

FROM THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE SUBSISTENCE TO THE SOCIAL ROLE OF CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

The irreversibility of consumption, namely the tendency - in presence of a contraction in income - of individuals not to reduce their consumption standards acquired over time, is a well known property in the literature and accepted by various theoretical paradigms.

One of its strongest explanations comes from the contributions of Thorstein Veblen, who introduced the concept of *conspicuous consumption*, and from the institutional school, where the irreversibility is traced back to the social determination of consumption and the related acquisition of standard expenditures.

The aim of the research is to trace, in the history of economic thought and in particular in classical political economy, principles that are consistent or even coincide with the ideas theorised by Veblen, without seeking or being able to assert a direct link.

We shall first show that, both in classical economists and Marx, a social dimension can be found in *the determinants of subsistence*. Furthermore, because of the social structure in which classical political economy developed, we argue that it is not possible to find a clear theoretical development towards Veblen's principles.

A connection with Veblen can be found, as several textual passages confirm, in the works of K. Marx. We shall argue that the main reasons for this possible connection essentially derive from the advances of the capitalist system of production and the changes in the distribution of the social product where the conception of *the social role of consumption spending* took full shape, a world where Marx developed his ideas even anticipating those of Veblen.