

David Todd, *Free Trade and Its Enemies in France, 1814-1851*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. ix + 275 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 (hb). ISBN-13: 978-1107036932.

Review Essay by Jeremy Jennings, King's College London

Reading David Todd's excellent well-researched monograph, I found it simply impossible not to think of the astonishing parallels between Anglo-French debates on free trade in the early decades of the nineteenth century and today's increasingly pressing arguments about possible British exit from the EU and France's parlous recent economic performance. At issue in both cases are two very distinct conceptions of how an economy should be run and two very contrasting visions of the good society. The parameters of this debate – free trade versus protectionism, individual liberty set against social solidarity; the market versus the State; the economic advantages of inequality against the claims of justice and equality – appear to have changed little over the past two hundred years, if not much longer. What Todd helps us to understand is how sophisticated those debates were in the earlier period and how articulate and powerful were the arguments deployed to challenge free trade ideology in the period after 1815. What we can now see is that, despite the considerable efforts of such brilliant polemicists as Benjamin Constant and Frédéric Bastiat, the free traders had lost the argument by the time the Second Republic came to its ignominious end. They have arguably never recovered from this defeat.

From the outset, free trade was seen as an English invention (in much the same way as globalization is seen to be underpinned by an “Anglo-Saxon” ideology”) and one, not to put too fine a point to it, that served British industrial interests. Britain, its critics observed, only repealed protectionist measures when it no longer needed them. Armed, then, with its industrial and commercial superiority, Britain set about promoting the dismantling of trade barriers throughout the world.

As David Todd ably shows, this was not a message without support within France. Of particular interest here is Todd's account of the evolution of the thinking of Jean-Baptiste Say, the leading French economist of his age. Overcoming his initial ambivalence towards Britain – articulated most forcefully in *De l'Angleterre and des Anglais* in 1815 – Say came increasingly to advocate the removal of barriers to foreign trade, a change of mind evident with each successive edition of his *Cours complet d'économie politique pratique*. Say, it seems, even went so far as to welcome the extension of Britain's colonial empire on the grounds that it was “favorable to the progress of the human species and its happiness.” Perhaps of greater immediate significance, Say advanced the careers of younger advocates of an emerging liberal political economy in France. Foremost among these were Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer, advocates of the anti-aristocratic doctrine of *industrialisme*, and later disciples such as Charles Dupin and Adolphe Blanqui (brother of the more famous revolutionary). As Todd observes, the large circulation figures enjoyed by the publications of such men indicates that the promotion of liberal ideas about trade did not go unnoticed. Not surprisingly, the powerful Bordeaux wine merchants mounted a lengthy crusade for commercial liberty (a campaign mixed with overt hostility towards Parisian centralization) whilst, under the Restoration, smugglers appear to

have attained the status of near-national heroes. Customs officers, by contrast, were the regular subjects of mockery. Restrictions on the liberty of commerce, it was recognized, went hand in hand with threats to political and individual liberty. The free circulation of commodities would also undermine the loathed reactionary order imposed upon a humiliated France by the treaties of Vienna.

The aftermath of the revolution of 1830, therefore, saw not only commercial reform in France – the privileges of seaports for the storage of foreign goods were abolished, for example – but also the opening of commercial negotiations with Britain in November 1831. “Rarely,” Todd comments, “had France seemed closer to emulate the common liberal perception of the British model as a combination of representative institutions, political stability and economic efficiency” (97). Not only this, but, as Todd shows, the British, through the interventions of men such as John Bowring, sought actively to encourage French moves towards free trade. In this, Todd concludes, we can see “an original and practical experiment in the transnational dissemination of ideas.”

Yet by 1834 commercial reform had stalled in France. And, as Todd shows, there was more to this than simply a justified fear of British commercial supremacy. The growing industrial specialization of Europe brought with it what many saw as troubling social consequences, most notably the spread of a new kind of urban poverty exemplified by the plight of the British factory worker. “The controversy on commerce”, Todd writes, “became a debate over British poverty as well as British power, and, outside Britain, the means of escaping both” (11). Free trade was equated with pauperism.

