
H-France Review Vol. 14 (January 2014), No. 3

Patrick Neiertz, *Voltaire et l'économie politique*. Oxford : The Voltaire Foundation, 2012. 288 pp. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0-7294-1053-3.

Review by Paul Cheney, University of Chicago.

For any scholar of the intellectual history of the Enlightenment, a new book on a classic theme—in this case, the economic views of a principal figure of the period—provides a welcome occasion to take stock of the many changes in this field over the past decades. Patrick Neiertz's *Voltaire et l'économie politique* testifies to these developments, but only by their absence. The author does cite some scholarship published in the past couple of decades, but in every way that matters, *Voltaire et l'économie politique* might have been written thirty or forty years ago. Had a similar book been written about a different author—say Condillac, Montesquieu or Rousseau—without an eponymous foundation and publishing imprint, I do not think it would have found a publisher. Time, trees and library budgets all being in short supply, this is probably a good thing.

Neiertz begins promisingly enough, observing that Voltaire should not be approached as a *philosophe* who self-consciously developed a distinct economic doctrine, but rather as a towering literary figure whose political engagements led him frequently to reflect upon economic subjects. Neiertz's Voltaire is “un témoin capital—et un témoin engagé—d'une innovation épistémologique: la constitution *en science économique* des réflexions sur le commerce” (p. xliii, original emphasis). Given the centrality of political economy to the European Enlightenment, and the multiplicity of forms—including literary genres—that political economy took during the eighteenth century, taking Voltaire as “un témoin engagé” could help students of the Enlightenment better understand how political economy developed amidst the complicated interplay among administrators, networks of scientific correspondence, practitioners of all kinds (agriculturalists, merchants and industrialists), and the literary public sphere. By tapping into Voltaire's tentacular correspondence network and relating what he finds there to aspects of Voltaire's literary *oeuvre*, Neiertz gives occasional glimpses of what such a study might look like. But *Voltaire et l'économie politique* is essentially beholden to a view of eighteenth-century economic science whose fullest and most recent expression is Joseph Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954).^[1] Elsewhere, Neiertz draws heavily upon late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship (e.g., Georges Weulersse and André Morize) for his understanding of the context of debate in eighteenth-century France. ^[2]

For Neiertz as for Schumpeter, the writings of Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, “le meilleur économiste français du XVIII^e siècle” (p. 58), represent the high-water mark of French economic thought. Turgot's *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution de la richesse* come closest to the verities of classical economic analysis such as one finds in Adam Smith and, later, Jean-Baptiste Say, David Ricardo, and James Mill. Thankfully, Neiertz obeys his self-denying ordinance and does not scour Voltaire's *oeuvre* for hints of these economists' more rarified theoretical insights. At the same time, the author insists repeatedly that Voltaire was in fundamental agreement with Smith and Turgot in advocating for “capitalisme libéral” (e.g., pp. 47, 214), and the whole of the book is framed in terms of Voltaire's evolution toward this doctrine. Those who fall short of this standard come in for severe judgment, as for instance Jean-

François Melon, author of the *Essai politique sur le commerce*, who, “Par rapport à Turgot,” Neiertz esteems, “est un économiste archaïque” (p. 57).

Voltaire, Turgot and Smith emerge in this narrative as paragons of reasoned empiricism as against what Neiertz sees as the outdated theories of protectionist mercantilism and the doctrinaire, ultimately illiberal agrarian fantasies of the Physiocrats. No record has been left to posterity of the conversations that took place between Voltaire and Smith during the latter’s “five or six” visits to Ferney in 1765, but Neiertz fills this void with plenty of speculation (well-padded with “aura certainement été” and “laissez imaginer”) that by a happy coincidence, all helps to solidify the personal and intellectual links between Voltaire, Smith and Turgot (pp. 33-9). When Neiertz turns to Voltaire as an economic practitioner, he interprets Arouet’s evolution from a classic old regime *rentier* and financial speculator to a well-informed, risk-taking entrepreneur as the arrival, on the historical scene, of the heroic entrepreneur-industrialist essential to the growth of capitalism. Since the author so clearly ranges himself among the proponents of “capitalisme libéral” he sees in Voltaire, Smith and Turgot, one is certainly permitted to wonder what a less hagiographic and doxological version of *Voltaire et l’économie politique* might have looked like.

Although Neiertz’s book has a very clear agenda and set of arguments, *Voltaire et l’économie politique* often lapses into a rather conventional account of eighteenth-century French political economy, with Voltaire placed at the center of chapters on finance, luxury and Physiocracy. Although he was indeed a central protagonist in the luxury debate in eighteenth-century France, the originality and force of Voltaire’s intervention gets lost in a rather predictable progression of thinkers from Bernard Mandeville and Jean-François Melon to Montesquieu and beyond. Although Neiertz does discuss Voltaire’s audience, reception and the relative weight of economic versus moral arguments in his writings, he quickly sets aside this line of inquiry in favor, for instance, (pp. 141-7), of a classic intellectual-historical discussion about whether Voltaire owed his epicurean arguments to Melon or Mandeville. In an even more telling case of *une question mal posée*, Neiertz spends an entire chapter (chapter five) parsing out Voltaire’s seemingly contradictory relationship to Physiocracy, only to draw out some rather generic conclusions: agricultural improvement such as the Physiocrats advocated was an inevitable component of any comprehensive approach to economic reform in France; Voltaire took part in this vogue for rural improvement that began at mid-century and could therefore have been said to sympathize with the Physiocrats, but like many of his fellow *philosophes*, he abhorred their doctrinaire approach to political and scientific questions. Although Neiertz does devote some illuminating pages to the rhetorical strategies Voltaire employed against the Physiocrats, his principal findings on Arouet could be applied indifferently to virtually every *bien pensant* economic writer outside of the Physiocratic sect.

In some sense, the question is not whether to accept Neiertz’s findings, but whether they add to our understanding of Voltaire or of Physiocracy. Several decades ago, it would have been perfectly natural to view Neiertz’s stated subject—“la constitution *en science économique* des réflexions sur le commerce”—through the lens of Physiocracy versus anti-Physiocracy, or to reconstruct the luxury debate in terms of the problem of intellectual influence. The classic scholarship on this subject so amply cited by Neiertz testifies to the enduring value of this scholarly production. But it does not need to be rewritten. As an historian who is so enamored of nineteenth-century political economy and its eighteenth-century antecedents, Neiertz should also be well acquainted with the law of diminishing returns.

Notes

[1] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

[2] Georges Weulersse, *Le Mouvement physiocratique en France de 1756 à 1770* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1910) and André Morize, *L’Apologie du luxe au XVIIIe siècle et “Le Mondain” de Voltaire, étude critique sur Le Mondain et ses sources* (Paris: H. Didier, 1909).

Paul Cheney
University of Chicago
cheney@uchicago.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies 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. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/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 Review 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. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172