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Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007. xx + 388 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7391-1483-2

Review by John Shovlin, New York University.

The last thirty years has seen fundamental changes in the way historians approach the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European economic thought. Formerly, it was common to assess the contribution of early modern economic thinkers to the eventual emergence of classical political economy, or to map their success in anticipating modern economic concepts or theories. This rather teleological approach has since largely given way to studies that seek to understand economic thought within its original context. Most historians today read early modern political economy as a contribution to wider debates about political, social, and moral order in European societies. In *Compass of Society*, Henry C. Clark makes a significant and valuable contribution to this literature.

Clark's goal is to chart "some of the ways in which 'commerce' was discussed by the most thoughtful and observant Frenchmen before 1800" (p. ix). By commerce Clark means something more than just trade (though exchange relations are at its heart). Commerce encompasses the whole industry of society, the collective productive effort of a population, and the network of economic interdependencies that binds it together. In keeping with the larger reorientation in the history of economic thought, Clark views the tradition he traces as a response to "underlying problems that are better seen as moral, social and strategic rather than merely economic in character" (p. ix). Theorists of commerce responded to three overarching problems, he argues. They sought to remedy France's condition as a "low-trust" society, a social order lacking in cohesion, one plagued by "pervasive mutual suspicion and active ill will" (p. 313). They discerned in trade itself "a potential source of the kind of cohesion the French needed" (p. x). The second problem was privilege. According to Clark, "Some commentators . . . saw in the growth of trade a method of eroding or even dissolving the increasingly entrenched problems that the system of statutory privilege had seemed to generate" (p. x). The third issue that preoccupied writers on commerce was strategic. France had to compete in a cutthroat international environment and writers on commerce dwelt on the implications of such competition for the polity's political, social, and economic arrangements.

The temporal scope of Clark's study is impressively broad, stretching from the early seventeenth century to the French Revolution. The arc of the book traces a shift from a seventeenth-century absolutist discourse on commerce to the emergence in the eighteenth century of a liberal vision looking to the commercial societies of England and Holland as models. Clark sees the 1660s as a moment of profound divergence between France and its Dutch and English rivals. While Josiah Child and Pieter de la Court elaborated the intellectual foundations of polities predicated on commerce and the play of private interests, in France a quite different vision was consolidated. In an absolutist framework, it was only through the management of private interests by the monarchy that the entrepreneurial capacities of merchants, the industry of workers, and the desires of consumers could be harnessed to serve public purposes: "by attracting a reluctant and unreliable polity into self-interested enterprises the monarchy has chosen for it" (p. 20). The subordination of commerce to the purposes of absolutism entailed a

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prioritization of large-scale international and colonial trade, which served strategic and expansionist purposes, and luxury manufactures, which augmented the grandeur of the court and the Crown.

For Clark, the problem of social trust was at the root of the seventeenth-century divergence between France and the Maritime Powers. “The low level of social trust throughout France, and particularly among the political class,” he argues, “conferred a negative valence to the idea of individual self-interest then being validated in many intellectual circles in England and Holland” (p. 34). In France, it was the monarchy that would perform the magic of turning fissiparous private interest into the boons of public purpose. Later, however, absolutism itself seems to emerge in Clark’s analysis as the major obstacle to a liberal economic imaginary. He suggests that “To communicate the irony of a commercial order [i.e., how the play of private interests produced social benefits as an unintended consequence] . . . was particularly problematic in France because of the strength of a voluntaristic conception of social life engendered by the leading role of absolute monarchy” (p. 77). Nevertheless, such a conception of commerce did eventually catch on in France, he argues, and “developed into a flood” in the latter half of the eighteenth century (p. 77).

This focus on social trust—derived from recent work in the social sciences—is an interesting and promising line of argument, but it also raises some questions. How would one assess whether France had unusually low levels of social trust independent of the discourse which Clark interprets as an effort to grapple with such a problem? How would one establish that social trust was lower in France than in England or Holland? Why, moreover, did commerce seem a plausible solution to a problem of trust? Trade was hardly a sphere in which social trust was especially high. If the practice of commerce itself reliably produced trust, it is difficult to explain why merchant networks in eighteenth-century Europe were so often mediated by ties of family or religion.<sup>[1]</sup> It would seem that social bonds of a non-commercial nature were often needed to generate the trust necessary to sustain trade itself.

One of the ambitions of *Compass of Society* is to reconceptualize the liberal tradition in eighteenth-century French economic and political thought. Some historians of eighteenth-century Anglo-American political economy have deemphasized liberalism, in part to avoid teleologies whereby eighteenth-century writers are read through the prism of nineteenth-century debates, in part as a function of an emphasis on republican and natural jurisprudential modes of thought in scholarship on political economy before 1800.<sup>[2]</sup> “Liberal” has remained a less controversial label in French scholarship, but here historians have tended to invoke it rather broadly to characterize a range of thinkers who looked to markets as a model for economic organization. From Clark’s perspective, such an approach is distorting. Liberalism, he argues, should be read as a sensibility built around “the idea of a society of self-motivated individuals governed lightly by the rule of law” (p. xvi). In his view, Montesquieu, Vincent de Gournay, Morellet, Galiani, Turgot, and Sieyès were liberals, but the Physiocrats – the closest thing to free-market fundamentalists in the eighteenth century – were not.

