

“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 Vaud 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” paved 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 to industrialization, and this led into an array of complex questions relating to markets, prices, trade, taxation, legislation, finance, credit, land reform and what we would today call industrial policy,” 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.

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**.

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 was himself a minister. Their decision was influenced by the famous Swiss

natural law theorist Emer de Vattel, whose writings Professor Kapossy has previously edited. “Vattel spent the Seven Years War in Warsaw as advisor to the Polish crown, and he persuaded the Mniszechs that Bern, and particularly the Vaud and Lausanne, which was the cultural and intellectual capital, was where they would find the most vibrant and sophisticated intellectual scene.” Thus Bertrand, a friend of Vattel’s, was chosen as tutor, and the Mniszechs became unofficial Polish ambassadors to the Republic of Letters.

As he was developing the idea of using Bertrand and the Mniszechs as a window onto



Lausanne, von Nordosten by Johann Jakob Biedermann (1783–1830) - Collection Gugelmann, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department. View of Lausanne and Lake Geneva in the background.

wider European reform networks and ideas, Kapossy invited Harvard Ph.D. student Graham Clure to join the project as a postdoctoral researcher. Dr. Clure was then in the final stages of his dissertation on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, the most famous of the many plans devised by Enlightenment thinkers for the economic and political reform of Poland. Clure had a natural interest in the project in part because his research on Polish reform discourses included figures such as the French Physiocrats and the abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, who were themselves directly linked to the Economic Society of Bern.

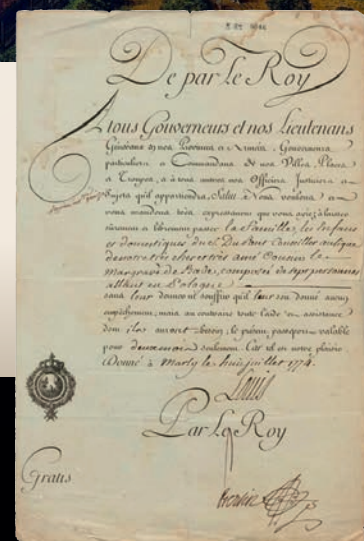
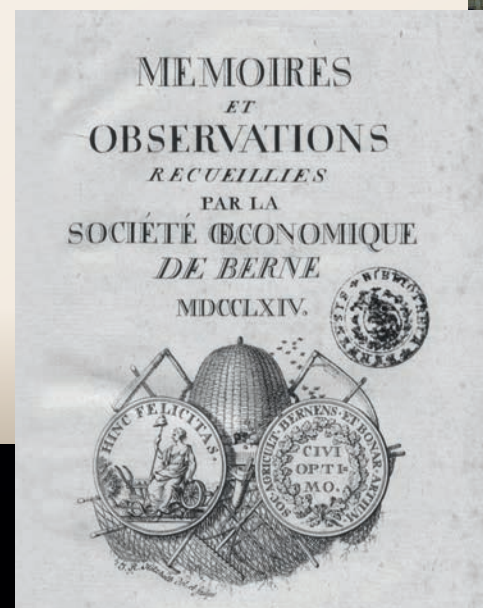
Moreover, Rousseau spent the period between 1762-65 living in Neuchâtel, on the border with Bern, where he had numerous contacts in the Economic Society. Although Rousseau and Bertrand had frosty personal relations and never collaborated, Rousseau influenced economic thinking in Bern and the Vaud, just as these ideas in turn constituted an important point of reference for one of the major texts that he composed during his time in Neuchâtel, a reform project for Corsica in which he began to outline the main themes that he would later develop in his *Considerations on Poland*. For Clure, the Enlightenment Agrarian Republics project provided an ideal setting in which to complete a book based on his dissertation, titled *Rousseau's Last Masterpiece: The Political Institutions of Poland*. The project has also enabled him to pursue further research on reformers who were active in both Poland and America, such as Pierre-Samuel Du Pont de Nemours and Filippo Mazzei, important theorists of the French and American Revolutions who served at various times as advisors to both the Polish king and the future American president Thomas Jefferson.

