

REFERENCE

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Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. viii, 315, \$99. ISBN 978-1-10702-119-8.

doi: 10.1017/S1053837213000400

Liana Vardi has written an excellent book, which definitely adds to our understanding of the Physiocratic movement. It must be said that Vardi does not aim at an analytical reconstruction of Physiocratic thought, or focus on Physiocracy as a forerunner of classical political economy. Indeed, in the chapter on Quesnay and throughout the book, we find very appropriate comments and remarks on the Physiocrats' contribution to economic ideas. But the true merit of the book is in the very interesting journey offered to the reader, bringing to the fore some new perspectives on the evolution of the Physiocratic movement during at least three decades, from the mid-1750s to the time of the Revolution.

The book evolves like a novel, using the life of three major characters—Quesnay, Mirabeau, and Du Pont—as the thread of the script, and it is very much concentrated on their personal and intellectual history. But what is the story that Liana Vardi tells us? The major theme is of an epistemological nature, and it unfolds along two main narrative lines. The first one concerns the evolution of the methodology adopted by the three authors and, in a sense, by Physiocracy. Quesnay dominates the late 1750s and early 1760s for a decade or so. Then, Mirabeau plays the major role until the late 1770s, and he partly overlaps with the much younger Du Pont. But a second theme comes to the fore: the contrast, the tensions, and even, one could say, the intellectual fights that characterize the relationship among the three Physiocrats. It is an intellectual history of Physiocracy in which Vardi highlights in particular the differences and even the points of disagreement among the three men.

For the Physiocrats, the road to knowledge was always mixed up with that of the education of the rulers, and the methodology adopted by each of the three men is linked to the way in which he tries to convince the rulers to adopt Physiocratic policies. Following Vardi, we could synthesize the major 'drivers' for each of the three Physiocrats: reason and mind for Quesnay, plus, of course, evidence; ethics and passions for Mirabeau; and, again, passions, imagination, and arts for Du Pont. Vardi highlights the methodological difference between the three men, but, in reality, the opposition appears very much to be between Quesnay, on one side, and Mirabeau and Du Pont, on the other (see, for instance, pp. 171 and 181). The Doctor (Quesnay) relied on reason as the only way to knowledge and also as the main tool to convince the opponents and the court of the goodness of his policies; he convinced Mirabeau first and Du Pont later to follow him on this. But Vardi shows that the two men accepted Quesnay's primacy and, in particular, his disregard for analogy and imagination (p. 36), but imagination and emotions took their revenge over the years when Mirabeau and, in particular, Du Pont made extensive use of them in their writings. One could say: from reason to passions and emotions, to arts and imagination.

It is clear that Liana Vardi sympathizes much more with Mirabeau and Du Pont than with Quesnay. In a sense, it is a story that takes us from the more rational of the three men, as he certainly was, to the more passionate authors, the latter two, with Du Pont's being involved in the attempt to use arts to educate the prince and the princess (see ch. 7). The space dedicated to the period of the late 1760s onwards is much larger than the formative period of Physiocratic thought. Thus, the book evolves from the first two chapters dedicated to Quesnay, but the rest of the book, from chapters 3 to 8, concentrates on Mirabeau and Du Pont de Nemours, with three chapters each. Chapter 4, with the beautiful title *A Delicate Balance*, represents a sort of transition from the period and the method of Quesnay to those of Mirabeau and Du Pont.

Vardi concentrates on the three leading Physiocratic figures because "physiocracy must be defined very narrowly," because of the methodological and policy commitments that the adherents had to accept (p. 2). She is probably correct; and one has to avoid mistakes such as that of considering Turgot as a Physiocrat. On Turgot, there are many very interesting pages. Three other main figures are mentioned with reference to Physiocracy: Le Mercier de la Rivière, Le Trosne, and the *abbé* Baudeau (although, on the latter, there is very little). Vardi is right in saying that these six authors make up most of the Physiocratic contributions in terms of both economical and political views. There are other, also less well-known, stories, such as those described in the very interesting chapter 5 on "Representative Assemblies."