The prelude to this, however, was the attempt to bring the economic past back to life under the Bourbon Restoration. As Todd notes, the disturbances of the Revolution amplified what had been long-established concerns about the deleterious social effects of the spread of commerce and luxury. France, it was argued, should keep faith with its aggressive mercantile policies of the past. This meant more protectionism and an attempt to reconstitute the economic power of the aristocracy. Such a policy necessarily entailed greater regulation of colonial trade where, after 1815, French colonies saw an illicit “but spectacular” revival of the slave trade. Yet, as Todd observes, such a “jealous conception of international trade as a zero-sum game” (123) was tainted by its association with the illiberal politics of the Terror and the Napoleonic Empire. To survive and prosper, therefore, the jealousy of trade argument had to be reinvented. If Todd is right, this was done through the emergence of what he describes as “modern economic nationalism” (123).

At the heart of this new doctrine was the fear of urban pauperism. Britain, Todd writes, “now served as a foil. The misery and unruliness of its workers were reinterpreted as a consequence of its excessive reliance on foreign exchanges and a predilection for free trade” (124). And there appeared to be no lack of evidence to support this conclusion. Todd cites the accounts of British urban poverty provided by Auguste Mimerel and Eugène Buret but he could easily have cited many more. Alexis de Tocqueville was by no means alone in being shocked by the combination of opulence and degradation he saw when he visited England in the 1830s. France would stand up for a more equitable distribution of wealth.

To this could then be added arguments for national self-sufficiency, the need to protect infant industries, calls for the development of agriculture, a revival of anti-luxury discourse, as well as a sustained attack upon what Adolphe Thiers dismissed as the “dogmatic science” of political economy. Protection against cheap British goods entering the French market was seen

as a question of social solidarity. As the articles of *Le Moniteur Industriel* showed, such arguments could easily be bolstered by a strident Anglophobia. Bastiat was charged with working for the “benefit of England” in much the same way that the Catholic *Ligue* had worked for the benefit of Spain and Rome in the wars of religion of the seventeenth century. Yet another aspect of this debate was a growing interest in “German” ideas of organic solidarity.

Such was the successful reception of these views, according to Todd, that French advocates of free trade were left in disarray. “Liberal arguments about trade,” he writes, “became increasingly relegated to the margins of intellectual and political life” (156). Indeed, enthusiasm for free trade was confined to the Gironde and a narrow section of the urban middle class.

If the proclamation of the Second Republic, where for many liberals protectionism seemed a means of protecting an endangered social order did not bring the controversy over free trade to an immediate end, that end was not long in coming. In April 1848 the *Association pour la Liberté des Echanges* was closed down and its great advocate, Bastiat, withdrew to Rome, where he died two years later. Support for free trade now rested, Todd concludes, with a “handful of conservatives” and such supporters of Bonapartism as Michel Chevalier.

There is much more in Todd’s monograph that merits our attention. There is for example a fascinating discussion of the controversy surrounding attempts to foster an indigenous beet-sugar industry in France. The utopian socialists also make a brief appearance as first supporters and then critics of free trade. But what are Todd’s conclusions? Most obviously, that economic Anglophobia was at the heart of nineteenth-century French protectionism. Also, that the failure of the free trade argument was in part a reflection of the failure of the constitutional liberalism endorsed by François Guizot and Alexis de Tocqueville. However, the “chief cause” of this failure, according to Todd, “lay in the emergence of an alternative interpretation of 1789 that stressed the necessity of protection in order to defend the economic and social legacy of the Revolution” (230). Finally, and importantly, that after 1830 protectionism in France was a liberal discourse. If men such as Thiers believed in the necessity of commercial protection against foreign competition, so too, according to Todd, they were “stalwart advocates of economic liberty within national borders” (231). In brief, the causes of commercial and political liberty became dissociated.

Todd’s concluding remarks give us much to think about. Protectionism after 1870, he suggests, contributed to the enduring stability of the Third Republic and arguably remained a force of stability in French society until its abandonment in the 1980s. Todd’s contribution to the “intellectual history of globalization” makes us realize that these issues are not about to go away.

Jeremy Jennings, King’s College London
Jeremy.jennings@kcl.ac.uk

Copyright © 2016 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-*

France Forum nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum

Volume 11 (2016), Issue 2, #1

ISSN 1557-7058