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Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010. xii + 305 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0674047266.

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Over the past forty years, a remarkable historiographical transformation has occurred. The French Revolution has become a topic for intellectual historians. Whether it be through the social history of ideas pioneered by Robert Darnton or the very different Cambridge School approach associated with Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock, texts and discourses are now central to study after study of the Revolution and its origins.[1] This is, in many ways, as it should be. Eighteenth-century France saw a considerable increase in literacy and publishing and it would be a great weakness in our scholarship if these materials were left unaddressed. Yet the textual turn has gone so far that the occasional new book to focus on irate peasants, indignant taxpayers, or nervous lenders immediately stands out.[2] Our historical labors are increasingly divided. Some version of quantitative empiricism on one side, linguistic constructivism on the other. We are, in a sense, back where the history of the French Revolution was in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when d'Hauterive's explanation of the French Revolution in purely geo-political terms was countered by Gentz's equally one-sided emphasis on writers' "propensity to idle and extravagant speculation." [3]

The great unresolved question remains: How, if at all, are ideas related to the material conditions of existence? Culture, law, and politics—we now widely agree—cannot be automatically derived or predicted from social relations. Since some aristocrats were court capitalists and others were zealous revolutionaries, the case of the French Revolution makes it especially obvious that ideology, behavior, and interests need not coincide. Words and ideas, texts and discourses—for twenty years, a growing majority within the North American historical profession has treated these as largely autonomous forces. At the same time, various calls for a "return to the social," a "history of practices," and/or a "history of emotions" indicate that not all are fully satisfied with this language-based state of affairs. There must be more to life!

In this context, the "history of economic thought" has emerged as a minor growth industry. As Paul Cheney makes clear in the introduction to his *Revolutionary Commerce*, the field's attraction for many lies in the possibility of "a new synthesis," one that aims to overcome our present political/social and intellectual/economic dichotomies (p. 14). By bringing the traditional tools of intellectual history—the familiarity with a set of canonical authors, the close reading of texts, the tracing of influences and affiliations—to bear on a new set of questions, the history of economic thought lets us pay attention to credit, markets, and debt without obliging anyone to compile serial data sets. In books such as Michael Sonenscher's *Before the Deluge* or Henry Clark's *Compass of Society*, we may not learn much about levels of indebtedness in old regime France, but we learn a great deal about how Montesquieu, Sieyès, and the Physiocrats envisioned debt's relationship to political stability.[4]

Cheney's *Revolutionary Commerce* shares several features with these other works while nonetheless gently challenging many assumptions central to treating the Revolution as an episode in the history of political thought. His argument, in a nutshell, is as follows: throughout the eighteenth century, the growing importance and prosperity of France's Caribbean possessions (which he calls primitive globalization) created irreparable tensions within the Old Regime. In confronting these contradictions, writers from Montesquieu to the Physiocrats elaborated a "science of commerce" that took one of two major forms. While Montesquieu and many who cited him espoused a "politics of fusion"—one in which commercial wealth and knowledge were valued, even as existing social hierarchies were reinforced—the Physiocrats adopted a far more radical position. Neither analysis emerged as fully dominant before 1789. Instead, in both, "economic conflicts with discrete social referents...[were increasingly] papered over by voluntarist claims" (p. 190). As conflict over French merchants' monopoly on shipping to and from the colonies (the Exclusive) grew, writers appealed more and more frequently to the common good and national commerce as ideals that nonetheless united all parties. As Cheney puts it, "[t]he final years of the Old Regime saw a ratcheting up of voluntarist political discourse as the contradictions of the absolutist state mounted" (p. 189).

Those well steeped in recent literature on the origins of revolutionary political culture will probably find this short summary sufficient to highlight the novelty of Cheney's work. For other readers, though, more explanation may be helpful. Here, therefore, I would like to focus on three contributions I find especially significant: the role Cheney assigns to geo-political and temporal comparisons; his attention to geography; and, most important of all, the way he relates discourses to material conditions of existence.

One of Cheney's chief claims is that a comparative method—not dissimilar to the one that Cuvier would later develop for natural history—was central to eighteenth-century assessments of France's political, social, and economic well-being. While other scholars, following Tocqueville, have emphasized universalism and abstraction as key features of the French Enlightenment and of revolutionary political discourse, Cheney calls attention to the numerous authors who argued for the importance of policies and laws consonant with the specifics of France's historical, political, and geographic development. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* is obviously the best known of such texts and Cheney carefully demonstrates how Montesquieu's work was read and elaborated by royal administrators (such as Georges-Marie Butel-Dumont, a member of the so-called Gournay circle) and reactionary noblemen (such as the Chevalier d'Arco) alike. In the debate over the Exclusive, both sides cited Montesquieu. In other words, while there was empirical disagreement over the specifics of France's case, no one in this argument offered an analysis based on mathematical axioms or literary abstractions. When such formulations did appear—in the form of appeals to "the common good," for instance—they were desperation measures, not diagnostic categories (see my third point below).

