
H-France Review Vol. 23 (November 2023), No. 189

François Etner, *Catholiques et économistes: Leurs controverses depuis la Révolution*. Bibliothèque de l'économiste, no. 46. Edited by André Tiran. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022. 453 pp. Bibliography and index. €48.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406129479.

Review by Charly Coleman, Columbia University.

In 1980, weeks before he strangled his wife, the sociologist Hélène Rytmann-Légotien, while in the throes of a psychotic break, the Marxist political philosopher Louis Althusser gave an exceptionally unguarded interview to Italian television. Sitting on a rooftop in Rome, with church domes dotting the skyline, Althusser waxed religious. “I became communist because I was Catholic,” he avowed. Despite his commitment to formulating a Marxist science on structuralist grounds, he insisted that “I remained a Catholic, that is, an internationalist universalist. I thought that inside the Communist Party there were more adequate means to realize universal fraternity.”[1]

François Etner’s ambitious if at times frustrating book passes in silence over this enigmatic profession of crypto-Catholic faith. The omission is symptomatic insofar as it points to both the possibilities and limitations of the author’s schema. By narrating “les jugements catholiques sur la science économique et les réponses qu’ils ont suscitées du côté des économistes” (p. 9), he aims to uncover “la part spécifique catholique des débats économiques contemporains” (p. 426). This influence is one of absence as much as presence, since among the premises of Etner’s study is that economic thought has held less sway in France than in the anglophone world. His approach is explicitly prosopographical as well as historical. As he argues, the dialogues between Catholics and economists, along with the intermural debates among members of both parties, gave rise to a surprisingly resilient, decidedly corporatist position between classical liberalism and *marxisant* socialism that remained a touchstone in France for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As we shall see, however, the devil is in the details. Etner is the first to admit that the appellation “catholique” is as “vague, réductive, [et] trompeuse” (p. 426) as it is indispensable. The problem of who and what counts as Catholic, and by which measure, looms throughout the book. This reader was reminded of Jonathan Israel’s monumental—and monumentally flawed—study of the Enlightenment, which applied an impossible standard of ideological purity to divide the *philosophes* into moderately religious and radically atheistic camps.[2] In a similar manner, Etner tends to fall back on a series of ideal types organized into binaries that preclude a careful analysis of his subjects’ theological and devotional commitments. Thus, much of the narrative turns on the distinction between Catholics who were “*relativists*,” that is, willing to bracket their faith,

versus those who were “*absolutistes*” (p. 9, emphasis in original) or “intransigeants” (p. 18). It was the latter who established the terms of the debate, thereby auguring a gradual divorce of Catholic thought and political economy over the course of the nineteenth century. Etner remains faithful to their uncompromising vision and, in so doing, allows their historical blind spots to become his own. In particular, he seems entirely unmoved by the wealth of recent research that interrogates the ways in which ideas and institutions long coded as quintessentially secular, including the economy itself, in fact emerged out of deep and abiding religious antecedents.[3]

Despite persistent questions of nomenclature, the book unfolds over sixteen chapters that run from the new regime established in 1789 down to the period of the Fourth and Fifth Republics. The narrative begins *in medias res*, with the outbreak of the French Revolution. Not unlike Darrin McMahon, who identified an “anti-*philosophe* discourse” at the heart of counterrevolutionary convictions that set an agenda for the modern political Right, Etner regards the Revolution as an unavoidable referent in subsequent debates.[4] A thinker’s views on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the laissez-faire policies it seemed to underwrite, offered a telling glimpse into one’s orientation in economic thought. Absolutist Catholics lamented the new regime’s hostility to the Church and its commitment to “idéaux révolutionnaires, à la Raison, à la science, à l’idée du progrès” (p. 17). Liberal economists, for their part, were “*tous favorables à la Révolution*” (p. 21, emphasis in original). Catholics took heart after the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte’s empire and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, with Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre developing an anti-individualist critique of what they took as the psychologically alienating and morally corrosive tendencies of market society. On the other side, economic thinkers among the *Idéologues*, such as Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Jean-Baptiste Say, expounded upon Adam Smith’s views on the division of labor and free trade as well as Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism. Although liberal economists believed in the utility of religion, they rejected Catholic intolerance to confessional pluralism.

Catholics and economists alike elaborated philosophies of history to buttress their respective positions while leaving a middle ground for moderates. Partisans in both camps understood the Enlightenment and the Revolution as issuing from the Protestant Reformation but drew rather different conclusions from this genealogy. Whereas liberals looked forward to a future of progress, Bonald and Maistre valorized the medieval period as a time when social harmony prevailed over the interests of individuals. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, liberal Catholics such as Charles de Montalembert charted a third way. In his view, the Revolution might have been a tragedy, but it had not stooped to the satanic depths heralded by Maistre. Likewise, Alban de Villeneuve-Bargement, an absolutist Catholic who nonetheless engaged with economists of his time, joined Benjamin Constant in defending the ideals of 1789 against the excesses of the Terror. He also joined more radical thinkers such as Louis Blanqui in opposing a neophysiocratic “*école économique française*” (p. 64) to its English counterpart, complaining it placed productivity above human needs.

