

Editorial

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The French Intellectual Tradition of Liberty: A Special Issue of the *Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines*

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1 France: Between *Dirigisme* and Liberty

France is a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction. On the one hand, it's a mess of *dirigisme* and socialism. As of the latest figures (2020), France had the dubious distinction of the greatest government spending to GDP ratio of all the OECD countries, at just North of 60%.¹ From the first post-WW2 government in 1946 until 1992, France deployed centralized five-year plans, which, although less stringent, shared the ambitions of their Soviet counterparts. France is the country of *raison d'état* and the technocratic rule of the *énarque* and *polytechnicien* élite. And while France was the first of the European countries to overthrow her absolute monarch (if we exclude the nine-year blip of the British Protectorate, which led to the Glorious Revolution and another 350 years of a monarchy that endures to this day), it quickly replaced the despotism of absolute monarchy with the despotism of the 1793 Terror. A few years of that despotic chaos was followed by the dictatorship of Napoleon, a restoration from 1815 to 1848, a three-year socialist republic, another empire for a quarter century, then three more republics and a four-year constitutional suspension under Vichy's Quisling collaboration with the Nazis. All in all, France had a total of 21 constitutional regimes between 1789 and 1958 – another dubious distinction. French politics have suffered from the competing claims of Descartes and Rousseau for 150 years, in France's odd plebiscitarian caesarism.²

1 <https://data.oecd.org/gga/general-government-spending.htm>.

2 Nikolai G. Wenzel (2016), "Descartes, Rousseau, de Gaulle: France's Constitutional Waltz of Plebiscitarian Caesarism," *Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines*, 22(2), 191–211.

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Parallel to this mess, France endures. It does not suffer the ministerial instability of Italy. It is still a member of the G7 richest countries in the world. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen is largely sound (from a classical liberal perspective), and predates the US Bill of Rights by a decade. France boasts many giants who are routinely taught, studied, and revered by friends of liberty; among these, we note primarily Frédéric Bastiat and Alexis de Tocqueville – and among more serious classical liberals, Jean-Baptiste Say and Benjamin Constant.

It is interesting to note here that F.A. Hayek drew a sharp distinction between the *English* Enlightenment and the *French* Enlightenment.³ In Hayek's taxonomy, the English tradition represented individual rights, spontaneous order, and methodological individualism – where institutions are understood as “the result of human action, but not of human design.”⁴ By contrast, the French tradition was based on Cartesian rationalism, (or “rational constructivism”) and the deliberate design of society and institutions. The former can be traced forward to contemporary classical liberalism, while the latter enjoys continuity with socialism, interventionism, “market failure” theory, and other forms of social engineering. The English version is associated with John Locke, David Hume, Bernard Mandeville, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith – but also Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Say, and Bastiat. The French version is associated with Descartes, the *Encyclopédistes*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Auguste Comte and Henri de Saint-Simon⁵ – but also Thomas Hobbes, and, later, John Maynard Keynes and Paul Samuelson.

Despite its many interventionist thinkers and Hayek's dismissal, France has a rich tradition of classical liberalism, and the world of liberty owes an unpayable intellectual debt to French thinkers. In this Special Issue, our contributors discuss 10 influential thinkers in the classical liberal tradition: Montaigne, Montesquieu, the Physiocrats, Voltaire, Constant, Say, Tocqueville, Molinari, Rueff, and de Jouvenel. The intellectual world and human liberty owe a debt of honor to every one of those thinkers; presenting these reflections on their influence on classical liberalism in chronological order helps us trace the development of the ideas in their historical, philosophical, and social context.

