

Reassessing Enlightenment Economics

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Resurrecting the life of John Cary's *Essay on the State of England*, a book which travelled all over Europe throughout the 18th century, S.A. Reinert challenges our understanding of Enlightenment economics, while calling for a more nuanced and historically-informed understanding of political economy in general.

Reviewed: Sophus A. Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy*. Harvard University Press, 438 pp.

Translating Empire provides a bold new interpretation of political economy in the age of Enlightenment. Erudite, deeply researched, and exhaustively documented, the book traces the intellectual life of John Cary's *Essay on the State of England* from its birth in 1695 through its French and Italian translations in the 1750s, to its final German translation in 1788. Borrowing from the methods of book history, Reinert shows how the text changed form and took on new meanings as it toured the continent to become a "written concert, performed by an international quartet of political economists" (257). But *Translating Empire* is more than a simple reconstruction of the *Essay's* peregrinations. By resurrecting the life of a text that scholars have dismissed as "mercantilist" and repositioning that work at the center of 18th-century political economy, Reinert challenges our basic understanding of Enlightenment economics, so often reduced to the free-trade doctrines of the physiocrats and Adam Smith. He argues that the diffusion of Cary's work demonstrates that state-centered approaches to the creation of wealth enjoyed wide resonance at the very moment when discussions of economic policy were expanding beyond state chambers to engage a broader public. Far from being eclipsed by theories of laissez-faire economics, as conventional histories of economic thought would have us believe, such approaches became "the absolute mainstream in Europe" by the late 18th century. (267)

Challenging Modern Economic Historiography

By asserting that state-oriented approaches to the economy not only endured but thrived, Reinert challenges three influential strains of modern historiography: "precursorism," defined as the search for Enlightenment antecedents of contemporary economic liberalism, an endeavor commonly found in economics textbooks; the "doux commerce" thesis, originally formulated by Albert Hirschman, which contends that 18th-century thinkers justified capitalism by arguing that trade civilized the nations engaged in it; and, finally, "classical republicanism," which, according to J.G.A. Pocock and his many followers, fanned fears that commercial wealth would extinguish

civic virtue, leading inexorably to corruption, decadence, and state collapse. Reinert will have none of it. Precursorism's highly selective hunt for the origins of contemporary free-trade ideology is, he retorts, inherently teleological, unduly privileging the physiocrats and Adam Smith over more interventionist thinkers. The *doux commerce* thesis ignores the fact that, in practice, there was a synergy between violent conquest and national prosperity that a wide swath of political-economic literature acknowledged and even promoted. And classical-republican anxieties about the decline of civic virtue were "trumped" by the notion that economic vitality would assure, rather than undermine, political liberty (29). Reinert acknowledges the presence of discourses of *laissez-faire*, *doux commerce*, and classical republicanism, but he insists that their significance has been blown out of proportion, obscuring a competing rhetoric at the center of Enlightenment political economy.

Indeed, what Cary's *Essay* and its multiple translations make clear is that in an age of intense military, diplomatic, and commercial rivalry many political economists asserted that the preservation of a nation's political liberty depended heavily on aggressive economic policy. To determine which policies worked best, writers increasingly argued comparatively, urging their governments to emulate states whose policies bolstered the economy and strengthened the fiscal-military state. Building on the work of Kenneth Carpenter, former curator of the Kress Collection at Harvard Business School's Baker Library, *Translating Empire* demonstrates that one nation stood above all others as an object of emulation: Great Britain. As Britain rocketed to prominence among the great powers, continental Europeans attempted to divine the secret of her success, translating ever larger numbers of English works on political economy in the hope of finding – and copying – the key to her astonishing economic and political might.

Essay on the State of England: A Way Into Britain's Economic Might

John Cary's *Essay on the State of England* was one such work. A Bristol merchant who had first-hand experience with the burgeoning Atlantic economy, Cary eschewed classical tropes and drew from his knowledge of trade to craft a "science" of wealth that, in good Whig fashion, emphasized the dynamism of labor, industry, manufacturing, and technology. "The State" was to play a central role in animating this economy (89). Although Cary disliked state-sponsored trading companies, monopolies, privileges and espoused "free" trade (meaning the liberty to choose one's vocation and to circulate goods unencumbered by *internal* customs duties), he very much favored state workhouses for the poor, the aggressive use of the navy to defend English overseas trade (even if it meant taking on additional public debt), state regulations that facilitated economic transactions, and, most importantly, the implementation of strong protectionist tariffs. Whereas he urged the removal of tariffs on imported raw materials and exported manufactured goods, he called for heavy tariffs on the export of raw materials and the import of manufactured goods, a policy that would boost English manufactures, produce a favorable balance of trade, and generate the wealth necessary for Albion to keep her enemies at bay.