This preoccupation with popular welfare was writ large in nineteenth-century debates over the virtues of industrialization. Whereas liberal economists held that the modern economy followed from the progressive free market ideals enshrined in the Le Chapelier Law of 1791, Catholics took inspiration from the primacy of agriculture and the vitality of trade corporations under the *ancien régime*. As Etner points out, multiple strands of liberal thought flourished during the period, with some emphasizing political freedoms such as the liberty of thought and expression, while others defended the principle of non-intervention in the economic sphere. By the

Restoration, even convinced liberals like the Swiss thinker Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi began to express misgivings that the market offered inadequate protections to workers, thereby paving the way for Catholic criticisms. Montalembert joined his colleague Félicité de Lamennais in emphasizing freedom of the press and of education as a way of preserving a social and moral role for the Church.

This strategy dovetailed with the agenda of social Catholics who focused more pointedly on economic matters. As Etner notes, workers' misery had long been the "affaire exclusive de l'Église" (p. 99), which prescribed self-restraint for the poor and liberality for the rich. Such demands ran up against Thomas Malthus's arguments in his *Essay on Population* (1798) that poor relief only encouraged unsustainable demographic growth and thus further suffering. Catholics rejected Malthusianism as a contravention not only against the command of real charity, but also against the Church's acceptance of procreative sex within marriage, whereas liberal economists fell back on more abstract proposals. With growing industrialization, religious observers found common cause with socialists, utopian and otherwise, in denouncing pauperism and in their calls for cooperative action. Tellingly, the disciples of Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon hailed Jesus as a precursor, which outraged the devout. The Revolution of 1848 foreclosed any potential reconciliation, and henceforth, committed Catholics would staunchly oppose socialism as sharing the same corrupting materialism as their liberal counterparts.

The Second Empire witnessed a relative thaw in relations between Catholics and liberal economists, even as the moderate faith championed by Montalembert fell into abeyance after the victory of the Falloux Laws (1850), which guaranteed freedom of clerical instruction. Sincere Catholics Frédéric Bastiat and Prosper-Honoré Corbière found that they shared with trained economists a certain historical optimism as well as similar commitments to moral education and social justice. However, fault lines emerged over the rectitude of contraception, which Catholics typically opposed, and the right to name one's heirs, which economists embraced over the tradition of primogeniture.

The ideological terrain shifted once again with the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870. The plight of workers remained a central concern, but Catholics and liberal economists increasingly disagreed over strategies to address it. In particular, Catholics adopted the corporation as an "idéal mobilisateur" that demarcated a "troisième voie chrétienne" (p. 255) between classical liberalism, with its defense of a free market in labor, and revolutionary socialism, which demanded intervention by the state. In contrast, the economic platform of laissez-faire drew both praise and ire as a bastion of "individualisme" (p. 262, emphasis in original). René de La Tour du Pin joined fellow Catholics in blaming unchecked economic liberty, especially in the financial sphere, for mass immiseration. He also led the charge in calling for a revival of corporations in response to the Social Question. Unlike *ancien régime* precedents, these new institutions would be tailored to large-scale industrial enterprises, with the aim of "dépasser l'opposition entre le capital et le travail, au nom d'une même fraternité chrétienne" (p. 288). Neocorporatist doctrines also found support in *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical of 1891, while liberal Catholics fell silent in the wake of the Paris Commune.

The final chapters on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries tend to eschew in-depth analysis in favor of broader, at times meandering, overviews. For instance, Etner privileges the writings of professional academics over the demands expressed by workers themselves, despite William Sewell's claim that the nineteenth-century labor movement grew out of an articulation

of *ancien régime* corporatism and the Enlightenment discourse of universalism.[5] Another section, on the Jewish Question, tells the familiar story of Catholic antisemitism that only grew more virulent during the Dreyfus Affair, whereas self-professed liberals upheld the Enlightenment ideal of regeneration, the slippages of which have been carefully examined by Alyssa Sepinwall in her study of Henri Grégoire.[6] Corporatism and antisemitism would merge in terrifying ways under the Vichy regime, although Etner is at pains to qualify the association by noting that Philippe Pétain's platform gave an outsized role to the state.

Under the restored republican regime, "humanisme" became the watchword for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In keeping with the book's focus, Etner's narrative features discussions of Catholic economists such as François Perroux and Daniel Villey, both of whom demonstrated, for different reasons, the divergence of religion and liberalism. The somewhat belated embrace by French economists of Anglo-Saxon methods that effectively mathematicized the discipline have deepened the divide between Catholicism and the social sciences. Nonetheless, Etner suggests that Catholic humanists such as Louis-Joseph Lebret contributed to anticapitalist and anticolonial strains in French political culture and that the "idée corporatiste" (p. 416) endures in the autogestion movement on the Left.

