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Anthony Mergey, Michel Pertué and Jean-Paul Pollin, eds., *Guillaume-François Le Trosne: Itinéraire d'une figure intellectuelle orléanaise au siècle des Lumières*. Le Kremlin-Bicêtre: Éditions Mare & Martin, 2023. 316 pp. Bibliographic references. €33.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2849346792.

Review by Stephen Miller, The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

With the demise of the social interpretation of the French Revolution in the 1970s and 1980s, historians of the twenty-first century have reevaluated the social and economic origins of the Revolution by studying Physiocracy, the eighteenth-century school of economic thought, and asking new questions about the period. Why did the educated classes come to see “the economy” as crucial to the destiny of France? How accurately did the physiocrats depict the social and political relations of the period? How did landowners use the Physiocrats’ ideas to advance their political agendas? To what extent did the Physiocrats shape the thinking of the political class in 1789? [1] Anthony Mergey, Michel Pertué, and Jean-Paul Pollin show, in the introduction to this edited volume, that although historians have reexamined François Quesnay, Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, and other luminaries of Physiocracy, the only monograph on Guillaume-François Le Trosne dates from the beginning of the twentieth century with “conclusions désormais datées” (p. 14). [2] Yet, as the essays in this collection demonstrate, the study of Le Trosne provides insight into the economy, society, and royal justice and fiscal systems of late Old Regime France.

Gaël Rideau shows that the lack of documentation makes it impossible to write a comprehensive biography of Le Trosne. Rideau therefore proceeds sensibly to describe the social milieu, what one could call the *ancien régime* bourgeoisie of Orléans. Le Trosne’s father was a squire (*écuyer*) who owned the ennobling office of *secrétaire du roi* and more than one feudal domain. His mother hailed from a family of refiners (*raffineurs*), office holders, and members of the municipal council (*échevinat*). Le Trosne inherited his father’s office in the *présidial*, a secondary tribunal of diminishing authority relative to the Parlement of Paris. Members of the *présidial* sorely felt this situation as a crisis and petitioned the intendant in the mid-1760s to accord them jurisdiction over a greater number of cases and the right to join the nobility. Le Trosne carefully watched over his seigneurial rights, had them itemized in leases and enforced them in court, including the right to the ceremony of homage whereby his tenants dropped to their knees to pay him respect. As we will see, Le Trosne was a doctrinaire publicist of Quesnay’s concept of *laissez-faire*. In 1764, the people of Orléans contemptuously singled out Le Trosne in the marketplace as the author of their misery for his public support for free trade, including grain exports, during a time of dearth.

In an essay on Le Trosne's fiscal doctrine, Cédric Glineur explains Le Trosne's view that the monarchy arbitrarily burdened tenant farmers by obliging them to pay taxes on land rented from privileged proprietors. The problem, elaborated by Le Trosne in his major work--*De l'administration provinciale et de la réforme de l'Impôt*, published abroad in 1779--was that the monarchy had imposed each one of its fiscal levies for a specific purpose and that they had all become corrupted over time. The taxes did not bring in enough revenue. The crown wastefully distributed pensions to *grandees*. It thus had to borrow, and reimbursements weighed on public finances and taxpayers. The wealthy classes therefore preferred to loan to the state rather than invest in the economy. Le Trosne affirmed that the forced *corvée* labor required of rural inhabitants on the roads harmed agriculture by diverting people from productive employment and applying them to sterile work. He called for the suppression of seigneurial courts, tolls, *octrois*, *banalités*, and other impositions on the people. He argued that the nobility and the clergy should participate in administrative assemblies to distribute the tax burden, not as members of the privileged orders, but solely as proprietors. Le Trosne also argued, however, that the priest and seigneur should hold positions in parish assemblies by right. "On sent alors qu'il entend concilier la monarchie traditionnelle...avec la nécessaire adaptation des institutions à la modernité" (p. 127).

