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“Classical” liberalism in France, from the middle of the 19th century to World War I

Strengths and paradoxes of a thwarted society project

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We are aware of the way Karl Marx made the expression “classical school” go down in history when *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* was published in 1859, in order to name a school of thought that could encourage market economy and free trade, a weaker form a state regulation and intervention, of which the most renowned representatives were Adam Smith and David Ricardo. What remains overlooked is the fact that this “classical” liberalism emerged after a specific event that took place in the UK: in 1838, a manufacturer named Richard Cobden founded the Manchester League, or the Anti-Corn Law League, following his main proposition to suppress customs on grain (Halévy 1923, 290). This organization, after an intense form of free-trade lobbying, managed to convince the Prime Minister Robert Peel to abolish the infamous Corn Laws in 1846 and, by doing so, to restructure the balance within the Westminster political spectrum. This powerful wave, also called “Manchesterism”, gave a new impulse to the European “classical” liberalism in the second half of the 19th century. The reason why it becomes necessary to be reminded of these elements is that in France, the disciples of “classical” liberalism, in order to defend their own ideas, constantly referred to this British genealogy: the French circles of political economy, as we shall see, all have in common an endless admiration for Richard Cobden’s work, and a will to use it in order to spread their ideas within their own country (Andriot 2022).

The French political economy school, created in the middle of the 19th century and related to the *Journal des Économistes*, rapidly acquired societies in most of the country’s main cities and placed economic progress through private initiative as a precondition for every other form of change. If its influence on the emerging economic science is major, important figures such as Frédéric Bastiat, Michel

Chevalier, Frédéric Passy or Yves Guyot never managed to obtain a prominent political role. Here is why: their liberal “purity” did not find much echo in France with other political forces, especially regarding the promotion of free trade, or a less regulated form of state. At the turn of the 20th century, these actions granted them the names “classical” or “orthodox” liberals, whose sacrosanct “laissez-faire” was outdated. In many ways, their nostalgia, at least within their views, is not always an easy aspect to tackle. It must be said that in opposition to some works trying to categorize these liberals (Girard 1985), sometimes progressive and sometimes conservative, it seems more coherent to consider them as supporters of simultaneous order and movement, rejecting radical solutions, encouraging stability as well as breaking reforms, but thinking that societies evolve through constant progress toward a specific form of modernity. Thus, the goal is to try to better understand the journey of this political family, the extent of its influence as well as its practices in France, from the end of the 19th century to the dawn of World War I.

I. Who are the French “classical” liberals?

1. A school of political economy

Concomitantly to the creation of the Paris Political Economy Society at the end of 1841, the *Journal des Économistes* was created by Gilbert Guillaumin (publisher) and Joseph Garnier (economy professor). To these two men, one can add the decisive influence of Frédéric Bastiat, coming from a family of Landes merchants. As an admirer of Richard Cobden’s work, he constantly published articles in the *Journal des Économistes* (Bastiat 1862 [1854], 15) until his death in 1850. Asserting of course the physiocrats’ and Turgot’s legacy in France, but maybe even more the “classical” legacy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and then of the Manchester League, this French school of political economy rapidly became the privileged sphere for those who would preach the absolute defense of commercial freedom, uniting quite logically a plurality of economic actors around it.

First of all, and quite obviously, we can mention economy theorists such as Michel Chevalier, tenured professor of political economy at the Collège de France since the July Monarchy. During the Second French Empire, the Franco-British customs agreement, signed on January 23rd 1860 bears his mark since it is also called the “Cobden-Chevalier” agreement. Between the 8th and 15th October 1859, while in London for the International Committee for Weights and Measures, Chevalier discreetly met his longstanding friend Cobden, as well as William Gladstone (Barbier 1995), Chancellor of the Exchequer. Since he was close to the Bonapartist power, the economist served as mediator, more particularly with the state minister Achille Fould, who was himself receptive to the cause of free-trade. On November 8th 1859, Chevalier told his British friend¹ about a conversation with the minister, related to a customs treaty: “Would you be so kind as to expressively repeat what

¹ Letter from Michel Chevalier to Richard Cobden, telling about a conversation with Achille Fould, November 8th 1859.

