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Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre, and Christine Théré, eds. *Le cercle de Gournay, Savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, INED, 2011. 29€ (pb). ISBN 978-2733-210390.

Review by Liana Vardi, University at Buffalo, SUNY.

When I was first asked to review this volume, I turned it down. Reviewing a collection of essays is much more time-consuming than reviewing a single-authored book, and it is hard to do justice to all the contributors. When approached again a year later, I yielded, figuring that I would learn useful things about French administration. For what I knew about Jacques Vincent, Marquis de Gournay (1712-1759) was that he had influenced his entourage in the Bureau du Commerce during his brief career there (1751-59), advocating freedom of production and trade, famously summarized as “laissez faire.” From Turgot’s well-known *éloge*, I also knew that Gournay himself had been a *négociant*, that he encouraged translation of English treatises on trade, and promoted freewheeling discussion on commercial affairs.[1] Turgot undeniably used the *éloge* to promote his own economic agenda as the quotations that follow make plain. Turgot nonetheless remains, as the French say, *incontournable*, since much of what we know about Gournay’s ideas comes from him:

“Il savait enfin que depuis un siècle toutes les personnes éclairées, soit en Hollande, soit en Angleterre, regardaient ces abus comme des restes de la barbarie gothique et de la faiblesse de tous les gouvernements, qui n’avaient ni connu l’importance de la liberté publique, ni su la protéger des invasions de l’esprit monopoleur et de l’intérêt particulier.”

“Il trouvait impossible que dans le commerce abandonné à lui-même l’intérêt particulier ne concourût pas avec l’intérêt général.”

“M. de Gournay en concluait que le seul but que dût se proposer l’administration était, 1° de rendre à toutes les branches du commerce cette liberté précieuse que les préjugés des siècles d’ignorance, la facilité du gouvernement à se prêter à des intérêts particuliers, le désir d’une perfection mal entendue, leur ont fait perdre ; 2° de faciliter le travail à tous les membres de l’État, afin d’exciter la plus grande concurrence dans la vente, d’où résulteront nécessairement la plus grande perfection dans la fabrication et le prix le plus avantageux à l’acheteur ; 3° de donner en même temps à celui-ci le plus grand nombre de concurrents possibles, en ouvrant au vendeur tous les débouchés de sa denrée, seul moyen d’assurer au travail sa récompense, et de perpétuer la production, qui n’a d’autre objet que cette récompense.”

The essays gathered in the present volume come from a 2004 conference. Under the umbrella of the “Gournay circle,” the contributors proposed different readings of the new “science of commerce” that Gournay was advocating (somewhat in the shadows), in contrast to the better-known Physiocrats who proposed a “new science of economics” based on agrarian productivity. The decision to do “Gournay without Gournay” renders the collection perplexing. Discourses on commerce produced in the 1750s by men who were somehow connected to the energetic inspector are its one point of convergence.[2] As a consequence, Loïc Charles’s (re)construction of Gournay’s network is pivotal. Some of Gournay’s protégés, such as Plumard de Dangeul, were directly indebted to him for mentorship of their work.

Others such as Malesherbes were merely positively inclined toward publications on commerce.[3] There were therefore “elective affinities” as well as patronage networks, the latter also enabled by Gournay’s alliance with the Bureau’s powerful director, Daniel Trudaine.

Because the concept of a group influenced by Gournay’s ideas is not new, the contributors were encouraged to tackle the lesser-known among his followers. Turgot is left out, despite his status as Gournay’s most famous acolyte. Those seemingly condemned to remain “historical footnotes” are rescued from neglect, especially Butel du Mont and Plumard de Dangeul. The abbé Coyer cannot be counted among the forgotten, given the impressive recent literature on *La noblesse commerçante*. I doubt that Véron de Forbonnais is as obscure as Charles suggests in the Introduction (p.18). He is surely known for his analyses of French finances and commerce by those whose eyes do not glaze over at the mention of political economy, and as a maverick who did not adhere to the economic liberalism that the Gournay group as a whole promoted. He is also, from my perspective, the most intelligent and well-informed critic of the Physiocrats. Much is made of Forbonnais in this volume (five articles discuss him in detail). In fact, one would have welcomed a volume devoted to Forbonnais’s thought and influence that did not manacle him to Gournay. Besides Turgot, other omissions include the abbé Morellet, who turned himself into the guru of the science of commerce (albeit an ineffective one) and Etienne de Silhouette, who makes as fleeting an appearance in this collection as he did at the Control general in 1759.

