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Comte, Altruism and the Critique of Political Economy

Philippe Steiner

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This paper is about Comte's conception of altruism, and the role played by this new concept in his critique to political economy. In the first section, the paper considers how selfish behaviour, or egoism, became treated as a major threat endangering the creation of industrial society by those concerned about the diffusion of political economy. Then, the paper summarizes the methodological critique set forth in the Cours, before connecting this critique to the economic content of the Système and the concept of altruism. In the final section, the paper contrasts Spencer's view of altruism to that held by Comte, and then considers the reaction of French political economists, defending the moral value of their science.

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Comte, Altruism and the Critique of Political Economy

Philippe Steiner

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Abstract

This paper is about Comte's conception of altruism, and the role played by this new concept in his critique to political economy. In the first section, the paper considers how selfish behaviour, or egoism, became treated as a major threat endangering the creation of industrial society by those concerned about the diffusion of political economy. Then, the paper summarizes the methodological critique set forth in the Cours, before connecting this critique to the economic content of the Système and the concept of altruism. In the final section, the paper contrasts Spencer's view of altruism to that held by Comte, and then considers the reaction of French political economists, defending the moral value of their science.

Keywords

altruism, Comte, egoism, political economy, Spencer

Comte, l'altruisme et la critique de l'économie politique

Résumé

Cet article examine la manière dont Auguste Comte introduit la notion d'altruisme dans sa critique sociologique de l'économie politique. La première partie de l'article explique pourquoi l'égoïsme et la diffusion de l'économie politique étaient considérés par lui comme de graves menaces pesant sur la mise en place de la société industrielle. Dans la deuxième partie, l'article rappelle la critique méthodologique que Comte expose dans son Cours de philosophie positive, puis montre le lien avec les considérations qu'il développe à propos de l'altruisme dans son Système de politique positive. La dernière partie contraste les conceptions de l'altruisme proposées par Comte puis par Herbert Spencer, et rappelle comment les économistes ont taché de répondre à Comte.

Mots-clefs

altruisme, Comte, économie politique, égoïsme, Spencer

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Auguste Comte's work is not thought to form a significant contribution to political economy, although his methodological critique of political economy had some influence during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the historical school challenged the more abstract conception of political economy then gaining momentum.¹ If Comte's critique is considered to be of minor interest, then the second part of Comte's intellectual career, dominated by the development of his religion of humanity, is entirely overlooked. For example, John Stuart Mill considered Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* to be a significant contribution to the philosophy of science, whereas he considered his later work, dominated by the *Système de politique positive*, to be a pointless enterprise, tainted by a regulatory mania emanating from the pen of "a morally-intoxicated man" (Mill 1865: 336). As scientist-philosopher, Comte is therefore considered to be of limited interest to historians of economic thought;² and as a religious thinker, he is of no interest to them at all. Conversely, historians of the social sciences take no interest in the economic content of his social and religious thought.³

There are two reasons for challenging this situation. Firstly, there is now a growing interest in the religious underpinnings of political economy, treating it as a political discourse whose scope extended far beyond the strictly economic domain. This is especially evident in France (Faccarello and Steiner 2008), given the political and social role played by the Catholic Church before and after the fall of the *Ancien Régime*, and it is also true of other countries, such as England and the United States (Bateman and Banzhaf 2008). Hence historians of economic and social thought might treat

Comte's religious views as a key his post-theistic social theory, to use Andrew Wernick's words, and to the economic organization that should be brought into being by the "sociocracy", a new religious elite spreading the credo of the religion of Humanity. Secondly, Comte's later works repay attention, since this is where altruism, a new word in the French language, was established. Altruism is now a concept commonly used by economists. However, this was not Comte's intention when he coined the word in the mid-nineteenth century to counter the idea that human action had a selfish foundation, an idea which he and many other social observers saw as pervasive in an industrial society. By focussing his attention on the opposition between egoism and altruism, an opposition deemed to be the "great human issue", Comte was not merely elaborating his own system of thought in terms of a so-called "subjective approach", and by developing the religion of humanity at the heart of his *Catéchisme positiviste* (Comte 1852) and his *Système de politique positive* (Comte 1851-54). He also extended his critique to political economy, exposed in the 47th lecture of his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42). I would like to demonstrate in this article that there is a strong connection between the first and second parts of Comte's works, where the critique of political economy is at issue. Comte's theory of altruism is certainly a key point of his religious credo, but it is also a specific response to a matter of common concern for French social scientists, for whom the new social order, or industrial society, lacked adequate cultural foundations. Furthermore, as a critique of the political consequences of the diffusion of political economy, altruism gave birth to a larger debate: firstly, among British social scientists, prompted by Herbert Spencer's lengthy discussion of altruism in his *Data of Ethics*; and secondly, among leading French economists during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the first section I consider how selfish behaviour, or egoism, became treated as a major threat endangering the creation of industrial society by those concerned about the diffusion of political economy. I then summarize the methodological critique set forth in the *Cours*, before connecting this critique to the economic content of the *Système* and the concept of altruism. In the final section I contrast Spencer's view of altruism to that held by Comte, and then I consider the reaction of French political economists, defending the moral value of their science.

1. Comte's methodological critique was in line with those of some leading German (Karl Knies) and English (John Kells Ingram and Thomas Cliffe Leslie) economists associated with the historical school. Modern commentators consider this connection to be very slight (Shinoya 2005).

2. According to Schumpeter, Comte's view of science was not of great interest, and his critique of political economy "a comedy of errors" due to an "honest ignorance" of the subject (Schumpeter 1954: 394, 418).

3. See notably Andrew Wernick's study devoted to Comte's religion of humanity (Wernick 2001), Thomas Dixon's study of the cultural history of altruism in Victorian Britain (Dixon 2008) and Mary Pickering's monumental intellectual biography of Comte (Pickering 2009, vols. II and III). French scholarship on Comte is no different on this score (Grange 2000, Karsenty 2006).

Egoism, benevolence and justice

At the beginning of the nineteenth century political economy was generally considered to be a discourse on the mode of organising post-revolutionary societies in such a way as to promote the wealth and happiness of the population. This was notably the case for those French social scientists and political thinkers who coined the term “industrialisme”. Initially this doctrine was embraced by Charles Dunoyer and Charles Comte, then directors of the *Censeur Européen*; and also by Benjamin Constant, Henri Saint-Simon and one of his secretaries, Auguste Comte. Among the founding fathers of this doctrine was Jean-Baptiste Say, the great French political economist of the period.

This doctrine soon prompted dissenting interpretations (Faccarello and Steiner 2008). On the one hand, Constant added a religious element which Say and Dunoyer found unpalatable, since they both thought that religious sentiment should not be part of the foundation of a new society. On the other hand, Saint-Simon considered that it was not only wrong, but also politically dangerous, to base a society solely on material interest; something more was needed, with a new form of religion, a “new Christianity” according to the title of his last book (Saint-Simon 1825). When his disciples added to this religious requirement the idea of organisation as a crucial element for industrialism the movement broke apart, and dispute between the three differing approaches became bitter.