Cheney is hardly the first to direct our attention to the *Spirit of the Laws* and I confess that my initial, hasty reaction was one of "Oh look, Montesquieu! *Again.*"^[5] Yet there is much here that is new and thought-provoking. Situating Montesquieu on a chronological and conceptual continuum that runs from Macchiavelli to Barnave, Cheney argues that his development of a historical "science of commerce" was part of a long-running meditation on despotism in the modern world. Montesquieu, like other eighteenth-century writers, drew often on classical examples, but he also insisted that international trade and the growth of overseas empires meant that his world differed profoundly from that of the ancients. The economic climate had changed, bringing with it a widespread re-configuration of geo-political realities. Confronted with the examples of the dissolute Spanish Empire on one side and the implausibly prosperous Dutch Republic on the other, the science of commerce tried to offer France a third way forward.

Montesquieu's "politics of fusion" was an effort to square the circle: to encourage commerce without undermining absolutist monarchy's social and political foundations.

In one of the book's most engaging sections, Cheney analyzes the politics of fusion as the product of a life divided, almost equally, between the port city of Bordeaux and the military-administrative center that was Paris (pp. 71-86).^[6] In multiple respects, he shows, Montesquieu led a double life. He was a regular visitor at Versailles *and* a member of the Bordeaux *parlement*. He was a vigorous defender of feudal privilege *and* a wine merchant fascinated by commerce. In Paris, where he frequented numerous *salons*, he made friends with whomever he liked. In Bordeaux, as a founding member of the local Academy, he actively encouraged a policy that relegated most non-nobles to associate member status (p. 84). Comparing the Bordeaux Academy to other comparable institutions, for example, Cheney demonstrates that its full members were drawn disproportionately from the nobility. Given the overall membership figures, we would statistically expect 46 percent of the full members to have been noble, but the actual figure was 75 percent.

Geography provides Cheney with the basis for a number of other, equally memorable, conclusions. For instance, he observes that over sixty percent of French economic writers in this period lived and worked in Paris, a vantage point from which the rapidly expanding maritime economy of the Atlantic ports was barely visible (p. 23). From where they sat, foreign trade and colonial expansion produced more difficulties than they did wealth. France was, these writers maintained, an agricultural country by its very "constitution"—an erroneous belief, from the perspective of eighteenth-century Nantes or twenty-first-century economic history, but a deeply cherished one, nonetheless. This sort of careful attention to spatial specifics informs Cheney's choice of sources throughout. We therefore hear comparatively little about the writers who are metaphorically central to French politics in this era (Sieyès, Condorcet, Turgot) and far more about those who were, literally, peripheral. In demonstrating how anonymous authors writing on behalf of the Saint Malo or Nantes Chamber of Commerce worked through arguments about conquest versus commerce, Cheney gives us something like Montesquieu in practice. Earlier in the book, when he draws on the writings of Pierre-Daniel Huet and the abbé Saint-Pierre, Cheney reminds us that both men were functionaries of the absolutist state as well as being figures of some note in the Republic of Letters. In other words, their interest in commerce was as practical as it was philosophical. If their writings were destined for the despatialized abstraction that is the Habermasian public sphere, they nonetheless originated in specific, physical locales. In Cheney's book, as in John Shovlin's *Political Economy of Virtue*, place matters.^[7]

Local social networks and particular commercial institutions may play a role in shaping authors' arguments, but they are not, in any automatic way, determinant. This becomes clearest in the penultimate chapter of Cheney's book, where he persuasively argues against most existing genealogies of revolutionary political voluntarism. In a widely cited analysis, Keith Baker has proposed that the political language of 1789 emerged when discursive strands that had once been tightly "bound together in the concept of monarchical authority" became distinct. Woven together, threads of argument based on reason, justice, and will had made a lustrous cloth of gold. Unravelling, the last would knot itself into a set of nooses.^[8] Cheney challenges both this reading and the related one by François Furet, each of which he sees as diagnosing a pathology in French social thought at the end of the Old Regime. In contrast to these authors, who saw revolutionary culture arising within political language itself, Cheney suggests that the discourse of the will only became predominant in the face of bitter clashes of economic interest between metropolitan merchants and colonial plantation owners. In their efforts to ignore, dismiss, or paper over the different legal status and administrative structures of the colonies and the

metropole, writers increasingly used a vocabulary, that of “the nation,” which would soon exacerbate more tensions than it relieved.

At this juncture, Cheney’s book offers glimpses, I think, of what a materialist history of ideas might look like in the twenty-first century. Mass production is largely irrelevant; political languages are not produced mechanically by social and economic relations. Neither, however, are they completely independent of them. On Cheney’s reading, French writers appealed to “the national good” and “public opinion” in an attempt to resolve culturally a conflict that would prove to be irresolvable in economic or social terms. Here, I think, there is a significant break with Baker, who introduced his “On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution” with the suggestion that intellectuals in any given society are like the *bricoleur*, or handyman, as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The *bricoleur* does not deal with parts that have to be custom ordered, nor does he require specialist tools or make new creations from scratch. Instead, he works with the materials he has at hand. Materials that are both finite and mixed (such as the three discourses of will, justice, and reason). In contrast, Cheney’s writers respond, sometimes in specialized custom discourses, to the intractable realities that surround them.