For Cary, the use of military force to secure foreign colonies and extend the empire was integral to this vision of a state-centered economy. As he grappled with affairs in Ireland and Newfoundland, he conflated issues of wealth and military prowess. "His political economy was in the end one manifestation – or rather an influential codification – of a larger ideology of British imperialism centered on the mutually reinforcing relationship between naval power,

manufacturing capitalism, and an exceptionalist Protestant nationalism.” (127) Although Reinert is wary of the controversial term “mercantilism,” he deploys it carefully throughout the book to highlight the imperialist political economy that Cary so compellingly articulated.

Had Reinert restricted his analysis to the content of Cary’s *Essay*, he would have produced a modestly important work on a little-studied figure of English political economy. But *Translating Empire* goes much further by tracing the trajectory of the treatise as it crossed the channel into France, the literary heart of the Enlightenment, dove south along the Italian peninsula to Naples, and ricocheted north to Leipzig, changing in critical ways at each stage. In what is by far the most innovative and illuminating aspect of the book, Reinert assesses the national contexts through which the *Essay* passed and describes how translators transformed the structure and meaning of the text as they introduced it into foreign lands and languages. As the *Essay on the State of England* metamorphosed into the *Essai sur l’État du Commerce d’Angleterre*, then into the *Storia del commercio della Gran Bretagna*, and finally into the *Ökonomisch-politischer Commentarius*, it took on new significance and widened its base within the emerging field of European political economy. Chasing the text across the continent, Reinert musters his extraordinary language skills and broad knowledge of national historiographies to chart the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual evolution of an increasingly complex textual hybrid.

Crossing the Channel into France, Italy and Germany

Physiocracy. François Quesnay, the founder of physiocracy and creator of the famous *Tableau économique*, is usually credited with inventing the idea of the circular flow of wealth, creating a free-trade economic paradigm, and preparing the way for Adam Smith’s manifesto *The Wealth of Nations*. Quesnay is also known to have insisted that France’s prosperity depended on the productivity of agriculture rather than that of “sterile” commerce and industry.

The French case is most interesting. The physiocrats have long enjoyed pride of place in conventional accounts of French political economy, and Reinert acknowledges this strain of thought which, echoing Fénelonian paeans to a morally pristine yet threatened rural world, promised to return France to its agrarian foundations, but he draws attention to an alternative economic logic developed by a long line of French or Francophone thinkers¹. In fact, Cary’s French translator, George-Marie Butel-Dumont, was a prominent member of the Gournay circle, a group of political-economic writers who, led by the well-connected intendant of commerce, emphasized the value of industry and exchange over agriculture and assigned the state a robust role in promoting manufactures and trade. On the eve of the Seven Years War, Butel-Dumont observed in the translation’s preface, “All of Europe fixes their eyes on [England], to learn, through the examination of their conduct, by what resources a Kingdom of such small extent as England has arrived at a power equal to the vastest states.” (156). Engaging an anxious French public, Butel-Dumont introduced Cary’s political economy into the kingdom and added an extensive commentary that updated the original while tailoring it for a new audience. The result was a book with a more cosmopolitan outlook but which nonetheless urged the French to follow Britain’s example by instituting aggressive commercial policies.

¹ Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Jean-François Melon, Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay, Ferdinando Galiani, and Jacques Necker

The message of Butel-Dumont's translation was clear: if the French state did not do all it could to expand its navy and merchant marine, secure colonial possessions, and encourage the importation of raw materials and the exportation of manufactured goods, it would never successfully compete against its energetic rival, Great Britain. Such a message was a far cry from the economic liberalism soon to be articulated by the physiocrats, who urged the monarchy to withdraw from putatively self-regulating markets. Decrying physiocracy's "historiographically pampered existence," Reinert contends that Butel-Dumont's translation – and the Gournay circle's "science of commerce" in general – established in France an alternative state-centered logic of political economy that, contrary to much historical literature, was never defeated by Quesnay and his followers. Indeed, the Colbertian framework developed by the Gournay circle outlasted the physiocratic efflorescence of the 1760s as thinkers such as Galiani and Necker continued to elaborate its main themes.