Naturally (and sadly, perhaps) we have had to leave other influential thinkers out – sometimes, for lack of space, other times for lack of available authors. We do not discuss Pierre Nicole or Pierre Bayle; Charles Dunoyer and the *Economistes* are absent. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is so obviously an enemy of liberty that he is now

³ F.A. Hayek, “Individualism: True and False,” in F.A. Hayek (1948), *Individualism and Economic Order*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ F.A. Hayek, “The Result of Human Action but not of Human Design,” in F.A. Hayek (1967), *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ And, interestingly, the Physiocrats – see the entry by Hobbs and Wenzel below.

embraced by many classical liberal thinkers; we leave that interesting controversy to future work. Perhaps the most glaring omission is the great Frédéric Bastiat – still the best and most masterful expositor of simple economic concepts, but also a deep and insightful thinker. But the editor of this *Journal* assuaged our worries about this omission by reminding us that this *Journal* has published no less than 21 articles on Bastiat in the recent past; the omission is as sad as the secondary literature is rich.

2 The Entries

We start this intellectual adventure with Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), author of *The Essays*. In David Schaefer's explanation, Montaigne was the architect of modern liberty. Indeed, he lay the foundations for a system of individual liberty, rule of law, freedom of religion, limited government, and rational republican or democratic government to replace monarchy. In this way, Montaigne was a precursor to other French intellectuals (such as Montesquieu), but also non-French classical liberal thinkers who developed a fuller theory of liberal government (such as John Locke). Unfortunately, Montaigne is understudied, underappreciated, and largely misunderstood in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755) is celebrated in the classical liberal world for his constitutional theory, including the protection against despotism, and the separation of powers (“distribution,” technically, as Stuart Warner reminds us). He was influential, notably, on Alexis de Tocqueville and on the US Founding Fathers, and remains an important figure in the classical liberal tradition. Stuart Warner digs deep into an exegesis of *The Spirit of Laws*, with particular emphasis on the different conceptions of political liberty in Montesquieu's thought, the nature of power, the importance of institutional versus moral constraints on the state, the distribution of power against despotism, and lessons from history (notably Rome and England).

We then turn to Bradley Hobbs and Nikolai Wenzel's essay on the Physiocrats (1694–1774).⁶ The Physiocrats were writing in the waning years of the French absolute monarchy, under the reigns of Louis XV and XVI. They were primarily concerned with two liberal goals. First, the Physiocrats advocated the submission of worldly regimes to natural law; in their time, this meant primarily the monarchy, but classical liberalism also owes them a debt for placing natural law over positive law – in what would later be known as “legislation” (in the writings of F.A. Hayek) or democratic absolutism. Second, the Physiocrats opposed mercantilism, in favor of

⁶ Because Physiocracy is a school of thought, it does not have clean dates and we adopt here the dates for the primary Physiocrat, François Quesnay.

free trade. In the process of defending natural law and free trade, the Physiocrats laid the foundations for a systematic science of modern political economy, and were directly influential on other classical liberal luminaries, such as Adam Smith, the 19th-century *Economistes* (Bastiat, Say, etc.), and the Austrian school of economics. The essay closes by acknowledging some troubling seeds in physiocratic writings, especially proto-formalism and legal despotism under rule of law, which led the likes of Tocqueville, Hayek, and William Röpke to reject the Physiocrats.

David Wootton dives deeply into the thought of Voltaire (1694–1778). He disputes the accepted reading among Voltaire scholars, arguing that Voltaire had to write cautiously about liberty and tyranny, given the political environment and his patrons. But Voltaire was a systematic defender of liberty, with a well-developed normative political theory. He was an early advocate of rule of law, ordered liberty (for anarchy is just as bad, or worse, than tyranny), freedom of conscience and expression, and the right to rebel against tyrants when prudence so dictates.

In his essay, Henry Clark laments the lack of contemporary attention to Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). Constant, he writes,

is the most important French liberal that most casual liberals have never heard of. Everyone knows something about Montesquieu because checks and balances and the separation of powers are household terms. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution* are both established classics. But Constant is largely *terra incognita* even for those with a university degree – to their loss.⁷

Constant was personally marked by the tyranny and chaos into which the French revolution and the Napoleonic dictatorship lapsed. He responded by explaining the difference between ancient and modern conceptions of liberty. For the ancients, liberty meant direct political participation of a minority, in small city-states that accumulated wealth through slavery and conquest. For modern Europeans, liberty meant individual independence, under rule of law and commercial society. Constant feared throughout his writings that the virtue-promoting institutions of the ancient world would lead to ugliness if wielded by modern states; although he had lived through the Terror of 93 and Napoleon's dictatorship, he was a prescient analyst of the 20th-century total state, and a defender of commercial society as indispensable for liberty.