you want me to bring to his attention”, to which he responded: “tell him that the proposition is being very seriously considered” (...), “this is what I shall tell M. Cobden”, I answered, “but it would be even better if you told him yourself” (British Library, Cobden Papers, Add MS 43647). With the direct implication of the Emperor, the treaty was signed in early 1860, and if we cannot explicitly mention free-trade, taxes on Franco-British exchanges were indeed largely reduced². Often intimately linked to the political economy societies of their cities, the great Chambers of commerce of the country, such as in Paris, Lyon or Bordeaux, defended free trade in a rather clear way. While many liberals were not fooled, and saw the Cobden-Chevalier agreement as a minor economical concession coming from Napoléon III, in order to limit political freedom, most of the Chambers of commerce were also satisfied, such as the Chamber of Lyon which again in 1869, defended its ratification (A.D. Rhône 1 ETP 239, Comptes-rendus des travaux de la CCI de Lyon, 1869, 149). In addition, the strength with which the supporters of protectionism rejected the treaty seems to assert its strong free-trade orientation: for instance, the *Nouvelliste of Rouen* gathered the signatures of 400 manufacturers who were opposed to this decision (*Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, January 24th 1860).

Without any doubt, the 1860s were a prosperous period for commercial freedom, since thirteen other customs agreements were signed with the other European nations (A.N. fonds Jules Simon, 87 AP 10³); from 1864 onwards, imperial authorities allowed the opening of the first classes of political economy in Paris and Lyon, with the approval of the Chambers of commerce (*Journal des Économistes* 1864, 366). Yet, the influence of political economy under the Second French Empire – if not the recuperation of its ideas by political powers – is only a parenthesis. First of all because pacifism, inherent to the free-traders for whom trade brings nations together, failed again when the Franco-Prussian War started in 1870. Moreover, because at the end of the conflict, Adolphe Thiers took the lead of the new republic and negotiated the end of the hostilities. Even if he was at the head of the liberal opponents within the legislative body of the Second Empire, the latter had always been a fervent protectionist, and was against the British competition, considered unfair in the context of the 1860 agreement. It explained why he did not hesitate, on July 26th 1872, to denounce this commercial treaty by increasing taxes on raw materials, in order to pay for the war compensation demanded by Germany (*Annales de l'Assemblée nationale* 1872, sessions from January 13th to February 1st). *De facto*, the Third Republic started by a questioning of “classical” liberal ideas. Political economy could have been undermined, but on the contrary, this event reinforced the vocation of its actors to express themselves through its own channels.

² If there was indeed an exemption from duties or very low prices for French product in the UK, The Franco-British Treaty, on the contrary, only replaced the former interdictions by taxes set between 10 and 30% of the merchandise value.

³ Personal notes on trade agreements, probably published around 1877.

2. Free-trade: at the service of the bourgeoisie's interests?

An environment of free trade influence did strengthen under the Third Republic. During the last decades of the 19th century, the prominent influence of a figure such as Léon Say demonstrates the real presence of liberal ideas. Jean-Baptiste Say's grandson, who distinguished himself by publishing in 1803 a political economy treaty, by being appointed several times as finance minister and senator, Léon Say is first and foremost a businessman willing to defend the interests of economic environment in a liberal way. His decisive role in the consolidation of a liberal Republic, as a leader of what was called center-left politics, is well known (Garrigues 1993); but he also prevented protectionism from gaining ground, for instance by exempting the UK from the 1881 general tariff when he was finance minister. Lord Lyons, the British ambassador, stated:

Last evening, I had a confidential conversation with Mr. Léon Say about the commercial negotiations. He observed that he could never have believed that, under a ministry of which he was a member, the commercial agreements that came to be beneficial to both our countries, would be ended (...). The protectionist spirit had, he said, burned during the last years, and it needed time to cool down. (A.N. FO432/62, Lord Lyons's report for the Foreign Office, February 19th 1882)⁴

In November 1884, he created and led the National League against higher prices for bread and meat (*Journal des Économistes* 1884, 189), with a perfectly suited argumentation, reminiscent of the UK during the 1840s: the masses of consumers, working or farming, should not be fooled by the pipe dream of protectionism; every customs tax added to importation, rather than protecting the national market, will result in a general increase of food prices. The new association, openly described as "anti-protectionism", does not, however, forget to address its natural supporters – exporter industries – and adds that restraining foreign trade in order to boost the economy of the state is equivalent to breaking the French virtuous economic models that were adopted in 1860. Supported by the *Journal des Économistes* and the Paris Political Economy Society, by the Lyon Political Economy Society, by various figures such as Paul Leroy Beaulieu, Agénor Bardoux, Jules Simon, Yves Guyot, Frédéric Passy or Edouard Aynard, a French Anti-Corn Law League seemed to emerge. On January 18th 1885, at the Tivoli-Vauxhall, the league gathered almost 3000 people in order to listen to the speeches of Léon Say, Frédéric Passy or Edgar Raoul-Duval, in front of the representatives of the great Chambers of Commerce of the country, and also free-trader manufacturers and traders (*Journal des Économistes* 1885a). Equipped with a press release and local branches, the league enjoys a certain success in its constitution: in July 1885, it took a more general name, *Ligue pour le libre-échange* (the free trade League) (*Journal des Économistes* 1885b), in order to provide a more permanent character, and a larger ambition.