In the postwar period, Etner notes, "il devint difficile de préciser les relations entre catholiques et économistes" (p. 403). Matters are not helped by the author's seeming unwillingness to engage with the cutting-edge research recently published by anglophone historians of France, work that has revealed distinctly Catholic renderings of modernity. For instance, had he addressed Samuel Moyn's study of the role of personalism in underwriting Christian human rights, he might have weighed in on the question of whether the Church's acceptance of a version of individualism truly marked a break with doctrinal tradition.[7] Similarly, Brenna Moore has explored the trope of Catholic friendship in ways that would add welcome nuance and human depth to Etner's claims about the persistence of corporatism.[8] James Chappel and Sarah Shortall each offer compelling accounts of how, in the face of challenges posed by secular liberalism and twentieth-century totalitarianisms, the Church charted both a spiritual and political course for believers as religion became ever more sequestered from the official public sphere.[9]

One is tempted to add that Etner's reliance on binaries—absolute versus relative Catholics, liberal versus Catholic, individualism versus corporatism, and so on—raises doubts about his analyses of preceding periods as well. To take examples from my own work, early modern theologians in France found themselves on both sides of the question of whether the self could be said to own its ideas, actions, and material belongings. Orthodox figures such as Jacques Bénigne Bossuet asserted the individual self's possessive attachment to things and moral accountability before God against the claims of mystics like Jeanne-Marie Guyon and François de Fénelon, both of whom valorized dispossessive states of spiritual abandon in which the soul renounced all goods.[10] The articulation of the theological and the economic spheres was not limited to debates over personhood and property. Indeed, some of the most influential French economic thinkers in the liberal tradition, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot among them, trained for a career in the Church. Before the French Revolution, theologians were at the forefront of thinking about wealth in its myriad forms, from the celestial treasures dispensed by the Church to the agricultural fruits of the earth.[11]

In fairness, Etner's book only starts with the postrevolutionary period, and it generally avoids the deep engagement with theological sources that distinguishes the work of Moyn, Moore,

Chappel, and Shortall. These interpretive decisions make sense given the author's parameters, which call for concentrating on the economic writings of Catholic thinkers. Even so, it is worth wondering whether Etner might have narrated his story in different terms by considering the persistence of themes I associate with "economic theology," or the historical corpus that seeks to bridge the divide between spiritual and material riches. For instance, Etner rarely discusses monetary theory in any depth, citing a lack of interest on the part of Catholic commentators. Yet, as even Karl Marx recognized, the doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the body and blood of Christ could be generated ad infinitum, served as telling metaphor for interest-bearing capital.[12] Or, as Shortall has recently shown, Eucharistic theology deeply informed the ecclesiological vision of figures such as Henri de Lubac, who developed a mode of "counter-politics" that sought to transcend purely terrestrial institutions and ideals.[13]

On balance, Etner's approach seems best adapted to the nineteenth century, when the relatively rapid rate of regime change leaves one grateful for the traction that his oppositions provide. As the author himself notes, it proves less revelatory for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite this limitation, Etner has done impressive and important work in recovering the economic views of Catholic thinkers who exerted considerable influence in their own day but have been poorly served by disciplinary boundaries that too often separate avowedly religious figures from their more secular brethren.

NOTES

[1] "The Crisis of Marxism: An Interview with Louis Althusser," *Verso Books Blog*, July 11, 2017, accessed June 14, 2023, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3312-the-crisis-of-marxism-an-interview-with-louis-althusser>. On Althusser's Catholic formation and preoccupations, see also Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*, eds. Oliver Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey (New York: The New Press, 1992), pp. 91-97, and Ronald Boer, "Althusser's Catholic Marxism," *Rethinking Marxism* 19 (2007): 469-486.

[2] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[3] See, for instance, Laurence Dickey, "Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility in Mandeville's Social and Historical Theory," *Critical Review* 4 (1990): 387-431; Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); David Singh Grewal, "The Political Theology of Laissez-Faire: From Philia to Self-Love in Commercial Society," *Political Theology* 17 (2016): 417-433; and Charly Coleman, *The Spirit of French Capitalism: Economic Theology in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[4] Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 13.

[5] William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On religious influences, see especially pp. 179, 216, 239-242.

[6] Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 56-155.

[7] Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

[8] Brenna Moore, *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[9] James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), and Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021).

[10] Charly Coleman, *The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-Individualist History of the French Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[11] Coleman, *The Spirit of French Capitalism*.

[12] Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols. (New York: International, 1975-2005), v. 32, p. 494.

[13] Shortall, *Soldiers of God*, p. 8.

Charly Coleman
Columbia University
cc3472@columbia.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172