Not content to have explored the French context, *Translating Empire* resumes its transnational romp across Europe by considering the cases of Italy and Germany. In Italy, which had once experienced a gloriously robust economy but had been left behind in the 17th and 18th centuries, Cary's work, refracted through Butel-Dumont's translation—for it was the French translation that was translated into Italian, not the original English version—took on new resonance. In the hands of its Italian translator, Antonio Genovesi, a Neapolitan who lamented the waning of his ancient kingdom, the text became far more historical in nature, as Italy's "great series of rises and falls... came to inform an analysis of economic change whose complexity far superseded Cary and Butel-Dumont's understanding of progress." (200). While Reinert exhaustively explores how Genovesi's Catholicism and Polybian sense of cyclical history shaped the annotations and appendixes of the translation, he concludes that at bottom the book's message remained the same: the state must actively encourage national manufactures, especially luxuries. According to Genovesi's historically-based "science of commerce", the labor-intensive production of high-end goods benefitted from a multiplier effect since producers added enormous value to goods before exporting them. To stimulate such luxury production, weighty tariffs would have to be put in place to encourage the importation of raw materials and the exportation of finished goods. As Genovesi observed, "Nowhere in Europe are these burdens [on commerce] in fact greater than in England, and at the same time no nation has a greater and freer trade." (211). Lest his readers forget this fateful lesson, the Neapolitan concluded his massive three-volume work with a translation of the English Navigation Acts.

If Genovesi's translation of Butel-Dumont's translation went on to become "the most influential work of political economy produced in 18th-century Italy," its German translation suffered a rather different fate (231). Whereas Butel-Dumont and Genovesi contributed generously to the work, enhancing its physical and intellectual stature, Christian August Wichmann, a political economist who had translated Smith and physiocrat Guillaume Le Trosne, produced a stunted 1788 version that did little to influence the field of German political economy. Rather than blaming the failure of this final German translation on the presumed parochialism of German Cameralism (the administrative craft of harnessing the powers of nature), Reinert posits a psychological explanation: that Wichmann fell into bibliographic despair, fearing that he would never be able to access many of the works to which Genovesi's translation referred. But another possible explanation presents itself. In a final ironic twist to Cary's fate on the continent, Reinert astutely notes that Wichmann, a devoted physiocrat,

introduced the maxims of his sect into the footnotes, forcing Cary's ideas into a rigid free-trade ideology. Perhaps Wichmann grew tired of performing such conceptual gymnastics, of cutting against the grain of a work that was patently non-physiocratic, and gave up after translating the first of Genovesi's three volumes. Whatever the trials of its translator, the *Ökonomisch-politischer Commentarius* fizzled out in an act of liberal canon-building that Reinert sees as endemic to the entire history of modern economic thought.

A Historically Informed Understanding of Political Economy

Reinert does that field a great service. Not only does he resuscitate an influential English "mercantilist," showing how his ideas were appropriated and transformed in France, Italy, and Germany, but he throws down a gauntlet before those who would claim that 18th-century political economy was dominated either by economic liberalism, the "doux commerce" thesis, or classical republicanism. Indeed, in an epilogue he suggests that the entire historiography of economic thought was distorted by the Cold War, which split economics into warring camps polarized by the ideological extremes of economic planning and laissez-faire. As a result, we have lost the kind of nuanced, historically-informed understanding of political economy that shaped the discipline during its infancy in the late 17th and 18th centuries. Although such bold claims are likely to be contested, there is no doubt that the publication of *Translating Empire* has ushered in a formidable new voice to the field of Enlightenment political economy.

If this daring book has a flaw it is that it exaggerates the novelty of some of its findings. At the level of political-economic practice, a number of recent histories have shown that violent, aggressive, and interventionist European states made all the difference in generating the tremendous growth of trade in the 17th and 18th centuries, and that the British state in particular, once regarded as inherently weak and decentralized, actively spurred commercial growth and encouraged industrialization. Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke's *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the Economy in the Second Millennium* (2009) is only one of several recent studies that make this exact point. Secondly, at the level of political-economic thought, historians of France have illuminated important non-physiocratic approaches to trade, industry, and prosperity. Indeed, recent work on the Gournay circle by Simone Meyssonier and Loïc Charles, among others, has shed new light on a fascinating body of economic literature that flourished in the 18th century despite the advent of physiocracy. But this takes nothing away from Reinert's achievement, for no scholar has approached these questions with such trans-national breadth and extraordinary sensitivity to language and cultural transmission. *Translating Empire*'s geographic reach and methodological sophistication make it one of the most important books on 18th-century political economy to appear this century.

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