One important point in this episode is relevant to the present study, for with the Saint-Simonians the search for something that might counter-balance egoism became an issue. Following the path initiated by Saint-Simon and Comte, Saint-Simonians abandoned the idea that industrial society could be based on egoism alone. They now insisted on the moral dimension, since a stable social order requires a common moral doctrine: “An enduring society cannot exist without common moral ideas; this is as necessary on a spiritual level as a community of interests is on a temporal level. These ideas cannot be common if they do not have as their base a philosophical doctrine universally adopted in society. This doctrine is fundamental: it is the link that unites and consolidates all parties” (Saint-Simon and Comte

1821: 51). From this period onwards the idea that a moral link balancing egoism, which they view as rampant, emerges as a leading principle in their writing on industrialism (*ibid*: 51-52; 85-95, etc.).

The core message of the Saint-Simonian school, as exposed by Saint-Amand Bazard and Prosper Enfantin (1829), can be summed up as follows. Firstly, they coined a famous phrase, stating the need to move from the exploitation of men by men to the exploitation of the globe by human industry. Secondly, they linked the exploitation of men by men and, more generally, contemporary political and social instability (citing as an example the issue of the abolition of slavery) to the duality at the heart of human agency: “In two words, *calculation* or reasoning, science, applied to material interests, is not the sole factor motivating human action; we also act on the *sympathy* which fine arts arouse and favour; we are men of *reason*, but we are also *impassioned*, we are *self-interested*, but nonetheless we know how to devote ourselves to the most general.” (Bazard and Enfantin 1829: 27). A commitment to the well-being of other people, and to other-oriented action, was then ascribed to religion, and the historical method finally emerged as a powerful tool explaining how religion could once more take its place in industrial society. They argued that industrial effort was made in isolation and egoism prevailed as a consequence of the slogan: *Laissez-faire, laissez-passer*. Every “industrial” sought to achieve his goal according to his own personal interest, without taking into account the collective interest. Does competition really offer a social mechanism capable of transforming self-interested behaviour into a socially beneficial outcome, as the economists claimed? According to the Saint-Simonians, the answer was in the negative, as the recurrence of commercial crises plainly showed; they consequently felt the need to promote an “enthusiasm for collective life” and to spread a “love of the universal family of man” (*ibid*: 104). A new religion would help achieve this: “By proclaiming that religion is destined once more to reclaim its rule over societies, we are undoubtedly far from claiming that it is necessary to restore any one religious institution from the past, no more than we call for the reinstatement in societies of the ancient orders of war or of slavery. We are proclaiming a new moral condition, a new political condition; and thus also a very new religious condition; because, for us, religion, politics, morals are only different

names for the same thing. This problem [...] is no less likely to be posed and solved in terms at once simple and clear; the paths of investigation to be followed, the means of demonstration to be used in this connection, are the same as those which we previously employed” (ibid: 415).

As a former secretary of Saint-Simon, Comte was following a similar path, but in his own way. He gave a new twist to his own system by the end of the 1840's, according to some of his disciples who disagreed with his so-called “subjective synthesis” (Littré 1863: 538-52). In the lectures that Émile Littré has attended in 1849 with some members of the Positivist Society, and then in the massive four volumes *Système de politique positive*, Comte placed great emphasis on the functioning of the human brain, and on the idea that the heart (emotions) should prevail over the brain (mind).

The importance of the brain was nothing new to Comte, since he had already considered this topic in his *Cours de philosophie positive* - in the last lecture on biology, just before the part devoted to society and social sciences. Comte relied on Franz-Joseph Gall's phrenology,⁴ and his anatomical hypothesis about the location of the various functions of mind in the human brain. Contrary to the “metaphysical” approach to psychology followed by Descartes and Malebranche, and then by Antoine Destutt de Tracy and the French Idéologues, Comte emphasized the positive approach adopted by Gall. He particularly appreciated Gall's distinction between the affective and the intellectual parts of the brain, and his mapping of the various functions of the brain. However, he found Gall's work wanting and scientifically fuzzy: “In my view, to give it a scientific form one has just to acknowledge that the first category [appetency] is about the isolated individual or, at best, the family, and their successive needs, such as reproduction, education of offspring, sustenance, place to live, accommodation, etc.; whereas the second category [feelings] is more specific, requiring the existence of some forms of social relations” (Comte 1830-42, I: 868).

4. Phrenology, or the science of the mind, was initiated by Gall (1758-1828), a German physician, who was among the first to consider the brain as the sole source of mental activity. Comte used that term in his *Cours*, but he qualified his reference in stating firstly, that it was a science in progress and not an established one; and secondly, that animals should be included (Comte 1830-42, I: 851).

Comte went no further in his *Cours*; but he came back to Gall's phrenology when he developed his approach to religion and altruism. What was a plausible hypothesis in the 1820's was considered a dead end by the later 1840's, hence the negative reaction of Littré. Nevertheless, Gall's phrenology was at the root of Comte's theory of human intellectual structure summarized in the table dedicated to the “Classification of the 18 functions within the brain” which can be read as Comte's contribution to the provision of a “scientific form” for phrenology. This “cerebral table” was for him of definitive importance: he emphasized to the reader that he had had to go through ten successive drafts before reaching the final version of the table (Comte 1851-4, I: 680). This was then reproduced in the *Système*, in the *Catéchisme* and in his political pamphlet (*Appel aux conservateurs*).

Comte's comments on his table stretch over fifty pages of the first volume of the *Système* (ibid: 680-726), which he prefaces with a eulogy to Gall's achievements. The presentation of the cerebral table opens with a statement of the great human problem, the subordination of individuality to sociality, interpreted as the “natural basis of the true general theory of affective life” (ibid: 692). Comte then explains the structure and meaning of his table. Firstly, there is a threefold division – a very general feature of Comte's thought – between the heart (the loving part of the human being), the mind (the thinking part) and the character (the active part). The altruism versus egoism conflict is located in the loving dimension, in which Comte distinguishes no less than ten instincts. The instincts are sorted according to the dual rule of decreasing energy and increasing social importance. For example, the first instinct, the instinct of nutrition, is the most energetic one, since nutrition is an absolute necessity, but it is less important in term of morality; the opposite applies to kindness or the love of humanity, the tenth instinct, which is morally the most important, but the least energetic.

Comte sorts these ten instincts into three categories. Five instincts (nutrition, sex, maternal, military or destructive, and industrial or constructive) make up *interest* or pure egoism; then two intermediate tendencies (domination and approbation) are egoistic, but require social relations in order to satisfy the human drive toward *ambition*; and, finally, there come three pure altruistic instincts (attachment, veneration and kindness). Comte's

next step is to locate these groups of instincts. The five instincts constitutive of interest are situated at the rear of the brain, in closer contact with stimuli coming from the body; the two intermediate tendencies occupy the upper middle part of the brain, upper because their moral dignity is superior to interested instincts, and middle because they are in-between egoism and altruism. Finally, the three altruistic instincts are in the middle of the forefront of the brain: kindness first, followed by veneration, while attachment makes the link with egoistic instincts.⁵

Some comment may be of some use at this point in order to understand the meaning attached to this classification, and its connection to the critique of political economy. Firstly, localizing basic instincts within the brain seemed at the time to be a strange approach to the social sciences – and this explains the negative reaction of some positivists, such as Littré, while other social scientists interested in altruism simply paid no attention to this approach. However, the approach now conforms to recent research in neurobiology, and the conception of altruism as an instinct (Pickering 2009, II: 345). Furthermore, it also corresponds to recent neuro-economics, where economists use imagery related to brain function to identify the regions implicated in the decision-making process⁶. Second, it is important to emphasise that Comte does not treat egoism and altruism as two radically opposed instincts. Instead, he carefully explains that egoism and altruism can blend, as is the case with the two intermediary tendencies: “between the direct interest of the isolated individual and true social feeling there exists an indirect interest, which is still individual but which brings each individual into relation with the other in order to obtain individual satisfaction” (Comte 1851-4, I: 694). Third, Comte devotes one whole volume to explaining how these altruistic instincts – attachment, veneration and kindness – are supported

5. Attachment, as we shall see below, is often characterized as a form of “collective egoism”, notably within the family; this explains why Comte placed this instinct in close proximity to the egoistic instincts.

