

Doctoral Program in Economics



History of Economic Analysis

Narratives and Metaphors in Economic Theory: From Genovesi to Modigliani

Period:

First term: 30th January (Dal Degan, 2 hours); 31th January (Dal Degan, 4 hours); 6th February (Guidi, 4 hours); 11th February (Guidi, 4 hours); 13th February (Martini, 4 hours); 14th February (Martini, 2 hours).

Course hours:

20

Teachers:

prof. Marco E. L. Guidi, course coordinator, 8 hours (marco.guidi@unipi.it)

prof. Francesca Dal Degan, 6 hours (francesca.daldegan@unipi.it)

dr. Alice Martini, 6 hours (alice.martini@unipi.it)

Exam methods:

Research paper

How to prepare your final paper

- a. Choose if you want to work on your own or in pairs.
- b. Choose one of the following working topics:
 - 1) A theme that has a historical link to the research project that you are developing for the Ph. D. course.
 - 2) A theme that was described and/or commented on during the classes of the course by one of the three instructors.
- c. Send by **June 30, 2025**, a notification of your choice and a synthetic outline of the work you plan to do. Please address your email to alice.martini@unipi.it and francesca.daldegan@unipi.it.

- d. Read and study: you can use the references given in our lectures and/or in the syllabus as a starting point for the themes connected to those described by one of the instructors. If you are choosing a different theme, we will discuss the sources that you plan to use.
- e. Prepare your paper as you would do for a scientific symposium:
 - 1) Include a 200-word abstract to describe the content of your paper.
 - 2) Illustrate the method you adopted for your work, the main references used, and your main findings (the text must be between 3000 and 5000 words).
 - 3) Include a list of references at the end.
- f. Send your file by **September 15, 2025**.

Prerequisites:

None

Programme:

This course examines the deep connections between economic theory, rhetorical devices, and narratives. Central to the inquiry is the role of metaphors and models, two tools that not only facilitate understanding but are integral to the construction, evolution, and communication of economic ideas. By exploring the use of these devices across the history of economic thought—from Antonio Genovesi to Franco Modigliani—this course will illuminate their epistemological and ontological significance in shaping theoretical frameworks.

Metaphors have long been at the heart of economic discourse. They provide intuitive ways to conceptualize abstract ideas, enabling economists to relate complex systems to familiar domains and/or connecting different realms of knowledge. Examples include mechanical metaphors, such as the economy as a machine or equilibrium as a balance of forces; corporeal metaphors, like the economy as an organism with circulatory flows and health states; Adam Smith's iconic "invisible hand", which metaphorically represents self-regulating socio-economic dynamics. These metaphors do more than describe; they actively structure theoretical approaches and guide the formulation of causal narratives, embedding meaning into the very fabric of economic theories.

Equally important are models, that are not just simplified or idealized representations of reality; they also act as narratives, analogies, and metaphors that help scientists make sense of complex phenomena. To fully understand a model, it's not enough to know its structure—we also need to understand how it works, what it can do, and how it connects to other concepts or values in science. Narratives play a critical role in this, as they explain the relationships and mechanisms within the model, making it applicable to real-world situations. Without these narratives, models would lack context and relevance, leaving them disconnected from the realities they aim to describe. In this sense, stories form an integral part of models, as understanding a model requires knowing 'how it works' and 'what it can do' on the basis of 'which kind of relationships' with other scientific realms and values.

The course will trace these themes through key moments in the history of economic thought, beginning with Antonio Genovesi's early explorations of civil economy, Adam Smith's contribution on ethics and economics, and J. C. L. Sismondi's critiques of classical economics. It will then examine how metaphors and narratives evolved during the marginalist revolution and how 20th-century

economists, such as Franco Modigliani, used models to articulate and expand theoretical insights. One special focus will be dedicated to the evolution of the language related to saving as an economic phenomenon.

Drawing on foundational and contemporary works, including Black (1962), Kuhn (1979), McCloskey (1983), Mäki (1988), Mirowski (1991), Morgan (2012) and Hardt (2014), this course will provide students with the tools to critically assess how metaphors and narratives underpin the explanatory and realistic power of economic theories.