One of the problems the organizers had to face was that Gournay wrote little and that his influence lay mainly within his administrative department. After praising the inspector’s modesty and broad-mindedness, Turgot added in his *éloge*: “Plein de ses principes salutaires et féconds, il les appliquait à chaque matière avec une extrême facilité. Uniquement occupé de persuader une idée utile, il ne croyait pas être auteur. Ne s’attachant point à ce qu’il avait écrit, il l’abandonnait sans réserve à tous ceux qui voulaient s’instruire ou écrire sur ces matières, et le plus souvent ne gardait pas même de copies de ce qu’il avait fait.” But he did leave behind a series of reports and commentaries,[4] which are alluded to from time to time, but never brought fully to the fore, except in Simone Meyssonnier’s informative article on the Gournay papers at the Saint-Brieuc archives.[5]

The history of ideas typically relies on the analysis of some seminal text, and in the case of fertile authors, on the little brothers and sisters generated by the same brilliant mind. The lack of a core text from Gournay could have been balanced by an examination of his administrative influence. If Gournay was not doctrinaire like the Physiocratic sect, he did encourage concrete steps to dismantle the state’s regulations over trade and industry. It would have been useful to explore this. Instead, the collection provides a tribute to Gournay’s esteem for commerce and *négociants* through articles on linguistic practices: Marie-France Piguet on the term “commerçant;” Philippe Steiner on “commerce;” Frédéric Lefebvre on “honnêteté;” and Donnatienne Duflos de Saint-Amand on “intérêt” (self-interest), each revealing the changing acceptance of the concept or term. Catherine Larrère compares Montesquieu, Plumard de Dangeul, and Forbonnais on the form of government best suited to promote economic welfare, showing that for Gournay, good economic ideas could be applied under any system of government. While he favored royal absolutism, Dangeul and Montesquieu did not.

Christine Théré and Jean-Marc Rohrbasser analyze how the term “population” (after disappearing from French vocabulary) returned in the 1750s to refer to the demographic phenomenon rather than its earlier meaning of “peopling” (as in colonies), by way of Spain, rather than England. Forbonnais, Plumard de Dangeul, and abbé Coyer still used the older meaning and it was only with the Marquis de Mirabeau’s *L’ami des hommes ou traité de la population* (1756-1757) that population as the “multiplication of the inhabitants” gained wide currency (p. 155). Therefore, what we mean by “population” did not come out of the Gournay group, but rather from the soon-to-be Physiocratic marquis. This article exemplifies the problems I have with the collection. This information that Spain rather than England served as intermediary is interesting, but we are not told why it might also be important; never mind

what this might have to do with Gournay. When Christine Théré examines how Monchrestien and Cantillon understood “population” differently (in a different collection of essays), she makes “why this matters” explicit.[6] The volume on Monchrestien and Cantillon is much more focused than the present one on Gournay (and therefore more useful) because its very purpose is to probe the context of two “foundational” economic texts,” written a century apart. The contributors to the collection make methodology central to their enquiries. They worry about the specific historical context that gave rise to Monchrestien and Cantillon’s writings and ponder how best to avoid anachronisms. The common set of questions grant coherence to the enterprise. Such a guiding principle is lacking for the Gournay circle, and this is explained (or excused) as a product of Gournay’s broad-mindedness.