6. “Brain imaging is currently the most popular neuroscientific tool. Most brain imaging involves a comparison of people performing different tasks – an “experimental” task and a “control” task. The difference between images taken while subject is performing the two tasks provides a picture of regions of the brain that are differentially activated by the experimental task” (Colin Camerer, George Loewenstein and Drazer Prelec 2005: 12).

by social categories, particularly by the sociocratic clergy in society, and by women in the family. The important point here is that both Comte’s description of the ideal functioning of industrial society and his critique of political economy were based upon his views concerning altruism.

From the methodological critique of Political Economy to Altruism as a counterforce to egoism

In the later 1820s, having parted from Saint-Simon, Comte had no reason to take the “reform of political economy”, the programme that Saint-Simon had given him when they initiated their collaboration in August 1817, any further.⁷ The few book reviews related to political economy or industrial activities that Comte wrote during that period show that this task did not enthuse him⁸ – although they also show that his knowledge of political economy was meagre, to say the least. Nevertheless, his classification of sciences, and the role that he intended to give to sociology, forced him to explain why political economy was not the science of the social realm that would organize industrial society in terms of the positivist motto: “Order and Progress”. A critique of the methodological foundations of political economy thus became a central issue in the 47th lecture of his *Cours de philosophie positive*.

The methodological critique

Comte’s 47th lecture is devoted to the social sciences, which he would soon label sociology rather than social physics (*Physique sociale*) because Adolphe Quételet, the Belgian astronomer, statistician and social scientist, had already used this formulation in the subtitle for his *Sur l’homme. Essais de physique sociale* (1835). As commonly found in Comte, he launched into an overview of the historical development of the social sciences before explaining what he had in mind. He briefly mentioned the approaches taken by

7. When the young Comte became Saint-Simon’s secretary, his major task was to “reform political economy” (Gouhier 1970, III: 189-196).

8. In the later 1820s he wrote two short papers, on the budget (1819) and on political economy and industry (1828), and two reviews, both published in 1828: of J.-B. Bidaut, *Du monopole qui s’établit dans les arts industriels et dans le commerce*, and of Swan, *Courtes observations sur l’état actuel du commerce et des finances de l’Europe* (Comte 1970: 133-9 and 171-193).

Montesquieu and Condorcet, and then wrote “Some philosophical reflections on the nature and the topic of political economy” (Comte 1830-42, II: 92-8). His criticisms were mainly methodological:⁹ firstly, economists were wrong to isolate their science from political science; secondly, since they had been educated as men of letters and lawyers, economists did not have the scientific training needed to build a new science. An exception was made for Adam Smith, notably because Comte thought so highly of his *History of Astronomy* that he put that essay on the reading list that he drew up for workers in his *Catéchisme positiviste* (Comte 1852: 37). Thirdly, political economy was highly metaphysical, since it supposed that economic actors were perfect calculators of their own interest. The language of science (mathematics) used by some economists – Comte had in mind Destutt de Tracy’s long introduction to his *Traité d’économie politique* – appeared meaningless to him because it was tainted by metaphysical conceptions of psychology. At this point his critique of political economy and his comments on Gall’s phrenology converged. The metaphysical approach to psychology and to the functioning of the brain attributed a superiority of reason over the passions, a position deemed erroneous by Comte. The remaining unique passion was “egoism under the command of the intellect”, an erroneous conception that was at the root of a misconception of human beings: “Hence, man has been portrayed, against all evidence, as an intellectual being, processing continuously, without noticing, a vast number of imperceptible calculations, without any form of spontaneity, from his most tender childhood” (Comte 1830-42, I: 856). A few pages later, targeting Helvetius’s utilitarian views on ethics,¹⁰ he rejected the idea of “egoism treated as the necessarily unique principle of ethics, it being not necessary to stress here the considerable danger of this view” (ibid: 862). He favoured instead the Scottish school of Hume, Smith and Ferguson, notably because they took account of both egoism and sympathy (ibid: 862-3). Fourthly, there was no progress in political economy; economists wasted their time

in endless polemics over value, utility, production and the like. Fifthly, and this was more political or sociological than methodological, Comte rejected the slogan of free trade on the grounds that it represented an unwarranted attempt to legitimate the lack of market regulation. Consequently, political economy was condemned for systematizing the current state of (economic) anarchy. Comte finally criticized the economists’ view of the machinery question, and claimed that economists could not neglect issues related to time and transition periods.

This very negative assessment of political economy left room for one enduring favourable comment: political economy paved the way for positive philosophy, since it rightly emphasized and explained the role of the division of labour. Economists were therefore praised for their explanation of the solidarity between the various interests within society (Comte 1830-42, II: 95-6).

The main response to Comte’s criticisms came from Mill in his *Logic*: he argued that the rational behaviour of economic agents was a hypothesis, and not a description of actual behaviour; and also that political economy as a separate science was of use in understanding an extensive category of phenomena “in which the psychological law mainly concerned is the familiar one, that a greater gain is preferred to a smaller” (Mill 1843, II: 901). French economists did not react publicly to these criticisms, and it is possible to speculate that, had the *Journal des économistes* been founded earlier than December 1841, it would have swiftly answered and rebutted Comte’s strictures on the method of political economy. Curious as it may now appear, a number of socialist thinkers were given the opportunity to explain their points of view in the pages of the *Journal des économistes*.¹¹ The situation changed when political economists felt that they had to fight not only against their arch-enemy – the protectionists – but also against socialist thinkers, who became more prominent after the fall of the constitutional monarchy in July 1848 and the launching of the second republic.¹² The open-mindedness that characterized the

9. This is well known, so I limit myself to remind Comte’s major point in this paragraph. The reader can find more detailed accounts of these methodological criticisms in previous studies: see for example Swingewood (1970), Steiner (2011b: 165-175).

10. See Helvetius’s *De l’esprit* (1758) and his posthumously published book, *De l’homme* (1773).

11. As with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who eventually published his *Système des contradictions économiques ou philosophie de la misère* with Guillaumin, the leading publisher of French economists. Louis Blanc and Etienne Cabet were also invited to write for the *Journal des économistes* at the very beginning of the 1848 revolution.