Outline:

Week 1:

Introduction to the Course and Key Concepts

Overview of rhetoric, metaphor, and analogy in history of economic thought.

Antonio Genovesi and the Beginnings of the Economic Discourse Exploration of Genovesi's work and rhetorical strategies.

Discussion of metaphors in Genovesi's vision of economic relations.

Adam Smith: The Invisible Hand and Beyond

Analysis of Smith's use of metaphor in *The Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

The role of the "invisible hand" metaphor in economic theory and its enduring legacy.

J. C. L. Sismondi and 19th-Century French Economists

Examination of rhetorical devices in Sismondi's critiques of classical economics.

Week 2 and Week 3: The theme of the lessons is 'Body, disease, cure in the economic thinking of early 19th century French economists. During the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, many questioned the fragility of the human body in the face of catastrophic events such as epidemics and natural disasters. Giacomo Leopardi's 'stepmotherly nature' seemed to regain its upper hand even in parts of the world that thought themselves protected by average living conditions and efficient health and social services, and at a time when science and technology seemed able to protect humanity from any danger. This raises a question for those concerned with the origins of modern economic science: is it possible that, in an era when disasters, famines and epidemics were frequent and had devastating effects, such as the one that - in the late eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth century - saw the birth of political economy, the biological fragility of human beings was not a central theme of economic analysis? What sense does it make to speak of productive labour, capital accumulation, and wealth growth in the face of phenomena that can wipe out all effort? A closer look, however, reveals that the theme is very much present - and at several levels - in the thinking of the economists of the time, the so-called 'classics'. The starting point for investigating this theme comes from Jean-Baptiste Say, who, in the introduction to his *Cours d'économie politique* (1820-29), compares political economy to physiology, the one a science of the social body, the other a science of the human body. Georges Canguilhem's reflections (*Le normal et le pathologique*, 1966) on the birth of modern physiology, almost coeval with that of political economy, constitute the starting point for understanding how the study of the functioning of the biological body arose from the opposition between the normal state of psycho-physical equilibrium and the pathological state. The cure (the 'pharmakon', the therapy, the clinic) is now conceived as the result of the scientific understanding of the path to be followed in order to bring the disordered state of the body back to equilibrium (similarly to what was thought to be possible for diseases of the soul, as illustrated by Jean Starobinski in *L'encre de la mélancolie*, 2012 -- and before that in *Le Remède dans le mal*, 1989). But it was Michel Foucault, on the basis provided by the latter, who grasped the link between the birth of economic science and the birth of the clinic. In fact, his lectures

at the Collège de France in 1977-1978 (*Sécurité, territoire, population*) and 1978-1979 (*Naissance de la biopolitique*) reconstruct the social-political link that is produced, in modern knowledge, between a new conception of governmentality entrusted to the laws of the market and a new conception of care entrusted to the modern clinic. Even applying these cues to the reading of the texts of classical economists, in particular the French (Say, Sismondi, thanks to their frequentation of idéologues such as Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy), one discovers how the sick body is at several levels present at the heart of economic reflection: as a subject of investigation (particularly in the study of population movements), as a metaphor (the social body), and as an epistemological model for the construction of economic theory (economic equilibrium and development conceived not in mechanical, hydraulic or even thermodynamic terms, but as a state of 'normal' health of the body). The remedy, then, is no longer entrusted to the thaumaturgic and protective powers of the sovereign (who might even cause greater evils than the disease itself), but to the maintenance of the normal health conditions of the social body.

Week 4: The final week connects the insights from the lectures of previous weeks by demonstrating how traditional approaches to economic history can be effectively combined with modern linguistic analysis. Specifically, the evolution of the concept of saving will be explored, showing how classical economic thought has examined its role over time. By integrating contemporary linguistic techniques, we can enhance our understanding by quantifying and analyzing key textual patterns in economic discourse. This approach bridges historical perspectives with data-driven methods, offering a more comprehensive and measurable way to study how economic ideas develop and circulate over time.

