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Manuela Albertone, *National Identity and the Agrarian Republic: The Transatlantic Commerce of Ideas between America and France (1750-1830)*. Farnham, Surrey (UK): Ashgate, 2014. xi + 324 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. (cl.) ISBN 978-1-4724-2136-4.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

In her introduction to this erudite and interesting survey of political and economic thought, Manuela Albertone notes the rise of a new “Atlantic history” that seeks to move beyond the boundaries of individual nation-states to examine the history of interconnections and exchanges across the “Atlantic world,” but remarks that much of this history has focused on empire, trade, and the circulation of commodities, rather than what she calls “the transatlantic commerce of ideas”(p. 5). In this work, she seeks to put forward a trans-national history of ideas by tracing the development of the agrarian republican ideology on both sides of the Atlantic during the age of revolution. As they sought to break free from British imperial rule, some American statesmen and scholars sought also to emancipate themselves from the hegemony of what Albertone repeatedly calls the “British model,” and found in the writings of the French Physiocrats a system of political economy more conducive to the circumstances of a new agrarian republic.

Physiocracy, as formulated by François Quesnay and his followers, held that agriculture was the source of all wealth, dismissed commerce and manufacture as “sterile” pursuits that circulated but did not create value, denounced mercantilist restrictions on trade as illegitimate and self-destructive, and advocated replacing all existing tariffs and customs duties with a single tax on the net product of the soil. The French Physiocrats were primarily concerned with economic stagnation and burdensome administrative regulations under the French monarchy, and particularly with the multitude of local privileges, guild monopolies, trade barriers, and price restrictions that stood in the way of the economic modernization of the nation. Admired by some contemporaries as enlightened reformers, and derided by others as a rigid, dogmatic sect, the Physiocrats faded from prominence after the failure of the ministry of Turgot, whose efforts to enact parts of their reform program (notably the liberalization of the grain trade and the abolition of guild privileges) triggered a massive backlash in defense of the status quo. In the decades that followed, the intellectual influence of Physiocracy was gradually eclipsed by the British school of political economy of Adam Smith and his heirs.[1]

Nevertheless, Albertone persuasively argues that Physiocracy exercised a decisive influence over the emergence of Jeffersonian Republicanism in the early years of the American republic. Even before the War of American Independence, sympathetic French observers, notably Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, to whom Albertone devotes a full chapter, had favorably contrasted the rough egalitarianism of the American frontier, where land was abundant and cheap, to the rigid social hierarchy of Europe, praising the “happy mediocrity” of a society of small independent farmers. Prior to and during the revolutionary era, the future “founding fathers” Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson made extended visits to France, where they found the Physiocrats to be among the most welcoming and like-minded members of the French republic of letters. Rubbing shoulders in the aristocratic salons and Masonic lodges that structured Enlightenment sociability, they forged friendships, shared insights and ideas, and circulated and translated texts. In the 1790s, following Franklin’s death and Jefferson’s return from revolutionary

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Paris to join the new republic as Washington's secretary of state, French Physiocracy offered an alternate model of political economy to those Americans opposed to the pro-British, neo-mercantilist policies of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists.

While Franklin and Jefferson require no introduction to even the most casual reader, Albertone's study also discusses the contributions of less familiar figures, particularly George Logan and John Taylor, to whom she attributes the popularization and dissemination of agrarian republicanism in the early national era. Both men, prominent journalists, pamphleteers, and political figures in their own era, condemned the Federalist program of protective tariffs, the promotion of industry, and the rise of government debt, arguing that these measures harmed the simple cultivator of the land, the source of the new nation's prosperity, to the benefit of a sterile, parasitic class of merchants, financiers, and speculators. This agrarian republicanism would become ascendant following the election of Jefferson to the presidency in 1800, and would ensure the rejection of the British political model of patronage and deference in favor of the expansion of populist democracy. The American Republicans, Albertone argues, were pragmatists who took from French Physiocracy those elements that fit their circumstances, while also recognizing the need to adapt certain aspects of the doctrine to meet the demands of New World realities and the changing international situation. Finally, she observes that early nineteenth-century French economic theorists, such as Jean-Baptiste Say, Destutt de Tracy, and Dupont de Nemours (whose long career bridged the Revolutionary divide), were similarly influenced by their ongoing correspondence with their American counterparts. She persuasively argues that neither French nor American approaches to political economy can be understood in a purely national context, but were a product of the "cosmopolitan Enlightenment" of the long eighteenth century.