Jean-Paul Pollin describes the influence of the physiocrats on the discipline of economics. For Quesnay, the economy revolved around the net product, agricultural production minus annual investments and costs of production. The net product was the agricultural surplus reduced by what was necessary for the reproduction of the economic cycle. A debate in the Society of Agriculture of Orléans in 1776 and 1777 pitted the abbé de Condillac against the abbé Baudeau and Le Trosne. Condillac argued that the value of goods resulted from exchange, the confrontation of supply and demand. The utility and abundance of goods determined their value. Baudeau and Le Trosne countered that value preceded exchange because it stemmed from the costs of production. Baudeau and Le Trosne won the debate by establishing that the value of a commodity could not fall below what it cost to produce it. Pollin could have drawn attention to Turgot's application of this theory of value, several years earlier, to labor and his consequent postulate that agricultural productivity set the entire economy in motion. Turgot reasoned, in *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses*, that the value of labor followed from the cost of subsistence. When agricultural investment increased output and stabilized food prices at affordable levels, employers paid less in wages and had more capital to invest and create more employment and commodities. The population, paying stable food prices, had income to become a source of consumer demand.[3]

Jean-Daniel Boyer's essay on Le Trosne's economic theories shows that the physiocrat continued to write in favor of the liberty of commerce even in the face of criticisms after bad harvests in the 1760s. Le Trosne developed his arguments in a commentary on Quesnay's *Le Tableau économique*, distilling the master's *magnus opus* down to twenty-two principles with corollaries and recommendations for reforms published in the *Gazette du commerce*. Like other partisans of free commerce, Le Trosne argued that royal regulations did not prevent dearth because they discouraged farm investment and thus made future scarcity more likely. Regulations led to economic instability, impoverished the realm, and triggered social unrest. The twenty-two principles highlighted the centrality of agricultural production, which should amount to the highest level possible so as to increase consumption and investment funds and initiate a dynamic cycle of growing wealth. Free trade, Le Trosne emphasized, hinged upon competition among grain transporters (*voituriers*) to lower costs for proprietors and farmers. Critics charged that

allowing foreign vessels to transport grain from the ports would harm the shipping industry, especially the navy. National power, Le Trosne countered, depended on output from the land, or the net product, which permitted the nation to fund its shipping industry. The lowering of shipping costs through foreign competition would force French shipping to modernize and lower freight prices.

In another publication, *Lettres à un ami sur les avantages de la liberté du commerce des grains et le danger des prohibitions* (1768), Le Trosne made the case that when “le prix de l’Europe, considéré comme le bon prix” (p. 186) prevailed in the ports and frontiers, it diffused to the interior markets, so long as the costs of transportation and interior tolls diminished and grain circulated freely. Under such conditions agriculture would flourish. Broyer could have pointed out the fancifulness of this argument. Even after the Revolution eliminated internal tariffs, tolls and monopolies, France remained a mosaic of territories (*pays*) with their own standards of living and cultures. The inadequacy of the transportation infrastructure led to regional price differentials, which continued to allow merchants and producers to buy cheap and sell dear at the expense of the population and overall economy in the nineteenth century.[4]

Maxime Menuet and Patrick Villieu, authors of an analysis of Le Trosne’s monetary theory, show that the doctrinaire physiocrat did not understand the concept of savings. Like other disciples of Quesnay, Le Trosne ignored the role of money as a reserve of value, the goal of productive investment. Physiocrats believed that growing output and remunerative prices brought opulence. The storing of money, however, interrupted circulation and lowered the price of commodities. Savings thus amounted to sterility, which deprived agriculture of the riches needed for improvement. Government bonds and financiers, which attracted the savings of the landed classes, detracted from agricultural investment and economic effectiveness.