Montesquieu is the central figure – the hero, in a way – of the story Clark tells. What Montesquieu contributed was a kind of historical and political sociology that framed the eighteenth-century French liberal tradition: the idea that conquest was dangerously anachronistic, and that peaceful commercial competition was the new reality of international relations; a claim that commerce could suffuse a spirit of reciprocity to all the institutions of a society – political, cultural, legal, and moral; the distinction between a “commerce of economy” and a “commerce of luxury,” the former, a trade in mundane goods, diffusing broad material prosperity, the latter linked to the court and its corruptions. If Montesquieu is the presiding genius of this discourse, the honor of being its practical sponsor goes to Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay, a merchant who became an Intendant of Commerce and used that position to sponsor the translation of foreign works of political economy into French, and to encourage the development of a coterie of young French writers many of whom would go on to prominent positions in intellectual life and royal service. (Among Gournay’s more notable acolytes were François Véron de Forbonnais, the abbé Morellet, and Turgot). Gournay and his associates developed the liberal model.

What was that model? Liberals posited “a social order held together by the reciprocal bonds of production and exchange” (pp. 131-32), an order suffused by the “spirit of commerce.” They represented trade as an antidote to the “sclerosis of the French social order” (p. 133). Dividing the population into productive and unproductive sectors, they argued that the latter was too large in France. By encouraging competition and economic individualism, they hoped, French institutions might slowly and peacefully be renovated. In Clark’s pithy formulation, they offered “projects for providing an enlightened ‘soft landing’ for their social order” (p. 284). Liberals did not contest the value of strong monarchy, seeking rather to combine this aspect of French political traditions with the commercialism of England and Holland. Above all they were marked by their rejection of the constructivist rationalism which Clark associates with the Physiocrats – that is, a belief that the whole social and economic order should be remade in a kind of revolution from above. Physiocracy represented a clear break with the Montesquieuan framework. If the Physiocrats grappled with the same problems as the liberals, the solutions they offered were fundamentally different. Clark views Physiocracy as part of a “cultural conservatism” that arose during the Seven Years’ War. The Physiocrats wished to restore a “pre-modern political and social order” (p. 259). England was central to Physiocratic thinking, but as a negative example.

Clark’s characterization of Physiocracy as conservative owes much on his decision to make the marquis de Mirabeau’s *L’ami des hommes* (1756) his exemplar of Physiocracy. Mirabeau and François Quesnay crafted Physiocratic doctrine together, but Quesnay was the dominant partner intellectually. *L’ami des hommes* was written and published before Mirabeau met Quesnay, and the book diverges significantly from key tenets of what would later constitute Physiocratic orthodoxy. In *L’ami des hommes*, Mirabeau called for a reinvigoration of peasant agriculture rather than the shift to large-scale commercial agriculture on English lines that Quesnay advocated. In 1756, Mirabeau offered a quasi-feudal vision of social relations in the countryside, while later Mirabeau would argue that property not privilege ought to be the foundation of the social order. Clark’s focus on *L’ami des hommes* rather than on later Physiocratic works may elide the ways in which England was a positive as well as a negative model for the Physiocrats, and exaggerate their cultural and social conservatism (a label that fits poorly, in any case, with the notion that Physiocracy represents a kind of constructivist rationalism).

Clark’s typology appears a little too neat in certain respects. Given the intellectual gulf that, in his view, separated the Physiocrats from Turgot, surprisingly close links persisted between them. Moreover, it is not entirely clear in practice what the distinction is between Physiocratic constructivism and Turgot’s policies in abolishing the trade corporations, or envisioning the wholesale transformation of local government. Not all liberals could follow Montesquieu in his praise of the English constitution. Forbonnais, for instance, rejected this aspect of Montesquieu’s thought.<sup>[3]</sup> Nor could liberals necessarily agree on major policy questions. Morellet and Galiani disagreed bitterly over the latter’s *Dialogues on the Grain Trade* (1770). Clark notes Morellet’s “virulent response” to the Neapolitan’s work, but does not elaborate. Finally, as Clark himself points out, Sieyès’ views were riven by deep tensions between a valorization of free exchange as a superior mode of economic and social organization, and a much more *dirigiste* attitude toward state economic intervention (pp. 292-93).

These complications do not necessarily add up to a decisive problem for Clark’s scheme of classification. It is only natural that ambiguities, tensions, and discrepancies arise in the messy business of putting ideas into practice. But here a limitation of Clark’s approach should be noted. This is very much a book about ideas rather than the way they were applied, a study of texts rather than how they were read, received, distorted, or acted upon by others. At certain points in the book, Clark appears to want to claim a wider appeal for the tradition he has so carefully traced. He suggests in the latter part of the book that the liberal view of commerce had become part of the common sense of a wide elite readership by the 1780s (p. 285). Without question, political economic ideas of various levels of sophistication were a ubiquitous feature of public culture in the last decades of the old regime. However, to claim a special

significance for the liberal, Anglophile tradition Clark has mapped with such skill would require a study that goes beyond the history of ideas to embrace a more broadly political approach.

#### NOTES

[1] See, for example, J. F. Bosher, *Canada Merchants, 1713-1763* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[2] For example, Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[3] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 179.

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