12. One should bear in mind that during the 1848 revolution the government had abolished the few existing professor-

period during which French economists launched the *Journal des économistes* was over. It was not by chance that Gustave de Molinari (1850) wrote a review of Comte's booklet on positivism – his *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme* – and that Henri Baudrillart (Baudrillart 1854), professor of political economy at the Collège de France, published in the *Journal* some years later his opening lecture, which was devoted to dismissing the idea that political economy was a science favouring individualism at the cost of solidarity.

Molinari opened his review with a harsh statement: “This is a new sect” (Molinari 1850: 247), meaning that Comte's views were similar to those already studied and criticized by Louis Reybaud in his *Etudes des réformateurs sociaux ou socialistes modernes*.¹³ The review was mostly negative, and not intended to offer a dispassionate assessment of Comte's views. Molinari briefly mentioned the *Cours*, but moved immediately to the philosophical and religious substance of Comte's doctrine. Molinari explained that, at the scientific level, sociology was simultaneously “the science of social relations, the political economy and the political science of positivism” (ibid). This sociology seemed to him mainly confusing: property was conceived in the same way that communists saw it; the process of the accumulation of capital was not clear, and Comte misunderstood the Malthusian theory of population. Coming to the religious dimension of positivism, Molinari mocked the detailed table displaying the weekly feasts of the “Abstract cult of humanity”, which he reproduced in his review. Positivist ethics and the positivist philosophy of history were not well regarded because they were either trivial – to ask for more benevolence, friendship, and justice is not so very different from Christian morality – or

ships in political economy because of their supposed connection to the monarchy, and because the new government wished to further the development of a truly republican political economy. See “Suppression de la chaire d'économie politique au Collège de France”, *Journal des économistes*, April 1848: 57-67 and “Protestation de la société d'économie politique contre la suppression de l'enseignement de l'économie politique”, *Journal des économistes*, May 1848: 113-128.

13. The first edition was published in 1840, and the fourth in 1844. The preface to the sixth edition of 1864 contains an interesting comment on his change of mind: “I saw myself confronted with nothing but small sects that appeared to be animated by a real devotion. Benevolence was possible. I was led to see these incipient disparities as curiosities and not as dangers, a gentle madness that could be cured through appropriate healing. Later on things went awry, and the response had to change.” (Reybaud 1864, I: ii)

hypothetical. Molinari was pleased to note that Comte did not hint at a statist approach to social change, and he praised Comte's philosophical mode of life; he was a distinguished mathematician, he added. Summing up, he told the reader that “positivism has nothing to offer that is superior to what we already have. This is simply a utopia, like the utopia of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, Blanc, and Proudhon” (ibid: 255).

Baudrillart's article dealt with a group of writers who complained of the absence of solidarity as a topic in the writings of political economists; no specific writers were named, neither Comte nor any other being mentioned. For Baudrillart solidarity was a mystery, comparable to the Christian dogma of the Fall of Man and his redemption (Baudrillart 1854: 322). These mysteries did not belong to the subject matter of political economy; nonetheless, economists could take the existence of solidarity into account. Accordingly, a large part of the article was devoted to showing that solidarity was not limited to fraternity, and that solidarity was at the very root of political economy, if under a different name: exchange was conceived to be the basis of human solidarity, and thus economists were in fact aiding the development of solidarity in their relentless fight against the protectionists (ibid: 333). Baudrillart was also adamant in ruling out the criticism of egoism. This critique lacks precision, he wrote, because self-interest is a good thing, whereas egoism is not. Referring to the seventeenth century dispute over “pure love”¹⁴, he pointed out that his opponents were more rigorous than Christian theologians, since they required that people act out of a purely disinterested motive, such that egoism would play no part at all in the economic domain. This was deemed impossible even for the religious domain, according to received Catholic faith. Baudrillart's comments on Comte's critique were however mistaken since, as we shall see in the next section, Comte had a different approach to these two

14. This famous quarrel opposed Fénelon to Bossuet, two leading religious and political thinkers during the reign of Louis XIV. Fénelon claimed that pure love was possible within the Catholic faith, while Bossuet objected to this, notably because one has to abandon religious hope. For this theological debate and its connection to interest and the birth of political economy see Pierre Force's study (Force 2003). Mill also referred to this issue when he applauded the wisdom of the men who constructed Catholic ethics and compared Comte to “extreme Calvinists requiring that all believers shall be saints, and damns them if they are not” (Mill 1865: 338).

topics, and he openly differed from the socialists and the communists, whom he explicitly criticized (Comte 1855: part 3).

Comte's views on political economy are mostly limited to the methodological criticisms of the 47th lecture of his *Cours*, conveying the idea that in the second phase of his work he had omitted the issues that had been central at the beginning of his intellectual career. Commentators acknowledge that he did pay attention to the material dimension of an industrial society suffused with the religion of humanity, but this was deemed to be of secondary importance, and no assessment of Comte's final views on political economy are offered. This apparent lack of interest can be explained. Comte's psychological health was fragile. He had had to break off his lectures on positive philosophy in 1826-7. In the mid-1840s he had an emotional crisis related to his encounter in 1844 with Clotilde de Vaux, followed by her death in April 1846. This was an episode of his life to which he referred in all his writings published after 1850, and to which he attributed his own regeneration as far as his capacity for love and feeling was concerned. Furthermore, during this second phase of his career Comte took for granted his views on positive sciences and gave primacy to religion. His personal history, the religious tone of his writings, the changes that he introduced with the "subjective synthesis" that Littré regretted so much, and the statements given by authoritative thinkers such as Mill; all of this suffices to explain why commentators could neglect his economic thinking after the *Cours*.

However, a cursory examination of Comte's *Système de politique positive* shows that he continued his critique of political economy through the opposition of egoism to altruism, an issue already present in the *Cours* at the juncture between biology and sociology, where Comte rejected the metaphysical view of man as a rational maximizer. Curiously enough, he was in the meantime led to praise Charles Dunoyer for his brilliant comprehensive conception of production, Dunoyer being a utilitarian economist and fierce advocate of pure laissez-faire, who might at first sight appear to have been completely at odds with Comte's own ideas.

Comte found great merit in *De la liberté du travail* (Dunoyer 1845), reading it despite his practice of "cerebral hygiene" (he had stopped

reading anything written by his contemporaries). He appreciated the "constructivist" view that Dunoyer adopted in one chapter, arguing that, contrary to Say's opinion, government should be considered to be a productive institution since it was concerned with the most important productive task of all: the production of civilized and moral men. Despite Comte's complete rejection of political economy and the principle of competition, both of which he thought irrelevant to industrial society, he appreciated Dunoyer's work and went so far as to recommend it to Mill in one of his letters: "Despite the fact that he comes from the milieu of economists, Mr. Dunoyer makes great efforts to head in an altogether healthier direction, making a remarkable distinction between two sorts of arts, the one acting on things and the other on men, and energetically reproaching political economy for only having concerned itself with the former. His rehabilitation of competition and his vigorous critique of the so-called labour organisations that thrive today can have, I fear, too absolute a character, and might tend to prevent indefinitely a genuine systematisation of industry. But since he insists at length on the need to bring about reform within the population before instituting it at the governmental level, I think that his influence, despite an essential flaw in his conception, could be very useful in the current context" (Mill 1899: 411, Comte's letter to Mill, 28 February 1845). In this letter Comte acknowledged his interest, and confidence, in the power of government to modify the moral complexion of the population. It is important to understand here that Comte's new departure was to take his critique of political economy further, while explaining and advocating the beneficial role of altruism to the social fabric, thanks to Dunoyer's treatment of the "production of civilized man".