The book is very interesting in tracing the development of Physiocracy in the 1770s, and it provides many extremely interesting biographical elements, which are very well blended with the evolution of the authors' views. Chapter 7, which is dedicated to the education of the prince, opens with a very nice description of Du Pont's rather forgotten play. This shows that, in different ways, the three Physiocrats were very consistent in keeping the political focus of their message; which was addressed to the king, the rulers and the nobility rather than to the bourgeoisie and to the people.

A few comments may be added. Even if the book does not focus on the analytical contribution of Physiocracy to political economy, perhaps some issues might have been stressed a little more. An example is the extremely contentious question of the sterility of manufacture, which, in many ways, represents the weakest aspect of Physiocratic economic thought; parallel, in a sense, to their weakest political view: the legal despotism. Not much is said of Quesnay's contributions to Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and perhaps one would have liked to see among the secondary sources the 1972 edition of the *Tableau* by Kuzcynski and Meek. The role of capital accumulation in agriculture could have been underpinned more. It is clear in Quesnay that it is not agriculture *per se* that is productive but only *la grande culture*, in which farmers employ the capital and the more advanced techniques of cultivation. The transformation of the small sharecroppers into wealthy farmers was a major tension in Physiocratic analysis, perhaps the most important one in terms of transformation of society.

Coming back to the history of the Physiocratic movement, perhaps more discussion of the role of the regional parliaments could have been useful to complement the very good description of the debates inside the nobility, both at court and in the countryside (see ch. 7). Even if there are references to other major figures of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire and Grimm, the relationship with the *Encyclopédie* people could have been explored more: there is something on D'Alembert, very little on Diderot.

The pages on the critics of Physiocracy are very nice but here Galiani's *Dialogues* of 1770 might have deserved more space, because the Neapolitan author tackles Physiocracy precisely on the issue of the method it employs and on its view of the natural order. Galiani shows the inherent flaws in Physiocratic arguments in a very modern way, and, in a sense, he provides the strongest criticisms to Physiocratic policies and to the view of the superiority of agriculture.

Vardi's book is a very good description of the evolution of Physiocratic thinking through three decades, and, in particular, it presents the reasons for the failures of the Physiocrats to achieve the reforms at which they were aiming. Perhaps Quesnay was too dogmatic, and Mirabeau and Du Pont addressed themselves to the nobles and to the prince, but the times were changing, and a new alliance between part of the nobility and the bourgeoisie was emerging. Physiocracy represents one of those "unfinished bridges" between the past and the future that characterize all periods of huge transformations. In a sense, Du Pont's personal history is part of this period of change; he receives the letters of nobility in 1783, but in 1789 he is elected to the Committee of the Thirty, which has to prepare the Estates General. We can observe a different but similar transition for Mirabeau, whose son Honoré Gabriel would be a major figure during the first years of the Revolution.

Liana Vardi provides us with new insights and a very useful approach to this fascinating period in the history of mankind. The work is very well informed, with many major and minor references to primary and secondary literature. The 1976 book by Fox Genovese was much more concentrated on the formative years of Physiocracy and on the two co-founders, Quesnay and Mirabeau; there, the benchmark was the origin of the *Tableau*. Together with the recent works by Christine Théré and Loïc Charles, Vardi's book represents essential reading for the understanding of the evolution of Physiocratic ideas.

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Heinz D. Kurz, Tamotsu Nishizawa, and Keith Tribe, eds., *The Dissemination of Economic Ideas* (Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2011), pp. v, 367, \$150. ISBN 978-0-85793-557-1.

doi: 10.1017/S1053837213000412

The Dissemination of Economic Ideas offers a selection of papers presented at the 2009 joint meeting of the Japanese and European societies for the history of economic thought. The book answers an old call in the historiography of economics: more than forty years ago, Joseph J. Spengler (1970, p. 133) noted that "Historians of ideas have devoted little attention to the social processes underlying the transmission of ideas from culture to culture and from nation to nation. This is as true of economists as it is of other practitioners of other realms of science and the humanities." While, since then, scholars have actively engaged with the spread and dissemination of economic theories (for example, Coats and Colander 1989), there is no doubt that this topic still deserves to be further explored, and that this collection of papers