Quite obviously, political economy and business environments are intimately connected with the representation and promotion of liberal ideas. A lot of these liberals enjoyed privileged positions that enabled them to own, invest and influence

⁴ Translation by the author.

capital, and want to grow wealthy through their skills, to such an extent that one could claim that within the liberals, more than ever, the Third Republic was a time of interpenetration between politics and economy (Estèbe 1982, 166). Léon Say was thus a member of the board of directors for the Marseille docks and warehouses, and also for railroads in the north. Agénor Bardoux invested in the Orléans railroads, Emile de Marcère in the Béthune mines and in the mortgage credit institution. Frédéric Passy invested in the Société Générale and in the forges of Châtillon and Commentry. Within the Free School of Political Sciences, in press organs devoted to their cause, such as the *Journal des Débats*, or through many political economy tenures that had emerged in law schools since the 1860s, these liberals defended the preeminence of private initiative within the economic and social areas. They wanted to erase the partisan quarrels that, in their minds, had corrupted the country for almost a century, they wanted to prove that there was an objective, rational and pacified way to govern according to their own idea of “common sense” (Andriot 2022, 38). Should we see here a defense of the bourgeoisie? At least in the way they shared an antirevolutionary feeling, reinforced by the episode of the Paris Commune. Yet, in a more sociological perspective, it would be more coherent to design a set of practices specific to this political culture, practices which might be inherited from the world of merchant banks. The existence of a common ground through practices and maintenance strategies of their influence through proper channels, a certain discomfort towards political massification, soon to be the rise of the working class, a form of elitist conservatism through the praise of skill rather than vote, all those aspects seem to be indeed characteristics of “classical” liberalism. Considering that liberals advocate a depoliticized conception of public debate, resorting to spheres of influence does constitute a particular and original approach of politics.

II. An outdated project of society at the end of the 19th century

1. The Long Depression, a deep questioning?

Equipped with a solid framework when it comes to sociability, press and financial networks, it seems paradoxical to observe the fall of “classical” liberals through the prism of parliamentary representation (Garrigues 1997, 401-402)⁵. Yet, it was explained earlier that contrary to a part of their European counterparts, French liberals, as they refused to entertain the revolutionary quarrels and feared the ghost of civil war, became accustomed to invest more in metapolicies than in the electoral arena. One must add to this the emergence of a liberal-republican wave in the 1880s which, gravitating around figures such as Léon Gambetta, Jules Ferry or Charles de Freycinet, undertook an ideological synthesis between liberalism and democracy, and deprived “classical” liberals from the originality of a part of their program (Bernstein 1998, 270-271). The absolute “laissez-faire” remained their

⁵ The moderate left only had 5% of deputies left in 1885.

most important distinguishing element, but was violently met with the consequences of the Long Depression.

What we call the Long Depression, generally limited to the 1870s and the 1880s, refers to a long period of economic reduction, or even downturn. It can be described as a form of backlash, resulting from an overconfidence in the liberalization of financial and property transactions, and it is clear that this crisis led to major long-term reconsiderations regarding the position of the US as an organ of regulation, for instance through protectionism (Gourévitch 1975, 190). Individualism, materialism, unregulated industrialization, what used to be the pride of progress and modernity in Europe, failed then to win unanimous support. What we call then “classical liberalism” seems to stumble between culmination and start to be short of breath. The “socialisme de la chaire” (literally “tenure socialism”), created in the 1870s in Germany by some scholars, but spread in Europe by the Belgian economist Emile de Laveleye, did notice this decline of liberalism born with Smith, Say and Bastiat, overshadowed by the German model, which was somehow devoted to the state (Baudrillart 1875)⁶. Once failing in front of the scope of social misery, which it increased by encouraging the limitation of public intervention, it is hard to defend the most classical conception of liberalism. In 1881, Laveleye came back to explain that the dogmatic successors of the “classical”, such as the economist Maurice Block, were mistaken regarding the natural distribution of wealth under the “laissez-faire” effect, the egotistic pursuit of one’s own interests as advocated by utilitarianism (Laveleye 1881)⁷. To put it simply, he rejected the existence of a natural economic law, an “invisible hand” harmoniously handling transactions, a theory which is, for him, but a pure idealized abstraction of society.