The economic dimension of social life was dealt with in chapter 2 ("Sociological assessment of the human problem, or positive theory of material property") of *Système de politique positive* volume II. The material strength of society is said to follow two "economic laws": the first stating that a man can produce more than he needs for his own consumption, while the second states that products can be stored. These two laws make possible the accumulation of wealth: a surplus may exist and it can be stored because goods are durable. These production and accumulation processes require that products be appropriated since,

according to his theory of mind, the industrial instinct, a sub-category of “interest”, belongs to the egoistic dimension of man. Property is therefore necessary to initiate the energetic instinct of improvement, of which the industrial instinct is a sub-category. However, the issue of property rights was not important to Comte, and he did not enter into more detail on this point; instead, he emphasized the role played by a third process, that of the transmission of accumulated wealth.

He had a broad and unusual view of the transmission process (see Table 1), which can be divided into four different forms – gift, (market) exchange, inheritance and conquest – distinguishing between violent and voluntary transmissions on the one hand, disinterested and interested ones on the other (Comte 1852, II: 155). Inheritance and exchange are common within industrial society, but conquest and gift were matters from the past, notably the latter being practised by some tribes living in Oceania who “offer wonderful examples of the power of such an institution” (ibid: 156)¹⁵. Positive philosophy claimed that war had no real place in industrial society, and so Comte thought there was no reason to ascribe any importance to conquest as a mode of transmission. Gift was a completely different affair since, as a disinterested and voluntary form of transmission, Comte considered that the “oldest and noblest form of material transmission will be more helpful to industrial reorganization than anything related to the useless metaphysics of our crude economists” (ibid).

At this point Comte came back to his positive remarks on the division of labour, which had been identified in the *Cours* as the great discovery of modern economists. He explained that voluntary transmission was instrumental in the accumulation of capital, and therefore important to the division of labour which brought “each active citizen to function essentially for others” (ibid. 159). This collective dimension of economic activity, exemplified by the division of labour, became

15. It is likely that Comte learned from Antoine Edouard Foley about the role of gift exchanges in that region. A former student at the École polytechnique, Foley lived in New Zealand from 1843 to 1846, then came back to Paris where he became a member of the inner circle of the Positivist Society. Later on he published a memoir of his travel – *Quatre années en Océanie*, Paris, Hetzel, 1866 – the second volume being devoted to the mores and customs of the natives. However, there are no comments on gift-giving behaviour in that book.

Table 1 : *Transmission processes according to Comte*

Forms of transmission	Disinterested	Interested
Violent	Inheritance	Conquest
Voluntary	Gift	Exchange

the central tenet of Comte’s approach to altruism in industrial society.¹⁶ He suggested that the division of labour be considered at both a given point in time, and as something that occurred through the succession of generations (ibid: 405). Hence the importance attributed to the law governing bequests as a gratuitous form of transmission that was as important as gift-giving in realising the idea of altruism. Comte asked why, if such solidarity objectively existed, present citizens were unable to understand what they actually did, and why they conceived their exchanges and the division of labour in terms of self-interest. This discrepancy arose from “modern anarchy” – a general term pointing to the lack of any regulatory apparatus in the economic domain, and the spread of an individualistic way of thinking – and the lack of “a systematic doctrine of pacific behaviours, so that the latter is performed without giving each participant a just feeling of social dignity” (ibid: 161). The issue of altruism was thus bound up with the critique of political economy. Nevertheless, in the *Système* Comte did not stop at a methodological critique, but sought to explain how disinterested behaviour was at work within industrial society, even in its present unsatisfactory and incomplete form. Two social institutions were thus brought centre stage: first, the family, characterized by the affective domination of women; second, the clergy of the new positive religion, practising the art of bettering humankind.

According to Comte’s sociology, society is not composed of individuals, but of families.¹⁷ Therefore the chapter on material wealth was followed by a chapter dealing with the functioning of the family and, more specifically, with the way in which altruism is realised within a family. The

16. This is mentioned in the *Catéchisme* as well: “As material activity is becoming more and more collective, it is tending ever more towards its altruistic character” (Comte 1852: 59).

17. His views on family are very conservative, as Mill pointed out: “[...] his opinion on the proper constitution of the family, and in particular of the marriage institution [...] is of the most orthodox and conservative sort” (Mill 1865: 310).

three dimensions of altruism (veneration, attachment and kindness) are successively relevant to any living person: a child develops veneration for the parents who take care of her, and particularly for the mother; wife and husband develop attachment when they marry; and finally, parents experience kindness when they care for their children (ibid: 185-9). All appears to be for the common good, and these successive positions within the family create a system in which there is reciprocity between the veneration of the children and the kindness of the parents, a reciprocity which overlaps from generation to generation, and which is directly at the root of the feelings linked to the transmission of wealth through the law of inheritance. Nevertheless, according to Comte the situation is more complex, since behaviours within families are impure: familial altruism is generally tainted with egoism. This is the case whenever parents have an egoistic view of their children, as the object of their pride and vanity; this is also the case when children impatiently await their inheritance. These situations give birth to what Comte calls “domestic egoism” (ibid: 200, 212), a situation that he suggests can be resisted by giving fathers an absolute freedom to make bequests which, associated with the possibility of adopting a child, weakens the biological links between father and sons and, at the same time, raises the level of efficiency in the transmission of capital whenever the adopted child has abilities and capacities greater than those of biological offspring. Besides these points, the idea to which Comte constantly returns is the affective superiority of women. They should not receive any material wealth from their parents, they should be protected from industrial egoism and stay at home while the husband performs the role of breadwinner. This sheltered position and this affective superiority gave women a unique power to solve “the great human problem, the subordination of egoism to altruism” (ibid: 204)¹⁸ through their role in the affective education of children.

The second institution necessary to solve the “great human problem” is spiritual power, a combination of the intellectual power that the socio-catholic clergy has in the political domain, and the moral power of women within the family (ibid: 313). The connection between these two powers

comes from the fact that they both participate in the education of the child: women until they are fourteen years old for the affective aspect, and then the clergy dealing with the intellectual aspect. At this point, Comte made clear the importance he attached to Dunoyer’s distinction between industries that apply their art to things, and industries that apply their art to human beings (Dunoyer 1845, II: 103; III, 1-6). The former are the usual industries that one can find in Say’s *Traité d’économie politique* – manufacture, commerce, agriculture – while the latter are divided into those industries acting on the body of men (physical education), and those operating on affective faculties, intellectual faculties, moral habits, and on religion. For this “unnoticed discovery”, Dunoyer was lauded as “a wise economist” (Comte 1852, II: 319), repeated some pages later (ibid: 408-9); a public appreciation consistent with the private one evident in the letter to Mill quoted above. Apart from that point of agreement, Comte disagreed with Dunoyer’s praise of competition,¹⁹ and did not accept this “state of anarchy” as the ultimate rule for the proper functioning of the economic order. Instead, in the following chapter, Comte explained how the sociological clergy can “aspire to the modification of human will” thanks to the scientific and moral knowledge systematized in his positive philosophy (ibid: 356-7). The impulse at the root of the education provided by this clergy is to “prepare everybody to live for others in order to live in others” (ibid: 371), which are according to Comte the two faces of altruism – objective and subjective. The objective face is nothing other than the division of labour, whereas the subjective face relates to the cult of humanity, according to which the salient elements of the life of the dead are remembered by the living. The major issue with which the clergy has to deal is the anarchy that reigns in the material dimension of contemporary society: in other words, the economy has need of a regulatory power founded upon new principles. Two of them are considered at this point in particular.