In an essay on Le Trosne’s writings about vagrancy and begging, Michel Pertué argues that the hallmark of his views was the focus on the countryside and the severity of the recommendations. Le Trosne did not perceive the tendency of the towns, led by conservative office holders, to drive the poor toward the countryside, whence the poor had originally fled for lack of subsistence. Rural hospitals and foundations hardly existed. Le Trosne embraced the traditional view that rural vagrancy resulted from laziness, libertinism, insubordination, and the avoidance of obligations. The laziness of some inhabitants diverted to their subsistence the funds needed for investment. Moreover, this laziness made workers more expensive for productive farmers. Le Trosne further argued that vagrants, generally celibate, hindered population growth. Although he wrote unremittingly in favor of free markets to raise prices, augment farm revenue, facilitate investment, and generate abundance, “pour Le Trosne, le plus grand obstacle qui gêne l’activité des grands propriétaires est le vagabondage” (p. 62). He compared vagrants to voracious insects and enemy troops. He saw only one means of resolving the “problem,” a life-sentence in the galleys with a branding (*flétrissure*) on the face of the offender.

Pertué recalls that Michel Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that many enlightenment authors, including reformers such as Le Trosne, saw the common people as delinquents and recommended repression. Le Trosne was no stranger to such contradictions. We have seen that he wrote critically of seigneurial rights yet rigorously enforced them on the peasants of his domains. Le Trosne called for the reduction of capital punishment, proportionality between crimes and punishments, the presumption of innocence, and equality before the law. Jacques Leroy shows, in an essay on Le Trosne’s writings about criminal justice, that the disciple

of Quesnay argued against judicial torture, the arbitrary power of judges, their right to invoke religion, and the cruel alternative of destroying oneself through confession of guilt or offending God through perjury. Yet, Pertué also shows that Le Trosne endorsed the punishment of elimination for the poorest members of the community, the five to ten percent of the population consisting of vagrants.

It would be wrong to explain away Le Trosne's views as the common sense of the time. Pertué demonstrates that Turgot had his friend Loménie de Brienne write a report showing the ineffectiveness of a solely repressive policy. Turgot hoped the authorities would offer employment and public aid to the poor. Le Trosne's ideas also differed from those of du Pont de Nemours, who ascribed poverty to heavy taxes rather than to vice. The abbé Baudeau expressed opposition to the galleys and to judicial branding with a hot iron and hoped that assistance would be given to the poor as a social debt. Indeed, Le Trosne evinced other conservative opinions at odds with many enlightenment authors. He supported the slave trade and plantation economy in the colonies. He wrote in *De l'intérêt social, par rapport à la valeur, à la circulation, à l'industrie, et au commerce intérieur et extérieur*, published in 1777, that he "ne considère les nègres que comme des animaux servans à la culture" (p. 72).

Limits on the length of a review prevent me from discussing other essays in this fine collection that contain original research and arguments. They all contribute to making *Guillaume-François Le Trosne: Itinéraire d'une figure intellectuelle orléanaise au siècle des Lumières* a book anyone interested in late Old Regime France should read.

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Thérance Carvalho, “Chronologie et Œuvres de Le Trosne”

NOTES

[1] A list, by no means comprehensive, of monographs: John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Arnault Skornicki, *L'économiste, la cour et la patrie. L'économie politique dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, Collection « Culture et société », 2011); Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Steven Kaplan, *Raisonner sur les blés: Essais sur les Lumières économiques* (Millaud: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2017).

[2] Jérôme Mille, *Un physiocrate oublié: G.F. Le Trosne: étude économique fiscale et politique* (Paris: Larose et Tenin, 1905).

[3] Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, “Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses,” in *Œuvres de Turgot et documents le concernant*, ed. Gustave Schelle, 5 volumes (Paris: Institute Coppet, 2018), pp. 2: 472-530.

[4] Ernest Labrousse, “L’expansion agricole: la montée de la production” and “Aperçu de la répartition sociale de l’expansion agricole,” in *Histoire économique et sociale de la France Tome II, Des derniers temps de l’âge seigneurial aux préludes de l’âge industriel (1660 – 1789)*, ed. [Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse](#) (Paris: PUF, 1970) pp. 373, 415-6; Pierre Gervais, “A Merchant or a French Atlantic? Eighteenth-Century Account Books as Narratives of a Transitional Merchant Political Economy,” *French History* vol. 25, no. 1 (2011), pp. 31, 44-45; Xavier Lafrance, *The Making of Capitalism in France: Class Structures, Economic Development, the State and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1750 – 1914* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020) pp. 35, 66-67.

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