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Francis Démier, *La nation, frontière du libéralisme: Libre-échangistes et protectionnistes français, 1786-1914*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2022. 464 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €26.00 (pb). ISBN 9782271132048.

Review by Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, California Institute of Technology.

In *La nation, frontière du libéralisme*, Démier tells the story of French tariff policy from the Revolution to the eve of World War I. With respect to international trade, the book is articulated around three moments of particular significance. The first occurred during the early days of the Restoration. Then the government contemplated eliminating the high tariffs and prohibitions put in place by the usurper. Faced with elite hostility the effort died stillborn. The second involves the progressive reduction of tariffs culminating with the Cobden Chevalier Treaty in 1860. The third moment is the return to protection with the Meline Tariff of 1892. Yet Démier recognizes that in a country like France, where under the Old Regime, internal barriers to trade were rife, there was a first moment of trade liberalization, with the creation of the national market.

Démier covers the positions and doings of three different and often overlapping groups. To start, one group consisted of intellectuals who agitated for and against a liberalization of what everyone at the time understood to be France's isolationist policy. In particular, Démier surveys in detail the writings of political economists, trying to find a line other than the trade liberalism of Smith and Ricardo. The second group was government officials and politicians. They were most often rich and, if not investors themselves in important enterprises, linked by family ties to the captains of industry. Many also are ardent participants in the written debate about the economy and history. The last group comprises those I will call anachronistically interest groups and, until the 1880s, this was largely limited to entrepreneurs and capitalists. Overwhelmingly this was a debate among elites and it was exclusively so until the 1880s, when mass electoral issues began to have some influence on policy. The groups were never unified, as some were for free trade and some against. Some protagonists were sometimes in favor of tariffs and, at other times, opposed. Indeed, as Démier often points out, many had other priorities. Among those other priorities on the part of the intellectuals, we can count catering to the powerful, desire for advancement, and fear of social revolution. For the politicians, international relations and domestic political imperatives loomed large. The interest groups were more coherent, with the wine industry, Marseille, and Parisian luxury trades firmly in the free trade camp, and the textile, wheat, sugar, coal, and iron sectors firmly in the protectionist camp.

The book is organized in four sections. The first section runs from 1786 to 1830 and deals quickly with the impact of the Revolution's creation of the national market, which for a time acted as a

substitute for the international market. Faced with the international conflict that began in 1792, the revolutionaries had to abrogate the last trade treaty of Louis XVI. Thus began more than a half-century of severe protectionism. Under the Restoration, a coalition of protectionist interests came together to institutionalize both high tariffs and outright import prohibitions, a policy mix that most associated, not with the Bourbons, but with their nemesis, Napoleon. Démier makes it clear that this coalition was a very stable collection of private interests rather than any economic or social plan. This is hardly surprising given how restrictive the Restoration had made political participation.

The second section deals with the July Monarchy. Unlike the cousins who preceded him, Louis-Philippe was an economic liberal, who by all accounts should have wanted to liberalize trade, yet in his eighteen years on the throne, no moment came when a push to reduce trade barriers systematically could get going. The coalition of industrialists who feared English imports and wheat farmers who feared a flood of cheap grain from the Black Sea was too much for the Crown to challenge. Much is made of the fact that both Thiers and Guizot were opposed to free trade. By 1840, when Guizot assumed the leadership of the government, nothing could be done as he had rallied to the status quo. Given the enormous importance of Napoleon's generals in the many governments of Louis-Philippe, it is surprising that so little is made of their positions about commerce and international relations.

The third section focuses on the Second Republic and the Second Empire. Its particular interest was the long march to the Cobden Chevalier Treaty. It seems that the Emperor was a long-standing free trader who bided his time through most of the 1850s, building his strength before moving forward, although little in fact surfaces of Napoleon III's personal efforts or views. In fact, the whole process by which the Cobden Chevalier Treaty was ratified seems to have been designed to allow Napoleon to back out at any time without political costs. This explains the largely private, rather than public, nature of the negotiations. When the terms emerged and the Emperor committed to the treaty, France's ratification was inevitable. Indeed, when setting up the Empire, Napoleon III had reserved for himself the right to make trade agreements. The treaty was, in fact, ratified by both houses of the French parliament in a process that smacked more of a loyalty test than a democratic review. The section runs long on the positions of intellectuals, in particular political economists, something that seems to make sense given that Michel Chevalier was an academic whom Napoleon III entrusted with creating the draft of the treaty.