Firstly, Comte again quoted again Dunoyer very favourably, since he was one of the few economists of the time to defend the idea of a completely unrestricted freedom to make bequests in

18. The “great human problem” is mentioned on many occasions in Comte’s writings of the period, notably in the *Catéchisme* (Comte 1852: 50, 60, 166, 170, 207, 262, 279, etc.).

19. Dunoyer devoted an entire chapter to the social benefits of competition (Dunoyer 1845, I: 408-471).

whatever way was thought best.²⁰ As noted above, this freedom of bequest is necessary to weaken the “domestic egoism” that spontaneously appears within the family; it is also useful in order to achieve the efficient transmission of wealth from one generation to the next (ibid: 406), since this freedom of bequest makes it possible to go beyond the family circle when transmitting accumulated capital. Secondly, Comte developed his “religious theory of wages”, the central principle here being gratuitousness.²¹ Labour, he argued, understood as service to humanity, cannot be properly compensated by a wage; the only proper remuneration for this service is to be found in the action itself. However, there must be a wage for the goods consumed during the performance of the service and, quite probably, for the training of the person performing the service. This payment applies only to workers or proletarians, who should receive from the capitalists a minimum living wage – plus an additional sum related to their actual performance so that they might be able to own a minimum amount of property: accommodation, furniture, and the like. This would bring to an end the unsustainable situation in which “proletarians are just itinerants living temporarily in the midst of occidental society” (ibid: 412). The other social classes do not receive any wage: the clergy is paid by gifts offered to them as evidence of veneration; women are cared by their husbands; and finally, capitalists define themselves by their possession of a share of total wealth. They are prevented from expanding their share because of the “healthy competition” existing between them, and because they wish to gain the approval of the remainder of society. If this were not enough, Comte considers the possibility of discharging inefficient and greedy capitalists (ibid: 417, 419).

This leads to an industrial world in which altruism prevails over egoism. The latter instinct is still present, since the alimentary instinct must be

satisfied; this is the task of men entering the market so that they can provide their wife and children with food, clothing and housing. Egoism is still present among the capitalist class, but is moderated by the “healthy competition” that Comte mentioned, without actually explaining what it really meant. Beyond that, altruism rules: in the family, thanks to the affective power of women; in society, thanks to the sociocratic clergy spreading the gospel of the religion of humanity, and receiving gifts as remuneration; in industrial relations, since the wage relation shrinks; finally, altruism also rules in intergenerational relationships, since the law of inheritance and policy favouring adoption bypass “domestic egoism” and permit greater efficiency in the transmission of accumulated capital.

These “altruistic economic ideas” outlined by Comte were, to say the least, at odds with the current development of political economy.²² One might expect that political economists would not pay very much attention to the idiosyncratic views of the Great Priest of the Positive Church. But this was not the case. Comte’s views regarding altruism were successful in the sense that the most prominent contemporary economists and social thinkers did indeed pay attention to them.

Herbert Spencer, French Economists and Altruism

I have limited my investigation here to French economists, leaving out their English contemporaries. I will however take into account Spencer’s contribution, since his *Data of Ethics* was a major contribution to the debate on altruism, and because he was so widely known and his book so widely translated and spread among the French economists that it is impossible to give an assessment of Comte’s views on altruism without taking into account Spencer’s approach to the subject.

Spencer and the conciliation approach

Beyond the role played by the Parisian devotees of Comte’s work, Spencer played a decisive role in the spreading of Comte’s ideas, not the least because of his use of the word “sociology”, even after he had made public his methodological

20. Throughout the nineteenth century French economists discussed the role and the effects of the egalitarian law of inheritance set up by the Civil Code of 1804 (Steiner 2008); most considered that this egalitarian stance, subject to a minimum portion (at least a quarter of the legacy) left to the free disposal of the owner, conformed to the principles of the majority of French people, and they did not object to it beyond arguing about the size of the residual minimum portion. Dunoyer was among those who were in favour of a complete freedom of bequest right up until the very last moments of an owner’s life (Dunoyer 1845, III: 471-511).

21. The same argument is to be found in the *Catéchisme* (Comte 1852: 146-7).

22. Mill paid scant attention to them, even if he was ready to consider Comte’s views as morally desirable (Mill 1865: 340-1).

and political differences with Comte²³. This is also true for the issue of altruism, however much Spencer might have sought to conceal his intellectual debt to Comte.²⁴

Spencer paid great attention to altruism, and elaborated a quite different view of the concept.²⁵ There are some similarities of course: Spencer put great emphasis on the family as a congenial context for altruistic behaviour (Spencer 1879: 221, 232-4, 293); he mentioned the role played by the transmission process between successive generations (ibid. 221, 293); finally, he stressed the necessity of combining egoism and altruism, but in such a different way that differences are here more salient than similarities. The first modification comes from the fact that Spencer considered altruism to be a specific form of action, and not an instinct; this is clear in his definition of altruism as “all action which, in the normal course of things, benefits others, instead of benefiting self” (ibid: 232).²⁶ This definition allows him to introduce the idea of non-conscious forms of altruism, notably when parents use their bodies for the birth of children, thereby diminishing the strength of their own body (ibid: 233). Interpreted in terms of the means-end relations, this form of altruism would then play a substantial role in his final view of sociality, as we shall see below. Secondly, Spencer held an evolutionary interpretation of the growth of altruism, instead of the historical approach of Comte. At first sight, Spencer appears to follow a meta-historical approach to the rise of altruism: from unconscious to conscious altruism in the family, from

familial altruism to social altruism, and then with a four stages theory of the passage from egoism to altruism (see Table 2) as a consequence of his views on the evolution of cooperation cast into the means-end distinction (ibid: 161-164).

Table 2: The Means-end relation and cooperation according to Spencer

Forms of cooperation	Homogeneous ends	Heterogeneous ends
Homogeneous efforts	Simple	Complex¹
Heterogeneous efforts	Complex²	Complex³

In the case of simple cooperation, the distribution of the product is easy to do since the end is common to those involved in the process and the means are also the same. Complex forms of cooperation are not so easy to organise since they require a system of equivalence: between means, then between ends, and finally between both means and ends. As equivalence is encapsulated in contracts, his approach yields a four-stage theory of the birth of altruism (ibid: 276)²⁷. In the first stage, one gets one’s share, or one’s share in respect of egoism; then contracts bind those providing the various means; then market contracts are to be respected – “maintaining, through supply and demand, a due adjustment of the advantages and the labour given” (ibid: 276) – developing within industrial society. These two intermediary stages entail the decline of direct and indirect aggression, engendering the final stage, characterized by an “increase of sympathy leading to exchange of services beyond agreement” (ibid). This four-stages theory is often explained in terms of the calculus of pain and pleasure, and of the way in which the population of egoists or of altruists experiences selection

23. See his “Reason for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte” (Spencer 1864) and his book: *Man versus the State* (Spencer 1882).

