy and exchange.

This "economic primitivism" still finds illustrious representatives in contemporary historiography, which is sometimes reluctant to grant medieval men, for example, the provision of an economic space of their own, even if interstitial, in economic thought, or the capacity to measure

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2 Freely translated by the authors: "Comme les primitifs, les hommes du Moyen Âge nous paraissent souvent irrationnels, mais, comme Claude Lévi-Strauss l'a montré, la pensée sauvage a ses raisons: autres, mais souvent plus strictes et plus contraignantes que notre souple raison".

the value of things. In short, without necessarily directly opposing the idea of the rationality of medieval actors, part of historiography still hesitates to recognise the tools of rationality that were available to them – tools that they used, but also that they modified or even forged. Since the publication of Henri Pirenne's (1937) *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, through Georges Duby's (1973) *Guerriers et paysans*, to the works of Guy Fourquin (1969), Adriaan Verhulst (2002) and others, the debate on the medieval economy has largely focused on the question of abundance or scarcity. For some, the lack of technical means explains the chronic shortages and the numerous episodes of food crisis of the time. Others argue that agricultural production was relatively abundant, and that famine was the result of "growth crises". This debate, which lasted several decades, finally turned to the advantage of those who, like Pierre Toubert (2004), Michael McCormick (2002) and Jean-Pierre Devroey (2019), identified growth dynamics in the medieval economy. The works of Giacomo Todeschini (2008), Jean-Pierre Devroey (2006), Coquery, Menant and Weber (2006), and Laurent Feller (2009) have contributed to show that Christian doctrines were not incompatible with money and wealth and to identify rationalities in the management of goods and exchanges that had been ignored by primitivist approaches. At the same time, the work of these authors has opened up research perspectives about the medieval period that have not yet been fully explored: this is the case of the relationship with money, the management of goods and accounting, or the responses to famines and the management of scarcity.

Regarding the first aspect, the article by Leandro Rust published in this special issue discusses the role attributed to money by the accounts of the conflicts surrounding the succession of Benedict IX that took place between 1044 and 1046. The author seeks to show that the economic rationality of the agents competing for the papacy from the middle of the 11th century onwards can be identified in the plurality of formal and informal relations with money.

Concerning the second aspect, Cécile Troadec studies the real estate patrimony of the chapter of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, studied for the 14th and 15th centuries based on the *censuali* registers kept in the

Vatican Apostolic Library. Through this documentary series, the author shows how one of the most powerful ecclesiastical owners in Rome manages its real estate assets as a private player in the Roman real estate market would, aiming to optimise the profitability of its assets, as evidenced by the inflation of rents and the speculative investments made.

When it comes more specifically to accounting, Julie Claustre presents a dense historiographical review, showing that medievalists' belief in a medieval capitalist rationality expressed in accounting records marked a good part of the 20th century, until the return to a number of institutional, merchant, and artisanal accounting records, as well as the meticulous practice of editing and critiquing them, which has taken place since the 1990s, enabled medievalists to question this grand narrative of the medieval transformation of the European economy. Her article proposes a view of medieval accounting *ratio* as a set of practices of writing (and ciphering) linked to the process of development of administration and social competition induced by the growing adoption of the written medium, from the 12th century onwards.

Finally, rationality in the management of scarcity: in his article entitled *Rational Logics and the Fight against Hunger in Northern Medieval Europe*, Alexis Wilkin analyzes economic rationality from the perspective of political authorities' responses to famines. He looks at the evolution of interpretative attitudes and practices shared by political elites from the Carolingian period to the emergence of urban communities in the 12th century, focusing on the Southern Netherlands.

These are the questions that we propose to address in this special issue: a partial inventory, we concede, but one that seems important in addressing a notable historiographical turning point in the history of the medieval economy in the broad sense. Through the problematic of economic rationalities, the aim is to highlight new approaches for the study of medieval societies.

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