The last section of the book deals with trade policy in the half-century before World War I and the return of protective tariffs. Three main themes come to light. First, in a variation from the previous section, political imperative no longer came just from elite landed and industrial interests. The rise of competitive elections and universal male suffrage empowered a new interest: small-scale agriculture. Given the size and fragmentation of France's rural sector, small-scale farmers were pivotal and Méline, who was both attuned to the interest of the protectionist lobby and to electoral realities, recognized the fact and acted on it. Démier also points out that small-scale farmers were a conditional pillar of the republic (they had also voted for Napoleon III), so the stakes of tariff policy were larger than just the price of bread or wine. In a way, the situation after 1870 is easier to understand than what came before it, because democratic politics had a certain transparency that the prior regimes lacked. Although much has been made of the return of protection in the literature and by Démier, that should not be overstated because, combined with the decline in transport costs, the effective rate of protection (that Démier does not compute) was almost surely far lower than it had been in the 1850s.

The book left me wanting more for a variety of reasons, that I lay out below. This starts with a failure to evaluate the impact of intellectuals. To think that intellectuals have influence on outcomes may be something academics find easy to accept for reason of self-satisfaction—maybe we all want to be someone’s “Chicago boys.” Yet, intellectuals are more often used by the powerful who select those voices congruent with their goals. Their influence is likely to be overrated. But the book does little to evaluate the importance of their discourse. Similarly, when intellectuals and politicians write, it is purposeful, and truth-telling is only one of many possible purposes. Will the writer express his or her views or write something he or she thinks will convince the reader to do what he or she wants? The same is true for interest groups, whose positions may be far more extreme than economic reality warrants because that suits the political moment. Yet, the book shies away from any source criticism. In fact, it is as if the author had been adopted by the subject at hand. Instead, *La nation, frontière du libéralisme* offers a narrative of French trade politics as written about the French for largely French audiences. It surveys the writing of a small crowd but, over hundred years, that crowd adds up to a lot of people. The very volume of people to whom we are introduced is astounding. It is no surprise that a very large fraction of the text is devoted to telling the reader who was who and not to advancing the argument or the narrative. In fact, the very number of individuals makes it impossible to understand the role of most of the actors who appear. Those with starring roles, like Guizot, Chevalier, or Méline, are easier to follow but the analysis of their roles is neither novel nor detailed.

Second, the book entirely lacks a conclusion and mostly fails to draw lessons from the French historical experience. This is unfortunate because a longer-term view would help all of us understand that the conditions for a broad expansion of free trade are complex and historically contingent. Trade politics are complex even though the direct impact of a change in trade policy on the individual pocketbook (the private interests) are often easy to grasp in a simple Ricardian model. Some sectors will expand and others contract (hurting some workers, as well as some capital). What is far more elusive are the long-term distribution of the gains. Will the workers in the declining sector quickly find new jobs in other parts of the economy?

Ideological expression of support for free trade is also complex and often contradictory. For decades now, Europeans and Americans alike have lamented the loss of industrial jobs to the rest of the world. At the same time, as consumers, they have shown a massive preference for the cheaper foreign goods to those produced at home. It may be fashionable to be against free trade, but the consumer buys foreign and wants it cheap. Such behavioral inconsistencies may seem to have been impossible for the broad public in the nineteenth century. But if textile manufacturers insisted on protection, it is because large swaths of the population would have bought cheaper Manchester fabrics if the option were available. Among the elites who spearheaded international capital flows, dishonesty was even worse: they could enjoy the added profits from aging plants at home at the same time as the returns from colonial and international investments.

Free trade is also historically contingent for two reasons, one prosaic and the other political. The prosaic issue is transport costs. Démier alludes to this briefly in the last section of the book, but the collapse of transport costs is fundamental to any understanding of the global economy in the last 250 years. Despite a large literature in economic history dealing with the transport Revolution, it is banished to a single section late in the book. Transport costs are also fundamental to understanding the completion of the national market in France. The country was

not blessed with a naturally effective transport system. When canals and railroads were built in the nineteenth century, they implied a wholesale reorganization of the economy--no vineyards were needed around Paris any more, for instance. Interestingly enough, in the U.S. and France the commitment to the national market came before transport costs had fallen enough to create fierce competition between regions.

The political issue is that trade is war by other means, and international politics are important. Consider just one counterfactual: if, at Belgian independence in 1830, the French had quickly signed a customs union with the new kingdom, it would have helped cement their control of the west bank of the Rhine. The Belgian coalfields would have been within the French national market and efforts of the charcoal-based iron masters to protect themselves from competition would have been for naught. While this idea is a bit far-fetched, it failed in part because of international opposition to bringing Belgium too closely into the French orbit (something the Belgians also may not have been too keen on). The book would have benefited from a greater sensitivity to international politics. Trade is always a tango. Short of unilateral tariff reductions, which France never contemplated, all other moves either require reciprocity or invite retaliation. That locates part of the history of French trade in London, Belgium and, of course, Berlin. In the end, I found the book to have too much detail and not enough purpose, and I am not sure I would recommend it to anyone except those interested in French trade politics.

Jean-Laurent Rosenthal
California Institute of Technology
rosentha@caltech.edu

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