24. In his study of the definition and meaning of altruism in Victorian Britain, Thomas Dixon states that “Spencer was by far the most influential theorist of altruism in nineteenth century Britain” (Dixon 2008: 183) and that, beyond what he wrote in his *Principles of Psychology* and *The Study of Sociology*, his *Data of Ethics* was instrumental in the diffusion of the word altruism in Britain (ibid: 190-194).

25. Mill limited himself to a critique of altruism which he interpreted as the leading example of Comte’s extreme views on morality, even if he was most favourable to the cultivation of other-oriented behaviours: “It is as much a part of our scheme as of M. Comte’s, that the direct cultivation of altruism, and the subordination of egoism to it, far beyond the point of absolute moral duty, should be one of the chief aims of education” (Mill 1865: 339).

26. This definition obviously matches the current definition of altruism, in which the altruist benefits from the increased welfare gained by the recipient (Hammond 1987).

27. In both cases, Spencer’s approach is of limited value, since he did not take into account what is now called freeriding. Thus it was easy for him to explaining the passage from one stage to the next, shifting from social benefits to private benefits.

according to the way in which their behaviour fits the social context (ibid: 227, 235).

Finally, Spencer's conclusions were markedly different from Comte's: different in their political significance, different in the form of combination that was to be achieved between egoism and altruism, and different in their relation to political economy. The first difference is clearly expressed when Spencer rules out Comte's motto "Live for others", which he states is as wrong as the pure egoistic motto (ibid: 253). Spencer stressed the need to combine egoism and altruism, but he did not believe in the final step suggested by Comte, where the latter claimed that truly social life means to "live for others", objective behaviours and feelings paving the way for a subjective immortality given by the "life in others", that is to say, those who will retain in their memory a recollection of the objective life of members of past generations. The second difference is related to the fact that Spencer placed emphasis on the paradoxical nature of altruism: would an altruist accept an altruistic offer from his fellow altruist? If he does, and reciprocates, then the final outcome is no more than the initial situation. Accordingly, Spencer is adamant that the point is not to reach a situation in which altruism dominates egoism, but a situation of conciliation between both types of action. This approach is cast in the form of a second four-stages theory (see Table 3), in which competition and compromise on the one hand, egoism and altruism on the other alternate.

Egoism is the necessary starting point, since without a clear effort-reward relation insufficient wealth will be produced, and there will be no possibility of acting altruistically. The first stage is thus a competition between egoistic actors. Then, due to positive externalities – to use a term absent from Spencer's book – a better situation is reached when egoistic actors find a compromise, where nobody claims more than his due share of the wealth produced. With the growth of wealth and

the growth of human capacity to understand feelings experienced by others, altruism intervenes and, as the number of opportunities for altruistic actions declines with the amount of wealth, competition arises over opportunities for altruistic action. The final stage is reached when altruistic actors deliberately leave open the rare opportunities for altruistic action to other (ibid: 296-7).

The ultimate difference is now quite easy to grasp. According to Spencer's evolutionary view, there were various evolutionary processes that moved society from egoism to altruism. Both types of action are thus necessary to engender a wealthy industrial society, contrary to Comte's view, who thought that the real danger embedded within industrial society was the supremacy of egoism over altruism, requiring therefore a cultural change to be made by the positivist clergy, women and the proletarians, thanks to the positive religion of humanity. Spencer's views utilitarian and economic, the most surprising being the idea of "altruistic competition" (ibid: 296); furthermore, his argument was based upon an economic approach – a crude cost-benefit calculation – which limited the debate over altruism versus egoism to the benefit accruing directly or indirectly to individuals. Altruism and egoism were treated as if they were behaviours *on the same continuum*, in sharp contrast to Comte, who considered altruism to be an instinct and a value *different from* egoism, and who distinguished egoistic altruism from pure altruism. As a consequence, Spencer's conception of altruism involved no critique of political economy, whereas such a critique was central to Comte's approach to altruism as a set of instincts distinct from self-interested motivations. It was not by chance that Spencer separated off altruism from the religious content that was so central to Comte's account of altruism: in so doing Spencer excluded the dualistic view held by Comte, a perspective that had been shared with Saint-Simon during their

Table 3: Towards Altruism: Spencer's four stages theory

From egoism to altruism	Egoism	Altruism
Competition	"to get his share"	"no more than his due share of altruism"
Compromise	"no more than his share"	"taking care that others have their share of altruism"

collaboration in the early 1820s. The reaction to Comte's position by contemporary French economists took a different line, since they placed their anti-statist credo to the fore, using Comte's distinctions of wife/husband and family/market to counter his criticisms and his unconventional political conceptions.

Altruism, self-interest and French economic liberalism

By the end of the nineteenth century critique of Comte's ideas was clearly an issue for French liberal economists. In 1864 Reybaud added a long chapter on Comte and positivism, mainly devoted to the vagaries of his personal life and mental illness (Reybaud 1864, I: 284-380). Clémence Royer (1891) wrote a critique of Comte's sociology in Léon Say's and Joseph Chailley's *Dictionnaire de l'économie politique*, so harsh that the editors explained in a footnote that they did not endorse all of his views. André Liesse's entry on sociology was no less critical, claiming that the so-called science of society advocated by Comte had not produced a single positive result; the only sociological author worth reading was Spencer (Liesse 1891). During the same period Maurice Block dealt with the issue of sociology and egoism versus altruism in a book written to update the treatment of the principles and main achievements of political economy since Adam Smith (Block 1890). His assessment of Comte's achievements was negative: sociology, Block wrote, was the fruit of Comte's imagination, and it would never reach the status of a true science (Block 1890, I: 51). Block's main point concerned the confusion between science and art: Comte's synthetic approach was worthless in the domain of science, where the principle of the division of labour compels scientists to specialize. The same line of argument was presented in a chapter devoted to altruism and egoism: Block categorically rejected the idea that economists were preaching an egoistic point of view; instead, they were dealing with "legitimate self-interest" or "enlightened" interest. Paul Leroy Beaulieu concurred with Block, rejecting Comte's "pretense to subordinate political economy to sociology" (Leroy-Beaulieu 1894, I: 64).

Paul Leroy Beaulieu (1843-1916) needs to be singled out when considering the reaction of French economists to altruism. Founder and director of *L'économiste français* (1873-1938), a

weekly newspaper devoted to the diffusion of sound economic ideas among an extensive public, and professor of political economy in different institutions such as l'École libre de sciences politiques and the Collège de France, his public lectures were published in a four-volume handbook which went through six editions from 1896 to 1914. A prolific author, he wrote on issues related to the social question – notably on women as a labour force in large-scale industry (Leroy-Beaulieu 1873) – and like many French political economists of the time, he made significant efforts to spread an understanding of political economy among the middle classes (Leroy-Beaulieu 1888, 1906); in this he was successful, since these two books also went through numerous editions. A fierce liberal and a relentless advocate of European colonization, he was a central figure of French political economy in the decades preceding World War I.