Thus, for the liberals attending the various political economy societies in many French cities, there seemed to be a need to rebuild everything from the ground. Being on the defensive, they must, more than ever, justify their conceptions. Edouard Aynard, an influent Lyon draper and banker, regretted that it became so difficult to defend commercial freedom without being caricatured: to him, the very expression “free-trade” became so trite in France that it could only be parsimoniously used (A.D. Rhône, *Société d’économie politique de Lyon* 1885). In the middle of the 1880s, at a time when “State socialism” – imported from Germany – was in vogue, when democracies such as France demanded more and more public prosecutions, Aynard stated that liberalism had never been as essential as it was then. Since it enabled a reduction in the cost of living for workers, since it brought nations together through trade, and more fundamentally since it could protect people’s emancipation, liberalism must remain at the core of western societies. Speaking about protectionism, he concluded: “If this mistake was to prevail, it would lead us to a new form a slavery, progressively replacing action and state collective consciousness, monstrous and vague, with the individual’s precise action

⁶ The Germanophone economist Friedrich List is considered as the spiritual father of this “tenure socialism”, characterized by its desire to assign an economic role to the State.

⁷ Laveleye supports his demonstration with the works of Cliffe Leslie, a British economist who reproaches “classical” liberalism with its large inclination for abstraction.

and delicate conscience". (*ibid.*, 94) Liberals from political economy environments thus kept doing their best to connect political and economic liberalism within a same vision: if the economic crisis was to last, it would be because States, by regulating trade, disrupt the natural mechanism of private initiatives.

2. The 1891 protectionist defeat

As national economies became effected by the Long Depression, the appeal for protectionist measures blossomed everywhere in Europe; for example, Bismarck reestablished customs barriers in Germany in 1879. In France, among the free-traders, a lobbying asset was still encouraged by the various national political economy societies, coming from the Chambers of commerce themselves as well as the exporting sectors such as port trade or the Lyon silk trade. Yet, protectionists also organized themselves around farming as well as a part of the industrial world, gathered within the French Industry Association founded in 1878, in order to support candidates in favor of their projects. Among them, the figure of Jules Méline emerged. The lawyer from the Vosges, whom Jules Ferry chose as his minister of agriculture from 1883 to 1885, was very close to economic environments – such as textile – that were hostile towards an unregulated commercial freedom. Under the influence of the French farming society, a lobbying emerged to increase border taxes and come back once and for all on what remained of the 1860 treaty. If the weight of agriculture in France was more political and electoral than economic (Daumard 1987, 9)⁸, the republican myth of the small farming landowner was still widespread (Mayeur 1964, 77)⁹, and had to be protected from elitist liberals who would only work for big investors. To this gathering of conservatives and farmers, one can add paradoxically some liberal republicans. Jean Casimir-Périer, Francis Charmes, or Alexandre Ribot, like Adolphe Thiers before them, did not want to assimilate political and economic liberalism, and move away from the political economy theories of which free-trade remained a central pillar. However, it was difficult for them to come to terms with two well-established French specificities dating back to the French Revolution: the existence of a large middle-class composed of small landowners, and the emergence of a political wave willing to embody this tendency, namely the radical party.

In March 1891, when Charles de Freycinet's government proposed a deeper revision of general tariffs than what was done in 1881 (*Journal des Économistes* 1890, 146), it was about evaluating the three decades since 1860, and also taking stock of the real benefits of an anglophile policy. Jules Méline, the rapporteur of the bill and also president of the budget commission in the Chamber of Deputies, decided during the 1891 spring to defend a true return to protectionism. On May 12th and 13th, he delivered his arguments, insisting mostly on the French farming crisis against global competition (Méline 1891, 31). It is true indeed that the development of more high-performance modes of transportation enabled

⁸ Since the 1840s, the sectors of industry and finance are the ones which sustain the country's economic growth. However, half of the country's workforce is composed by farmers.

⁹ However, in 1882, 45% of the lands are still owned by big landlords.

American farm products to spread within the European market, so much that in 1880, the farming trade balance had a 15% deficit, which was only 3% a decade earlier (André Perez 2012).