In tracing the historical development of agrarian republicanism on both sides of the Atlantic, Albertone is a "lumper" rather than a "splitter," and her study tends to present agrarian republicanism as a more or less coherent and consistent doctrine across the period she studies. This approach has the advantage of allowing her to trace intellectual influences and to argue for the importance of French enlightened ideas in the emergence of an American sense of national identity. However, it also causes her to downplay the differences and tensions that existed within this movement and the multiple directions in which it led. Albertone argues, for example, that one of the distinctive features of late eighteenth-century agrarian republicanism was its fusion of economics and politics, with the Physiocratic belief that agriculture was the source of all wealth serving to legitimize a democratic republic of small independent farmers. While this is certainly true, it elides the fact that the early Physiocrats, notably Quesnay, Mercier de la Rivière, and the elder Mirabeau, operating within the context of the modernizing Bourbon monarchy, favored enlightened despotism rather than democracy as the means to enact the Physiocratic program of economic reforms, with Quesnay in particular praising the rational bureaucratic order of imperial China as a model for Europe to emulate.<sup>[2]</sup> By contrast, the younger generation of Physiocrats, notably Dupont and Condorcet, came to support representative democracy, very likely as the result of their extensive contacts with Franklin, Jefferson, and their countrymen, and their support of the American struggle for independence from Britain. Albertone's assumption of a natural linkage between Physiocratic economics and democratic republicanism thus causes her to brush rather quickly over an important part of the story.

Furthermore, the ideology of agrarian republicanism was a big tent that encompassed significant differences. To her credit, Albertone recognizes important divides within the Jeffersonian camp, but her emphasis on the unity of the Republicans means that the issues that divided them remain underdeveloped in her text. One such divide concerns the nature of the "republic of farmers" that was envisioned. While Crèvecoeur had romanticized the rough primitivism of the self-sufficient small farmer on the frontier, most of the French Physiocrats had looked instead to larger estates producing for the market and employing scientific rationalism to maximize their harvests. Their American heirs subsequently vacillated between an ideal of national self-sufficiency and the production of cash crops for international markets. French Physiocratic theorists were narrowly, even obsessively, focused on cereal

crop production, while American agricultural exports consisted primarily of non-food crops such as tobacco and, from the early nineteenth century, cotton. Some of the theorists of agrarian republicanism cited by Albertone advanced radical notions regarding landed property, ranging from the rejection of primogeniture to the denial of inheritance rights altogether, based on the arguments that property was a social construct, justified on utilitarian grounds, and that the dead hold no rights over the living, while others remained more socially conservative.

One of the most significant omissions in the text, in my opinion, is the question of slavery and of sectional differences. The four main American protagonists of Albertone's narrative hailed from Pennsylvania (Franklin and Logan) and Virginia (Jefferson and Taylor), and while the reader is given a well-developed intellectual biography of each thinker (one chapter each is devoted to Jefferson and Franklin, while a third chapter introduces Logan and Taylor), there is little acknowledgement that agrarian republicanism might mean something different in the slaveholding South than in the northern birthplace of the American abolitionist movement. Albertone does note Jefferson's well-documented ambivalence regarding the institution of slavery and observes that Taylor, who eventually moved from his native Virginia to pursue an academic career in South Carolina, evolved from agrarian republicanism toward states' rights and the defense of southern sectional interests. She does not, however, examine the different forms of agricultural production in different regions of the United States, nor the very different labor regimes in place on a southern cotton plantation versus a family farm on the northwestern frontier.

Finally, while Albertone frequently invokes the "British system" as a sort of bogeyman to which both French and American thinkers were opposed, she does not define what she means by this phrase, which she uses in reference to somewhat different things (mercantilism, urbanization and the rise of manufactures, a social order built on deference and patronage and characterized by inequality, Parliament and the role of "old corruption," and the school of classical political economy from Smith to Malthus and Ricardo). While all of these were unquestionably important aspects of Hanoverian Britain, they were less internally coherent than the term "British system" suggests (notably, Adam Smith was a strong critic of mercantilism, as Albertone correctly observes). Greater clarity and consistency of terminology would have made her arguments easier for readers to follow.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Albertone's book is successful in making the case for the importance of French influences in general, and Physiocracy in particular, for the emergence of agrarian republicanism in the United States in the early national era. In this sense, it makes a significant contribution to the intellectual history of the Atlantic World during the age of revolutions and offers a useful corrective to a purely national approach to the history of ideas. It will be read with interest by scholars in both French and American intellectual history, as well as by specialists in the history of economic thought.

## NOTES

[1] For more information on Physiocracy, see Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[2] François Quesnay, "Despotisme de la Chine" [1767]. Republished in Christine Théré, Loïc Charles, & Jean-Charles Perrot, eds., *François Quesnay: Oeuvres Economiques Complètes et Autres Textes* (Paris: Institut National des Études Démographiques, 2005).

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