In addition, the project brings together three doctoral students supervised by Professor Kapossy, Auguste Bertholet and Radosław Szymański of the University of Lausanne and Aris Della Fontana of the Scuola Normale Superiore of 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 lifelong correspondence with his Vaudois friend, Frédéric de Sacconay. 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 *Lumieres.Lausanne* and as part of a collection of essays by leading Physiocracy scholars which will soon be published by Slatkine. 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 every

major European language during the 1760s. Szymański's previous work on Enlightenment Polish reforms positions him to reconstruct Bertrand's multi-year educational program with the Mniszechs. Traveling through and carefully observing many different European economies, the Mniszechs 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 Szymański 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



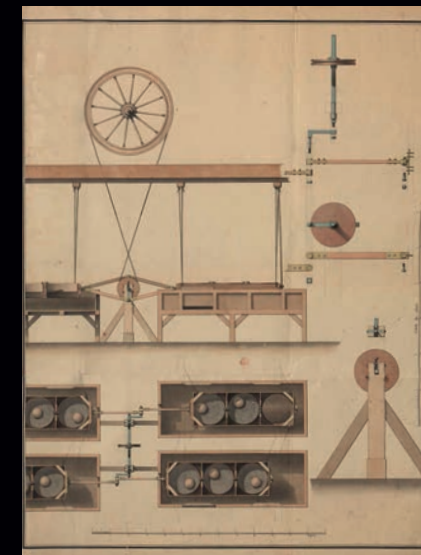
Bernardo Bellotto - View of Warsaw from the Royal Castle 1773.



1798 Berne Half Thaler. © Sincona AG

Far left: Front cover of *Mémoires et Observations Recueillies par la Société Économique de Berne*.

Left: Passport of Pierre-Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, 1774, ID:20091029_4_002, Winterthur Manuscripts (Accession WMSS), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE 19807.



E. I. du Pont Drawings of Powder Mills and Machinery, No. 047, Graining Mill, c. 1803-1830, ID:dupontdrawing_4700001, The Longwood Manuscripts (Accession LMSS), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE 19807.

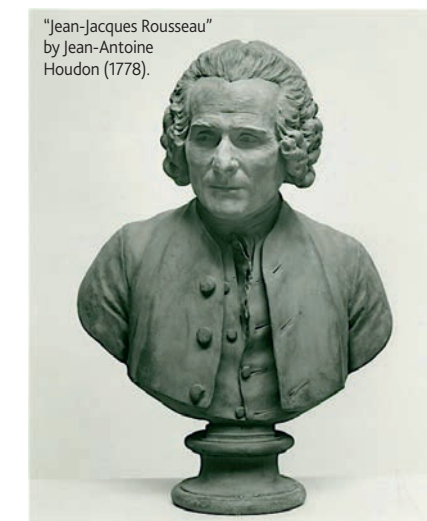
the fading glory of the great Renaissance commercial republics provides a new way of thinking about the challenges of economic modernization in Italy.

Transnational Reform Networks

One of the original aims of the project was to build outwards from the Vaud as a way of gaining a better understanding 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 –

Professor Kapossy hopes to hold a conference next year in order to widen his team's own transnational intellectual networks and establish new collaborations with junior and senior researchers in other countries, such as Portugal, Denmark, Sweden and Russia. There are multiple publications in the works, and Kapossy is already looking to the future and to subsequent projects which can harness digital tools to facilitate the study of economic reform thinking in a comparative context. One of the main results of the project is that it advances Kapossy's longstanding interest in tracing the development of Enlightenment ideas into the nineteenth century, among successive generations of thinkers that included Du Pont de Nemours, Malthus, Hamilton, List, Tocqueville, Hegel and many more.



"Jean-Jacques Rousseau" by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1778).

ENLIGHTENMENT AGRARIAN REPUBLICS

"Enlightenment Agrarian Republics : From Vaud, to Poland, and America"

Project Objectives

The "Enlightenment Agrarian Republics" project studies eighteenth-century European and American reform theories from the perspective of countries with a predominantly agrarian economy. Their theoretical and practical contributions to Enlightenment debates on the relation between agriculture and manufacturing, town and country, were widely studied at the time and had a major influence on nineteenth-century theories of balanced growth.

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Project Partners

• Professor Iain McDaniel, University of Sussex, United Kingdom

Contact Details

Project Coordinator,
Professor Béla Kapossy
Section d'Histoire
Université de Lausanne
Bâtiment Anthropole 5189
1015 Lausanne
T: +41 21 692 29 41
E: bela.kapossy@unil.ch

Project Website

W: <https://wp.unil.ch/agrarianrepublics/>

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Professor Béla Kapossy



Béla Kapossy is Senior Professor in early-modern History at the University of Lausanne and currently Dean of the Collège des Humanités at EPFL. His work focuses mostly on the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and Swiss political and economic thought.

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