Until the very end of the debates, the liberals fought using their usual weapons in order to refuse the new tariff. The natural virtue of "laissez-faire", the negative pressure exerted by the new American or German protectionist models, the fear of seeing a new increase in public spending and a weakening of trade, the wrong trial brought against liberalism in order to justify the crisis, these are among many exposed lines of reasoning, including when the law was voted but not yet announced. The new tariff was voted on July 18th 1891, 385 votes in favor and 111 against, but this did not prevent its opponents to keep fighting. Léon Say thus delivered a great speech in the Chamber of Deputies on December 21st 1891 in which he denounced such an economic overthrow (Garrigues 1993, 1077), and Auguste Isaac, president of the Lyon Political Economy Society, also defended his liberal vision during the November 20th 1891 meeting, when he stated: "We are passionate about constitutions and reconstitutions. We never know how to do without a revolution (...). We must get back to work to fix the mistakes of our concitizens" (A.D. Rhône, *Société d'économie politique de Lyon* 1892, 43-44). On January 11th 1892, the "Méline tariff" came into effect, imposing specifically a maximum and a minimum general tariff submitted to specific conventions. It increased all duties on importations between 15 and 30%, more particularly on farm products (André Pérez 2012). These "mistakes" quoted by Isaac from Lyon were about the endless deficiency of liberal appetite that French society would display, as demonstrated by the final success of the protectionist campaign. Jules Simon soon saw a new significant failure, and wondered what was left of commercial freedom: "The deceased Chamber was not thinking about it anymore, having finished its great China wall, under Méline's – the great architect – handy direction. (...) I do not understand the tranquility of free-traders. It is time for them to get to work, since they were defeated" (A.N. Fonds Simon, 87 AP 13).

III. A culture of depoliticization

1. Individualism, the next liberal fight

At the beginning of the 1890s, "classical" liberalism seemed to have lost a great battle, since the "progressive" parliamentary majority, gravitating more and more around Jules Méline, who became President of the Council of Ministers in 1896, confirmed the protectionist vocation at the time. However, more and more liberals wanted to engage a larger combat, against every form of doctrine defending an increase in the skills of the State, sharing the common conception of public power having, to some degrees, a positive role to play in the improvement of the citizens' living conditions, against the liberal belief making individuals the sole driving force of social progress. In this perspective, their absolute enemy remained Marxism, as its development scared as much as it was founded on a conflictual, anticapitalistic, politicized vision of social relations. In 1893, the election of 41 socialist deputies in

the Chamber of Deputies, as well as the numerous ongoing strikes in Carmaux, strengthened these fears.

Since the absence of regulation within liberal societies, the famous “laissez-faire”, appeared in the detractors’ minds as the origin of the economic crisis, it is, first and foremost, important to decipher a similarity between the rise of democracy and the will for a better distribution of wealth, and a connection with a rising preeminence granted to the resolution of social issues. In 1883, Gustave de Molinari, another Belgian economist involved in France, already observed a transformation of the modern States which, for the sake of national pride, always sought growth. This change is especially visible when the notion of domestic policy is concerned, which results in an increase of budgets and governmental prerogatives, to the detriment of *self-government* (Molinari 1883, 188). Obviously, this critique is linked to the traditional fight carried out by “classical” liberals, but it is, at the core, a rejection of the nation state as it took shape during the French Revolution, and reach maturity during the *fin-de-siècle*. One year later, Molinary continued his reflection, describing 1789 as a rupture: the extension of the “government’s machinery” thus became constant, as each party fought to increase the State’s functions since reducing them would mean reducing the rulers’ powers. For him, “We are only at the beginning of a revolutionary retrogression period. The government, which the middle class stole from the upper class, started to be claimed by the working democracy which will, in the end, manage to seize it.” (Molinari 1884, 501-502) Democracy was clearly defined as the core of the problem, it was as if it altered the State by turning it into a servant of the sovereign nation, which was even more problematic at the time of political massification.

There is a variety of solutions proposed, at the very heart of this minority of nostalgic liberals. Auguste Isaac, a Lyon textile industrial, made the fight against the socialist chimera his priority: “Interventionists, or as we begin to call them, the statistes, namely the disguised or oblivious socialists, constitute a growing mob within which several agitators by profession try to be taken seriously” (A.D. Rhône, *Société d’économie politique de Lyon* 1892, 34). The jurist and historian Georges Picot defined political economy as the last liberal bastion:

The economical school which struggled bravely and did not make way for a utopia without fighting will be the first to work night and day, ready to defend it until the end. During this century, it had a rare credit we could not be too grateful about. Better than anyone else, it managed to defend individuals and freedom. Through it, principles were asserted and it kept every truth at the core of science. It was its mission yesterday and it will be its honor tomorrow. (Picot 1890, 5).

