“Let Them Eat Cake. The Political Economy of Agrarian Republicanism”

Contrary to popular belief, the phrase “Let them eat cake” was never actually uttered by Marie Antoinette: it was dreamed up by the Genevan political thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1762 educational treatise *Émile*. We spoke to Professor Béla Kapossy about the eighteenth-century Swiss intellectual context in which Rousseau warned of a major European revolution caused by agricultural crisis and violent urban unrest.

Béla Kapossy, Professor of History at the University of Lausanne, has spent his career studying the intellectual history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Switzerland, encompassing French- and German-speaking cantons as well as wider international networks that included such figures as Edward Gibbon and the marquis de Mirabeau. These interests have led to a new FNS-funded project entitled “Enlightenment Agrarian Republics: From the Vaudois to Poland and America,” which builds upon Kapossy’s previous work on the Economic Society of Bern. The Economic Society was a leading European center for the promotion of scientific agricultural practices, which contributed to significant increases in agricultural productivity during the eighteenth century. This “agricultural revolution” paused the way for the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, by freeing up peasant labor to work in manufacturing. The “Enlightenment Agrarian Republics” project examines a different and complementary aspect of the Economic Society’s activities, dedicated to understanding the role of markets and governments in managing the transition to a balanced form of economic growth.

The Political Economy of Agriculture and Industry

The members of the Economic Society who came from the Pays de Vaud – the agrarian subject territory of the aristocratic republic of Bern – were prolific analysts of political economy, and their writings were translated and published throughout Europe as well as in America. “They saw that states like theirs couldn’t acquire the manufacturing industry that they desired unless they began by reforming the agricultural sector. Agricultural productivity was the ultimate limiting factor. You can’t acquire the manufacturing sector if you can’t feed the population to acquire the necessary labor to work in manufacturing,” Kapossy explains. If governments failed to strike the right balance, the consequences could be disastrous. Overheated and premature industrialization threatened to draw farmers off the land too rapidly, creating a toxic combination of urban unemployment and food shortages. “There was a paradox, in that food prices should in principle tend to be high, since everyone needs to eat, which should in turn stimulate investment in agriculture; but, at the same time, food prices can’t rise too high, because then the poor will starve, and also because high food prices will drive up labor costs and make exports uncompetitive, causing unemployment and more starvation.” This paradox lay at the heart of the Economic Society’s efforts to understand the role of the state in successfully unleashing and mastering the positive potential for exchange between town and country.

The ringleader of the Vaudois political economists, Elie Bertrand, was recruited in 1762 by the prominent Mniszech family of Poland to serve as tutor to their sons, then in their early twenties and destined to soon take up prominent roles in government. Kapossy decided that it would be worth studying more carefully the range of activities they engaged in during the subsequent years. “If you compare Bertrand to Adam Smith, for example, who at virtually the same moment became tutor to the young Duke of Buccleuch, accepting a kind of sinecure to accompany him on his Grand Tour, you can begin to see the differences. Bertrand organized a major research project around the Mniszechs, involving the leading lights of Swiss and French economic thought in new publishing ventures as well as designing a kind of ‘economic Grand Tour’ which intensively documented and analyzed economic conditions across Europe. He wound up advising the Polish king and was invited to stay on in Poland, though he didn’t accept the offer in the end.” At the same time, Kapossy points out, there were also similarities: The Seven Years War had just ended, permitting a sudden opening up of travel and a flourishing of reform thinking and exchanges of ideas. Some of the Continental thinkers whom Smith famously encountered, including Voltaire and the Physiocrats, were connecting with the Mniszechs around the very same time.

Major changes were also occurring within Poland. In 1763 the Polish king died and an ambitious reformer was soon elected in his place. “Historians are very familiar with the philosophes like Voltaire and Diderot who cultivated relationships with so-called ‘enlightened despots’ like Catherine the Great of Russia and Frederick the Great of Prussia, or Joseph II of Austria. It is worth remembering that Poland belonged to the same reform networks,” Kapossy points out. Because Poland was a republic with an elective monarchy and a powerful diet, scholars must be carefully attuned to shifting coalitions of reformers and the domestic factions which opposed them. “The powerful Mniszech clan, who were at the center of these struggles, resolved to send their sons to Western Europe to be trained by the leading minds of the Enlightenment, in order to prepare them to help guide Poland’s future reforms. They settled on Bern as their preferred destination, rather than the more fashionable Paris – a notable choice for Catholic Poles given that Bern was Protestant and Elie Bertrand and his father were ministers. Their decision was influenced by the famous Swiss travel and a flourishing of reform thinking and exchanges of ideas. Some of the Continental thinkers whom Smith famously encountered, including Voltaire and the Physiocrats, were connecting with the Mniszechs around the very same time.

Our approach to the political and economic ideas of the Enlightenment is to examine how the grand theory informed, and was itself informed by, the experience of reformers who sought to address economic and social problems in various real-life contexts.

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In addition, the project brings together three doctoral students supervised by Professor Kapossy, Auguste Bertholet and Radoslav Szymanski of the University of Lausanne and Avis Della Fontana of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Each had conducted previous masters-level research that intersected with the themes of the project. Bertholet studied a co-founder of Physiocracy, the marquis de Mirabeau, through his extensive Héloug correspondence with his Vaudois friend, Frédéric de Saccoury. Kapossy discovered this previously unknown cache of letters in a private collection, and he and Bertholet are now editing them, both in digital form on the scholarly web-project Lumières Lausanne and as part of a collection of essays by leading Physiocracy scholars which will soon be published by SLatkin. Bertholet’s doctoral dissertation will provide a major study of both the Vaudois and international networks of Bertrand and the many authors with whom he collaborated, notably on a volume of essays called the Spirit of Legislation, which was translated into multiple European languages during the 1760s.

Szymanski’s previous work on Enlightenment Polish reforms positions him to reconstruct Bertrand’s multi-year educational program with the Moszczynski. Traveling through and carefully observing many different European economies, the Moszczynski and Bertrand produced a vast number of manuscripts, now held in archives in Switzerland, France, Poland and Ukraine. In addition to composing detailed empirical analyses, they studied the range of different economic and political reform theories that they encountered on their travels, and Szymanski has begun to publish important findings about their contributions to the Polish reception of Swiss natural law theory, German Cameralism, French Physiocracy, and more. Della Fontana studies the Italian reception of Vaudois political economy texts, such as the Spirit of Legislation, as part of a broader project on Venetian and Italian reform thought. Italians were among the most avid of Bertrand’s followers, and their efforts to apply his ideas in the context of the fanning glory of the great Renaissance commercial republics provides a new way of thinking about the challenges of economic modernization in Italy.

Transnational Reform Networks

One of the original aims of the project was to build outwards from the Vaudo as a way of gaining a better understandings of the concerns that animated European political and economic reform thought more generally. “The notion of agrarian republics” provides a loose shorthand for some of the main themes which unite our individual research projects,” Kapossy says. “Bern, Poland, the United States, Venice and Genoa were all republics, but there were still huge differences in their politics and their economies. By studying them together, we can identify separate nodes and linkages in a larger network. Initially, we started with the Polish-Swiss strands of Bertrand and Rousseau, then we added the Polish-American strand of Du Pont de Nemours, who, like Bertrand and Rousseau, was also very much part of a French and Swiss context. Now we’ve also included Italy, which connects to the others in a specific and interesting way. This provides a kind of common denominator, which allows us to begin by examining different reform languages in multiple overlapping contexts, proceeding to add in new contexts and pan out step by step.

The project itself is now entering its final year and, while the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the group’s activities — especially travel to foreign archives and libraries —