For Paul Cheney, the Gournay Circle (including Turgot here) shared a new perspective on commerce by treating it historically. Highly influenced by Montesquieu’s reflections on the role of geography and the historical variation of practices, their most interesting contributions concerned colonial trade. Butel du Mont praised Britain’s commercial successes and their colonial management. He touted the freedom granted the colonies through their assemblies, and condemned the metropole’s Navigation Acts which, although periodically adjusted, failed to respond in time to colonial business concerns. Forbonnais was equally interested in colonial trade and offered a typology of colonial arrangements since ancient times whose modern adjustments were carefully investigated and granted more credence. While the one approved and the other contested Montesquieu’s analyses, Montesquieu is presented in this article as an important source for the Gournay circle. It is he who provided the framework for theorizing state intervention and freedom. Thus he helped Forbonnais consider how the mother country might reap the best returns from its colonies without driving them to independence, and how to balance the benefits of foreign as opposed to internal trade. Cheney’s article, the last in the collection, thus proposes a way to bring together theory and practice, exposing the range of options that nations might follow vis à vis their colonial holdings. Even if they disagreed on the value of colonies, the members of the Gournay circle adopted similar methodologies.

By this final essay, Gournay has clearly become marginal to the “group’s” intellectual development. And although Cheney has addressed French commercial policy elsewhere, bringing it out explicitly here would have been helpful.[7] Practice is alluded to but not enough, and it is administrative practice that Gournay was most eager to influence. In my favorite essay in the volume, David K. Smith describes the interaction of administrators and merchant communities at the Bureau of Commerce between 1700 and 1730. He shows how administrators negotiated the conflicting interests on which they were asked to rule, and how merchant communities learned to shift their discourse to persuade the government (and the public) that their interests and those of the state were one and the same. We are, in effect, at the heart of the project that Gournay would advance: the intersection of mercantile interests and government policy.

It is a shame that this theme was not pursued. Rather than focusing on the discourses of *some* of Gournay’s followers, it would have been most useful to describe the practices of the Bureau and Inspection of Commerce after 1730, the central role played by the Trudaines, father and son, and of Turgot, in carrying out Gournay’s vision of reform.[8] They were behind the growing support of free trade in grains within the royal administration (which the Physiocrats also supported). Although Gournay’s flexibility is asserted throughout—and compared favourably to Physiocrat rigidity—Gournay himself remains the *grand absent* from this collection. If we do not need to challenge the longstanding belief in the existence of a “Gournay circle,” we come out without a clear sense of what *he* stood for, even if we gain some insights into some of his acolytes.

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## NOTES

[1] Conveniently found at [http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Éloge\\_de\\_Vincent\\_de\\_Gournay](http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Éloge_de_Vincent_de_Gournay). All of the quotations from Turgot in this review can be found in this online version of the *Eloge*.

[2] Those who cannot figure out Gournay's role might look at Arnault Skornicki's *L'économiste, la cour et la patrie* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2011) whose first three chapters offer an overview of the ideas associated with the science of commerce, based on recent works.

[3] See Julian Swann's article on Malesherbes which examines the Remonstrances of the cour des aides that he penned, where he criticized «bureaucratic and ministerial tyranny, » making him less inclined to trust in Enlightened despotism than Gournay: « Malesherbes et la critique parlementaire du despotisme, de la bureaucratie et de la monarchie administrative », in Frédéric Lefebvre, Loïc Charles et Christine Théré, eds., *Le cercle de Vincent de Gournay: Savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris : Institut Nationale d'Études Démographiques, Paris, 2011), pp. 111-29.

[4] Published by Takumi Tsuda. See, for example, *Mémoires et lettres de Vincent de Gournay* (Tokyo : Kinokuniya, 1963).

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[5] The holdings are detailed in an Appendix, followed by several previously unpublished reports, presented by Christine Théré.

[6] « Connaître le nombre des hommes chez Montchrestien et Cantillon. Le dénombrement, l'arithmétique politique et les principes du peuplement, » in Alain Guéry, ed., *Montchrestien et Cantillon. Le commerce et l'émergence d'une pensée économique* (Lyon, ENS Editions, 2011), 215-57.

[7] For a fuller analysis on how this relates to French commercial policy, see Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce. Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[8] The role of the administration in the running of the state is excellently treated in Marie-Laure Legay's *La banqueroute de l'état royal. La gestion des finances publiques de Colbert à la Révolution française* (Paris : Editions EHESS, 2011).

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