In truth, what we started to notice during the 1880s was the maturity of nation states as coherent political structures. Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, professor of political economy at the Collège de France, wrote in 1890: “The civilized nations should be wary of it. By outrageously subordinating personal will to collective will, individual action to national action, they could end up destroying the main factor of civilization!” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1900 [1890], 461). The state monster of this age of political massification, caricatured as industrialized, militarized, bureaucratized, born from worried liberals afraid to witness the downfall of individual and

community self-government. For the Paris Political Economy Society’s fiftieth birthday, set on November 5th 1892, the president Frédéric Passy reaffirmed, on the contrary, the individualist basis of liberalism:

This doctrine, this belief, or to say it better, this conviction that societies are not randomly delivered, that men are not an inert matter made like clay in order to be shaped by every upper or lower kneader’s whim, they are responsible and free beings (...). It is the founding principle of political economy, the symbol of this school that Mr. Léon Say, the other day in the Institut, called the liberal school. (A.D. Rhône, *Société d’économie politique de Lyon* 1892, 253)

Everything is indeed summarized: “classic” liberalism does perceive itself as the historic defender of individual freedom, once fighting against autocratic despotism, now against the democratic masses risk of tyranny. In both cases, the loss of neutrality of the state tool is feared, and within a less laudable dimension, its loss of control from the liberal elites. Indeed, at that time, middle-class landowners and working masses were continuously gaining electoral power. The absolute critique defended by the Marxists regarding class struggle, or combat republicanism claimed by radicals at the turn of the century, is essentially a new translation of the liberal will to depoliticize democracy, erase public dissensus and State Intervention in order to contrast them with an individualistic, technical – if not technocratic – and moderated vision of business management.

2. Lobbying and civil society, the natural liberal playgrounds

Within political economy societies, there exists a solid body of liberals attached to “classical” liberalism, and yet it is difficult to notice a replenishment of ideas. The sole exception concerned the *Musée social*, founded in 1894, which tried to create a circle of liberal sociability articulated around social economy, which was blooming at the time: its founder, Aldebert de Chambrun, a senator from Lozère¹⁰, hoped to promote individual and associative freedom, in order to settle the social question through the private (Chambelland & Rosanvallon 1998) prism. As for the rest, in the 1900 introduction to his political economy dictionary, codirected with Léon Say before his death, Joseph Chailley wrote:

Our doctrines belong to the liberal school. Our masters are called Turgot, Adam Smith, Cobden and Bastiat, Herbert Spencer and, to a certain extent, the French positivists. These names are enough to prove that we are from a school of progress. (Say & Chailley 1900, VII)

This claimed progressivism seemed quite anchored in the past, regarding the references quoted, and at the time of the “radical Republic” (Rebérioux 1975), when anticlericalism and social issues took over the public debate, was likely to become less and less prominent. In the beginning of the 20th century, more than ever, the French liberals regretted not having their say in their own country, while they kept considering themselves as the main providers of progress through the promotion of free-trade and individualism. On November 14th 1901, Gustave de

¹⁰ Lozère is a landlocked department in the region of Occitanie in Southern France, located near the Massif Central.

Molinary created in Paris, near the Hôtel des Sociétés Savantes, the international free-trade federation, of which the participants come from the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and the US: this association wanted to be the successor of Richard Cobden and Léon Say, who were pioneers in their own countries, regarding the leagues for the defense of commercial freedom (A.D. Rhône, *Journal des Économistes* 1901, 432-434). Yet, for quite some time, these great events had lost their worth within the public debate, it is thus necessary to look elsewhere in order to see “classical” liberalism persist before WWI. In 1901, the creation of the Union of mining and metalworking industries did pave the way for industrial lobbying, a process more and more supported by the French liberals (Garrigues 2013, 37).

The main heritage of “classical” liberalism is linked to the desire to set new political targets, around a program based on political and economic freedoms, and thus to oppose every form of political willingness considered detrimental to civil society, a flexible and solid doctrine. Questioned, probably constantly undermined since the 1880s, it kept a limited but resolute aura, including in France. The radical Joseph Caillaux thus represented, since the beginning of the 1900s, a perfect target for the enemies of rising statism. When he came back as finance minister between 1907 and 1909, he strongly revived the idea of income taxes, mixing the German progressive tax and the British schedular tax. The heirs of political economy then strongly went into action, multiplying community actions and biased publications against Caillaux’s ambitions. The Federation of French Manufacturers and Merchants, supervised by the influential André Lebon (Dubos 2001), thus led a direct combat against the finance minister. This association was actually more of an emerging managerial union, since in 1910 it could count on the support of 3500 business owners, as well as the Chambers of commerce. A true lobby indeed, the Federation was seen as a counter power regularly submitting notes and reports to the parliamentarians (Dubos 2002). It was intended to defend not only business environments, but it also claimed a certain representation of civil society in every sense against the infringement of the state. Within this dimension, we can observe a persistence of “classical” liberalism, which is, this time, openly represented by the business world. The Senate’s opposition prevented this tax project to be carried through in 1914, a proof that “laissez-faire” still had disciples.