Anthony Evans and Nikolai Wenzel have written on Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832). The entry was originally entrusted to their friend and mentor Steve Horwitz (1964–2021), to whom it is dedicated. Say is now remembered almost exclusively for “Say's Law” – which, through a misreading, served as the basis for John Maynard

⁷ We note in passing that Nikolai Wenzel named his first dog “Benjamin Constant,” after reading the seminal essay on liberty on the Rue Benjamin Constant, in the 19th *arrondissement* of Paris.

Keynes' argument for aggregate demand management. Say is otherwise largely forgotten, although he was a founder of entrepreneurship theory, and a precursor to the subjectivist revolution and the Austrian school. Contemporary policy-makers would do well to look to his advice about fixing institutions (the microfoundations of macroeconomics), rather than messing with aggregate demand and fiscal stimulus.

Bradley Birzer has provided the entry on Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859). Tocqueville's *magnum opus*, *Democracy in America*, is still a reference for understanding the American experiment – but the book also remains a respected primer on the art of association in civil society, as an alternative to big government. As we saw in an earlier essay, Tocqueville picked up from Benjamin Constant the concern that the moderns, so engrossed in private independence and commerce, would too easily yield political power. While he was enthusiastic about the young country, its promise, and its governance, he also foresaw the possibility of democracy's drift into soft despotism.

Gustave de Molinari (1819–1912) was Belgian, but his key contributions took place in Paris (among others, as editor of the *Journal des Economistes*). Molinari is remembered primarily for his suggestion that security – much like any other good – could be better provided by the market than by a state monopoly; he was thus a precursor to contemporary anarcho-capitalism. Even if we dismiss his vision as utopian (as did many of his intellectual friends), we are indebted to him for this important thought exercise in radical liberty. However, in Alexia Bedeville's treatment, Molinari's most important contribution to the classical liberal tradition was his work in placing economic science on a solid scientific footing, while also applying this framework to all fields of human action (in this way, he was a precursor to the Public Choice school and Gary Becker's human economics). Molinari also places himself squarely in the tradition of classical liberal optimism: markets are self-regulating, economic science solves the problems of human cooperation, and markets exchange leads to social harmony.

Samuel Gregg writes on Jacques Rueff (1896–1978). Rueff was an economist and civil servant, and a participant at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society. He was a staunch defender of the gold standard as a bulwark against inflation, which he hated for its uncertainty, but also because of the insidious, undemocratic nature of the inflation tax. Rueff was an advisor to President Charles de Gaulle; he is widely credited with stabilizing the French economy after a decade of inflation and instability, and his opposition to massive public works programs and expensive welfare policies – especially when used as fiscal stimulus – earned him the moniker of “*l'anti-Keynes*.”

We close the 20th century and this Special Issue with Kevin Honeycutt's treatment of Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903–1987). De Jouvenel, another founder of the Mont Pelerin Society, is most known in today's classical liberal circles for his first major

work, *On Power*, a pessimistic discourse on the nature of the state and its encroachments on individual liberty. But de Jouvenel was a much more thorough political philosopher, who probed the “Big Questions,” like the nature of liberty and individual autonomy, the nature of power, regime preservation and the philosophical foundations of the good society. De Jouvenel also explored the limits of the classical liberal state; his “supra-minimal” conclusions (which end up resembling those of Hayek or Buchanan) led to clashes with other members of the Mont Pelerin Society, who were more skeptical of the state’s capacity to provide anything but security without unintended consequences.

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