If it was the programmatic *Pensée Sauvage* that provided a key metaphor for Baker, it is in the more allusive *Tristes Tropiques* that we may be able to find a precursor of Cheney’s analysis. Writing of the Caduveo, a Brazilian people with strict status hierarchies and a profound fear of *dérogation*, Lévi-Strauss surmised that the intricate symmetrical paintings with which the women decorated themselves were a sort of “social phantasm...a symbolic expression of [non-existent] institutions.”[9] Too proudly attached to their idea of noble heritage to envision procreation across caste lines, the Caduveo—unlike other nearby cultures—had never developed a kinship system based on moieties. Yet they were also numerically too few to survive without it. Doomed to extinction, the Caduveo divided not themselves, but their women’s faces, into the equal parts that their society so desperately needed. Here, as in Cheney’s analysis of political voluntarism, a discourse provides what society cannot.

Part of Lévi-Strauss’s long-standing debate with Sartre and central to a largely polemical text, the *bricoleur* of *Pensée Sauvage* was an appropriate and obviously conscious choice of analogy for Keith Baker, an intellectual historian making the case for the history of political thought. Cheney’s relation to *Tristes Tropiques* and to Caduveo face painting is far less obvious; indeed, I grant that I may be the first to see them as connected. Should this latter prove to be true—if anthropology is at best the “phantasm” that haunts *Revolutionary Commerce* (and related works)—then I cannot help but wonder if the history of economic thought is as independent and vibrant a sub-discipline as its practitioners sometimes assert. Are not its cast of characters and its concerns still very closely tied, and in a rather subservient fashion, to the canonical texts of political thought? It would be a curious reversal of vulgar materialism, if economic categories and concerns had always to be derived from political ideologies!

While it seems intuitive that a comparatively narrow segment of the population has thought about the traditional questions of intellectual history (e.g., What did Locke mean by “liberty?”), it also seems self-evident that far more people have had ideas about money, markets, and the workings of credit systems. When the eighteenth-century glazier, Jacques-Louis Ménétra, wrote in his diary, “Finally calculation and self interest [won out].... The prospect that if I [led a more quiet life] I would have enough to live fairly well in my old age if the Eternal granted me a long life that gave me food for thought... The hope of an easier life in my old age had more influence on me than all the moralizing I had endured.” Was this not an instance of economic thought?[10] Is its history not worth writing?

NOTES

[1] Keith Michael Baker's *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), which operates largely in a Cambridge School fashion, was probably the single most important contribution to this development. See also Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) and J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Darnton's social history of ideas is very different, combining perspectives from the history of the book with attention to the social positions of authors and audiences. Those unfamiliar with his work will find useful introductions in *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); and *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

[2] I refer here to three books that have made distinctive contributions over the past fifteen years: John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996); Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Philip Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *Priceless Markets: The Political Economy of Credit in Paris, 1660-1870* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[3] Alexandre de Lanautte, comte d'Hauterive, *De l'état de la France à la fin de l'an VIII* (Paris: Henrici, 1800); Friedrich von Gentz, *On the State of Europe before and after the French Revolution* (London: J. Hatchard, 1802).

[4] Works on the history of economic thought relevant to this review include Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

[5] It is probably not appropriate to write of a Montesquieu revival, since he has never really been out of fashion. Nonetheless, recent interest in the history of French liberalism, in particular, has made him a central figure in a way that he was not forty years ago. Cheney, for instance, teaches a course called "Montesquieu and the Enlightenment" (<http://home.uchicago.edu/~cheney/Montesquieu-course.htm>). Other recent works to give him a major place include Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (New York and London: Palgrave, 2001); David W. Carrithers and Patrick Coleman, eds., *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002); Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Johnson Kent Wright, "Montesquieuan Moments: The Spirit of the Laws and Republicanism," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* (2007); and Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*. In contrast, Jonathan Israel's account of the radical Enlightenment gives comparatively little attention to Montesquieu; as seen most recently in *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[6] Cheney takes the idea of France as a polity composed of two societies, one “oceanic” (centered in the Atlantic ports of Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, and Saint Malo) and one “agricultural” (centered on the Paris Basin) from Edward Whiting Fox, *History in Geographical Perspective: The Other France* (New York: Norton, 1971).

[7] For Shovlin, “middling” has a double meaning. It refers both to nobles who were less than fabulously wealthy and to the many who lived in the “middle” of the country, rather than at Versailles. See John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[8] Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 25-27.

[9] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (1955; London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), chapter 20. Many years ago, James Boon remarked that *Pensée Sauvage* is to Rousseau’s *Social Contract* as *Tristes Tropiques* is to the *Confessions*. For more on Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau, see James Boon, *From Symbolism to Structuralism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[10] Daniel Roche, ed., *Journal of My Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 217.

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