Indeed, we should not think that the liberals’ traditional insertion within industrial and financial capitalism disappeared: in addition to the unmissable Frédéric Passy (Société Générale and Tonkin Coal Boards), Emile de Marcère (Béthune mines and Franco-Belgian railroads), boards of directors were still preferred sanctuaries for André Lebon – mortgage credit institution and banks, Suez Canal – or the engineer and Nord deputy André Guillaïn – president of the forge comity since 1907 and the Union of mining and metalworking industries since 1904 (Estèbe 1982, 166). Robert Pinot, teacher at the free School of political sciences, former director of the social Museum and above all the “French first great professional lobbyist” (Richard 2017, 117-118), perfectly embodied the support for a liberal influence within business environments through his position in the forge comity and the Union of mining and metalworking industries, by putting limits to a social legislation considered too heavy for employers; what we have here is still not “classical” liberalism which

could be qualified as "pure", but a concrete proof that economic liberalism, in every sense, remains protected.

Finally, one must name the Association for the Protection of the Middle Class, founded in 1908 (Le Béguec 1993). Behind the 1899 taxpayers League's spiritual daughter, we do find Maurice Colrat, a lawyer and publicist, very popular at the end of the 1900s; Jacques Quantin, publicist as well and former disciple of Henri Barboux and Eugène Motte; finally, Charles Lamy, business owner and president of the Limoges Chamber of commerce. The association's liberal propaganda was rapidly established, especially since in 1910 it became endowed with a central research and tax protection comity, spreading information about the risks of "tax inquisition". Work was made easier through the association's diverse ramifications, which benefitted from the support of Federation of French manufacturers and merchants and, through this process, of 24 Chambers of commerce in the entire country. Its networks even reached moderate political environments, such as the Republican Federation of the Democratic Republican Alliance (A.N. Ministère de l'Intérieur. Direction de la Sûreté générale, "dossiers Panthéon", F7 15930 2). Far from being exhausted but then maybe more civil, liberalism as a political culture kept expanding.

On May 30th 1912, the Paris Political Economy Society's 70th birthday was the opportunity to count the troops of "classical" liberalism, since it welcomed representatives from every major political economy society, from France and all over the world, among which the influent London Cobden Club. We observe that no leading moderate or radical elected members was to be seen, a sign that "classical" liberalism became progressively isolated from the political sphere. Yet once again, it would be wrong to see in this process an elimination of the influence of political economy. On the one hand since economic liberalism was spread among a large part of the political body, and survived comfortably under the laws of the Third Republic: there were still very few social laws in France before World War I, even if their number increased after 1906, during a more troubled social context. On the other hand, because at a civil scale, liberalism progressively imposed itself as a fairly common habitus, a value and behavior system largely emanating from electoral and partisan issues. This is the true matrix of liberalism.

Conclusion

"Classical" liberalism can be defined – regarding its very origins – as a society project. In France, by drawing inspiration from several historical influences, its incarnation can be found in the way political economy was created in the middle of the 19th century. Its proposition implies applying, within the country, a form of "integral liberalism" (Garrigues 1997, 30) extended to politics, economy, social relations and cultural norms, through three essential cornerstones: freedom and individual initiative, encouraged and chosen in every occasion; pluralism, perceived as a necessary protection against every form of monism, either despotic or democratic; finally, balance, concerning political stability or social conservatism. Liberals' persistent practices are, unsurprisingly, in accordance with their ideas: their yearning for themes connected with their functions within society, such as

journalism, law, and of course economy, as well as a social behavior lapsing toward the maintenance of sociability networks, metapolitical work, and a cult of expertise. At the junction between these different themes, free trade appears as a founding and identity element, since it gathers them at the service of a simple yet essential goal: the preservation of the capitalist model.