The breakdown of the contents will be as follows:

- What is saving?
- Outline of the development of this “phenomenon” in the economic analysis:
 - The classical view
 - Marginalist thinkers
 - Keynes
 - Harrod-Domar vs Solow-Swan
 - Franco Modigliani’s *Life Cycle Hypothesis*
- Linguistic analysis: a case study
- Synthesis and Final Reflections

Bibliographical references

- Key Readings on the role of metaphors in Economics:

Black, M. (1962), *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press.

Brown, V. (1994), *Adam Smith Discours: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience*, Routledge.

Hardt, L. (2014). *Metaphors as Research Tools in Economics*, *On the Horizon*, 22, pp. 256-254.

Herrera-Soler, H. and White, M. (2006), *Metaphor and Mills Figurative Language in Business and Economics*, De Gruyter Mouton.

Kuhn, T. S. (1979). *Metaphor in Science*, in *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony, Cambridge University Press.

Mäki, U. (1988), *How to Combine Rhetoric and Realism in the Methodology of Economics*, in "Economics & Philosophy", 4, pp. 89-109.

McCloskey, D. N. (1983). *The Rhetoric of Economics*, "Journal of Economic Literature", pp. 481-517.

Mirowski, P. (1991). *More Heat than Light. Economics as Social Physics, Physics as nature's Economics*, Cambridge University Press

Morgan, M. S., & Boumans, M. (2004), *Secrets Hidden by Two Dimensionality: The Economy as a Hydraulic Machine*, in *Models. The third dimension of science*, Edited by: Soraya de Chadarevian and Nick Hopwood, Stanford University Press.

Morgan, M. S. (2012). *The World in the Model*, Cambridge University Press.

Resche, C. (2006), *Towards a better understanding of metaphorical networks in the language of economics: The importance of theory-constitutive metaphors*, in *Metaphor and Mills Figurative Language in Business and Economics*, Edited by Honesto Herrera-Soler and Michael White, De Gruyter Mouton.

- Key readings on how to bridge historical perspectives with data-driven methods (special focus saving):
 - Acemoglu, D. *Introduction to Modern Economic Growth*, Oxford, Princeton UP, 2009.
 - Aspromourgos T. 2012, «The Machine in Adam Smith's Economic and Wider Thought», *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 34, 4, 475-490.
 - Baumgartner H. 2010, «Bibliometric Reflections on the History of Consumer Research», *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20, 3, 233-238.
 - Eltis, W., *The Classical Theory of Economic Growth*, second edition, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000.
 - Gootzeit M. J. 1995b, «The Evolution of The Savings Concept», *History of Economic Ideas*, 3 (1), 71-92.
 - Gupta V., Lehal Gurpreet S. 2009, «A Survey of Text Mining Techniques and Applications», *Journal of Emerging Technologies in Web Intelligence*, 1 (1), 60-76.
 - Kurz, H. D., Salvadori, N., *Theories of economic growth: old and new*, in N. Salvadori (ed.), *The Theory of Economic Growth: A 'Classical' Perspective*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2003, pp. 1-22.
 - Martini, A., *Tra crescita e parsimonia: il risparmio nel dibattito economico dai classici all'Ipotesi del ciclo di vita*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2022.
 - Martini A., Pietrini F., *A Qualitative and Quantitative Outline of the Semantic History of 'Saving' in 19th Century Political Economy*, *History of Economic Analysis*, 2024/2, pp. 115-153, and references therein.
 - Martini, A. Spataro, L., *A Re-assessment of the relation between saving and economic growth from the marginalist thinkers to the debate of the 1950s*, in "History of Economic Ideas", 19, 2, 2021, pp. 143-173, and references therein.
- Additional specific readings on the three parts of the course will be indicated by the lecturers during class

Educational objectives

The class is designed to implement students' critical and creative skills in order to acquire independent capacities of interpretation, contextualization and systematic reconstruction of economic pivotal concepts and epistemological tools, tracing the evolution from the early efforts at economic analysis to Twentieth Century economic thinking.