Written as a response to the introduction of political economy in French high schools, his *Précis d'économie politique* stated in its opening pages that, contrary to a common view, political economy "is not a theory of egoism, and has a place for feelings of sympathy" (Leroy-Beaulieu 1888: 5). A society possessing a high level of morality would have obvious economic advantages, such as greater productivity, a reduced amount of speculation, and greater fairness in the distribution of wealth. He came back to this issue in the second chapter of his book on the economic role of the state, lamenting the incomplete view of human action that economists had borrowed from Adam Smith, focussing on self-interest, or more precisely, on the pecuniary interest (Leroy-Beaulieu 1890: 34-5). This is not true, he wrote, notably because with the growth of wealth, the pecuniary interest ceases to be the sole spring of action and religious beliefs; sympathy and a number of other motivations including the refinements of *sport* gave rise "to institutions in favour of the common good" (ibid: 35). Referring to Spencer's views on altruism, he emphasized that charitable institutions resulted from the decision of individuals (ibid: 36). And in opposition to statist thinkers, notably German philosophers (Hegel and Lorenz von Stein) and economists, the so-called "academic socialists" (Adolph Wagner and Albert Schäffle), he stressed the role of self-interested behaviour in the administration in the modern state, the true setting for the development of an obnoxious form of egoism. According to his

(negative) views on republican government, he explained that greedy politicians knew that they were in control for a limited period of time, and that their behaviour was not “driven or moderated by self interest” (ibid: 71). If they were ruled by a feeling of honor then they would look for “what is great instead of what is useful” (ibid.), an administrative vanity that would be worse than self-interested behavior. Altruism and egoism were not to be found where one might expect them.

In the introductory chapters of his four-volume *Traité théorique et pratique d'économie politique*, Leroy-Beaulieu examined in greater depth the issue of egoism and altruism, this time taking a different approach. Based on his own experience as a settler in North Africa, he first emphasized that self-interest is a spring for action found throughout the world, and cannot be attached to a specific moment of history as the Comtean meta-history would have us believe. Then he considered the egoism versus altruism issue. On the one hand, following a longstanding philosophical tradition (Force 2003), he made a distinction between self-interest and egoism or self-love, explaining that egoism had nothing to do with self-interest, because the former was a morbid exaggeration of the latter (Leroy-Beaulieu 1894, I: 68-9). If egoism does not leave room for other feelings, notably “what is called, after Auguste Comte, altruistic feelings or altruism”, this is not true of self-interest, which can be reconciled with other-oriented feelings. He then modified what he had written about Smith's works, explaining that long before Comte, altruism was a core idea of the founder of modern political economy, since “one should not forget that Adam Smith is the author of a *Theory of Moral Sentiments*” (ibid: 71). On the other hand, altruism actually did have an important role to play within political economy. According to him, self-interest was at work whenever the production and distribution of wealth was at stake, but altruism took over in the consumption process and, more generally, within the family (ibid: 71-72). Additionally, the generous donations made by wealthy entrepreneurs in the United States and also in France were of the greatest benefits to their fellow citizens. As a conclusion, he endorsed Spencer's conception of conciliation: “Thus, the principles of self-interest and altruism are not exclusive; they often exist in the same soul and to a high degree, but they do not apply to the same domain. The former motivates men in their economic activities, the latter

guides the spending of their income and wealth” (ibid: 76).

Leroy-Beaulieu's distinction between self-interest in the production of wealth, and altruism or sympathy, in the consumption process within the family, led him to Comte's views on education and inheritance. Like Comte, Leroy-Beaulieu had a most traditional view of woman's role, limited to household work and the care of the children; accordingly, it was better that young women be knowledgeable in the domestic arts rather than be given a formal education (Leroy-Beaulieu 1873: 146-8, 448-9). However, he did not believe it necessary to prevent women entering the modern labour force and, even worse, preventing them from doing so by creating legal and statutory obstacles, since “it is no business of the state to establish virtue, wisdom and health” (ibid: 201). Instead, citing evidence from a manufacturer, he emphasized the beneficial consequences of efforts on the part of wise and other-oriented entrepreneurs in shortening hours of work in their firms, and establishing more humane conditions for women after childbirth. These economic sacrifices are not economically inconsistent, he wrote, since through the improvement of the health and productivity of his labour force “the sacrifice made by the manufacturer was not lost: it brought him a female labour force that was healthier, more assiduous, and more dexterous” (ibid: 438-9). This conciliation of self-interest and altruism was again central to his views on inheritance which, together with saving, was the bedrock of the accumulation of capital. Both are sacrifices for the wellbeing of others (Leroy-Beaulieu 1888: 57-8) and he was pleased to quote Alfred Marshall's view that inheritance could be treated as a form of saving based on “family affection” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1894, I: 597). Following that line of thought, he did not fail to emphasize the need for life insurance as an excellent form of saving, especially for middle-class fathers (ibid: 598; and 1906: 322-3). Conciliation was also at the center of his views on human capital. Personal skills are definitely to be counted as part of the capital of a nation; they are as productive as any other form of capital, and thus yield revenues to the holder of that capital. Nevertheless, he added, “other considerations can and must enter into decisions concerning the use of this specific capital, so strongly related to human personality: sympathy, the interest of Humanity, the love of glory” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1894, I: 244).

Concluding remarks

Throughout these books, directly or indirectly, Leroy-Beaulieu was responding to Comte's strictures on political economy. He disentangled self-interest from egoism, the latter being an excess of self-interest as self-love;²⁸ following Spencer, he explained how self-interest and altruism can be reconciled through a shorter working day and better working conditions. Finally, in line with his positive appreciation of Comte's view on the social *consensus*, that is to say interdependence (ibid: 64), he considered the social dimension of the economy, notably saving and inheritance, including the use of human capital and gift-giving. By the later nineteenth century, therefore, Comte's views were not without influence on methodological debates among economists, and on sociologists such as Spencer and .

However, the religious dimension that had been so important to Comte was lost. Altruism as a new form of religious belief and way of life had no place at all in the perspectives of Mill, Spencer, or of Leroy-Beaulieu on the functioning of modern industrial society. Leroy-Beaulieu thought that Christian and Muslim faiths were sufficient for nurturing the moral values required for the proper functioning of the industrial order, but beyond some specific points of contact, they belonged to two separate spheres of social life.

Altruism as a political challenge to egoism had a different fate, since right up to the present-day the idea of balancing the development of self-interested behavior in the market has remained of importance; albeit not through the affective role of women in the family, but by public behavior understood as gift-exchange and gift-giving behaviours, being studied anthropologically in the lives of native peoples, as it is the case with Malinowsky in the debate over the historicity of "economic man" (Pearson 2000), or in the study of the current functioning of market society, as with the conclusions of Mauss' *Essai sur le don*. Later, Armatya Sen's distinction between sympathy and commitment (Sen 1977), the former being easily combined with self-interest, unlike

28. It is worth pointing out that in his well-known study *Le suicide* (1897), the French sociologist Émile Durkheim followed the same line when he defined egoistic suicide as a result of an *excess* of individualism – he also defined altruistic suicide as a consequence of a lack of individualism. Durkheim progressively excluded the egoism versus altruism issue (Steiner 2009).

the latter, can also be counted as a contribution to this issue, raised initially by Comte in the mid-nineteenth century.

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