In this perspective, it is hard to see the Long Depression and the development of the protectionist cause as absolute failures for liberals. As irrefutable symbols of the fall of political economy's influence on political environments, these events never prevent liberal ideas from keeping a steady place with economic spheres, or liberals themselves from organizing – including politically – in order to adapt to these new circumstances. Social economy, developed at the end of the 19th century as an attempt to fight pauperism through mutual and cooperative associations, would be another topic to develop (Gueslin 1998, 27). It is indeed the authentic proof that a part of the “classical” liberals tried and chose to “adapt”, by finally considering new subjects, but they were also forced to do so as they witnessed the shortcomings of the “laissez-faire” doctrine, encouraging the emergence of new political opponents, especially within the working class.

During this specific period, a pacifist political project based on freedom of trade appeared at a distance, undermined by the emergence of national and colonial tensions, but above all the French liberals' inability to build a political party that could be strong and influent enough in its main ideas – openly proclaimed – like the British Liberal party managed to do. In France, the *Fédération républicaine* and the *Alliance républicaine démocratique* were probably the closest to the definition of a liberal party. The latter even constantly appointed ministers in various cabinets at the beginning of the 20th century, thus qualifying the idea of relegation of liberal ideas in this country. Yet, this organization never acknowledged free-trade as a central dogma, or any anglophile affiliation.

As for the rest, liberalism is still very much alive. Indeed, it imposed itself as an explicative and influent theory, central to the question of economic phenomena, a dimension that the political economy school always aspired to have. It spreads in every environment, and finds in Marxism its only opponent, which it actively fights and openly satirizes as its arch enemy. Liberalism then persists as a powerful network of associative and economic lobbying, of which the representative organizations are not always the most visible, but know how to organize when it becomes necessary, for instance when they wanted the implementation of an income tax, or to postpone laws concerning working pensions or the eight-hour workday (Fraboulet & Richard 2010)¹¹.

It is clear that the oncoming era, from WWI to the 1970s, will confirm the decline of “classical” liberalism in terms of influence public policies. But again, one should be aware of lobbying activities as well as the impact of liberalism on civil behaviors in order to observe permanent elements. New organizations such the Union of

¹¹ This was indeed the case for the Union of mining and metalworking industries, which was busy trying to change or even impede social bills.

economic interests, which was founded in 1910 but began to be truly active in 1919, or the French Resurgence (Redressement Français), founded in 1925, of which the goal was to fund political parties that were hostile toward statism, demonstrate the vitality of the liberal ideas back in those days (Badel 1999, 470). In addition, one should not forget that in 1938, in Paris, the Walter Lippman colloquium took place, with the ambition to revive liberalism: neoliberalism did develop during the interwar period. On a larger scale of time, one should notice a last French paradox toward liberalism: frequently applied until the Fifth Republic, by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Emmanuel Macron, François Mitterrand or François Hollande, it seems that it was never self-sufficient as a political project for the first ones, and it was seldom named and proclaimed by the second ones. Following a long historical tradition dating back to the French Revolution, one should always, in France, compromise with a society composed of strongly politicized middle-class landowners, a sign of a democratic culture heavily anchored and hardly receptive to an accepted, or even unrestrained form of liberalism.

Translated into English by Thibault Gallard (MSH Clermont-Ferrand, UAR 3550)

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Abstract

Why did “classical” liberalism – during its European golden age in the mid-19th century – never give birth, in France, to a political movement which could be influent enough to carry its whole society project? The environments of political economy, which were the authentic representatives of this wave, seemed to have had a hard time finding their place within a contentious context inherited from the French Revolution, but also fully investing in the game of democracy. As the defenders of free trade and limited state power, liberals also faced the increasing difficulty to see their ideas being questioned at the turn of the 20th century. It is thus necessary to go back to the very definition of French “classical” liberals, in order to better highlight their ambitions, their failures and their inherent practices, and better understand what constitute for them, and in many ways, their own identity.

Résumé

Pourquoi le libéralisme « classique », en plein âge d'or européen au cœur du XIX^{ème} siècle, n'a-t-il jamais accouché en France d'un mouvement politique

suffisamment influent pour porter l'ensemble de son projet de société ? Les milieux de l'économie politique, authentiques représentants de ce courant, semblent en effet avoir eu du mal à trouver leur place dans un contexte conflictuel hérité de la Révolution française, mais aussi à s'investir pleinement dans le jeu démocratique. Défenseurs du libre-échange et d'un État limité, les libéraux sont en outre face à la difficulté croissante de voir leurs idées remises en question au tournant du XXème siècle. Il convient donc d'en revenir à la définition même des libéraux « classiques » français, pour mieux mettre en lumière leurs ambitions, leurs échecs et leurs pratiques intrinsèques, et ainsi comprendre davantage ce qui constitue à bien des égards pour eux une identité propre.