

Maria Novella BORGHETTI, *L'œuvre d'Ernest Labrousse. Genèse d'un modèle d'histoire économique*

Paris, éditions de l'EHESS, 2005, 300 p.

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Comptes rendus

Maria Novella BORGHETTI, *L'œuvre d'Ernest Labrousse. Genèse d'un modèle d'histoire économique*, Paris, éditions de l'EHESS, 2005, 300 p.

The historical writings of Ernest Labrousse constitute a central portion of the historical battleground invested by French historians between 1930 and 1960. Of the generals who led the valiant, but ultimately misguided attempt to construct a 'total history' of human experience, he was the least well-known outside the Hexagon. Outside the small world of specialists in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century French history, he was known in America and England mainly through David Landes' critique of his analysis of the distributional effects of price shocks in the grain market. In France, however, his institutional influence in the 1950s and 1960s was unequalled. He animated research into manuscript sources on prices from the Ancien Régime that before the publication of his thesis in 1933 had been subject only to anecdotal exploitation, and he invented a teachable method of analyzing and interpreting them. His erudition and authority, and polemical skills honed by his early career as a Communist Party journalist, made him a leader of the French historical profession. In many respects, however, he remained an outsider, neither a full member of the 'Annales' group, nor a full-fledged adherent to the kind of historical economics imported from the anglophone academy under the rubric of the New Economic History. Like Braudel, his mental world was formed in the 1920s, and he found its furniture fitting and comfortable.

Maria Borghetti has written an interesting study of Labrousse's writings, the most important of which are the *Esquisse*¹ (1933) and *La Crise*² (1944). The study is avowedly hermeneutic, an approach that in the case of someone who was in the last analysis a secondary thinker in the twentieth-century Pantheon, carries both advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantage is compositional. The texts suggest a natural set of topics for organizing a reflection on his approach to history. We thus have chapters on Labrousse's contact with economics in its successive Physiocratic, Marxist and Marshallian disguises; a chapter on the statistical sources and his treatment of them; a chapter on the conception of time implied by his statistical manipulation of the price series, and a chapter on his model and interpretations of his findings. The discussion reveals the mind of a fine historian at work. The disadvantage is that hermeneutics yields insight only where its object is sufficiently complex to warrant imaginative reconstruction. While not simplistic, Labrousse's thought did not attain that order of depth and complexity.

Borghetti nevertheless addresses the classic questions: What precisely is the content of Labrousse's work? What was novel in it, why did it assume so much

importance in the middle years of the last century, and what is its status today? These questions provide the warp on which she weaves a sketch of French economic historiography in the first two thirds of the twentieth century. In this respect, the first chapters reviewing his academic and political itinerary will be useful to the increasing number of persons who did not live through the turbulent middle third of the twentieth century. Her review of Labrousse's troubled relation with the first editors of the *Annales* throws light on that movement's ambivalence to formal economic reasoning and quantification. Her extended discussion of his relation to Simiand's method of doing price history throws light on the intellectual and ideological obstacles that impeded scientific analysis of market processes in the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, her discussion of his relation to Marx and the Communist Party shows how a profoundly honest intelligence attempted to integrate a form of classical economics with the Marxist vision of a society progressing through a sequence of well-defined stages.

Her treatment of Labrousse's conception of historical time and his economic model are less successful. While representing a true advance on methods available in his time, Labrousse's approach to analyzing price movements was primitive, and inadequate to handle the identification problem of assigning their cause. That the ontological status of moving averages deeply concerned him seems clear enough; but there is little one can say on the matter without drawing on the work of contemporary historians and statisticians who faced the same issue. The discussion of his method of modeling also adds little new to what is known. Perhaps the most interesting part of the the latter chapters of this work concern the question why one should read Labrousse today. Borghetti contends, rightly, that for all the flaws in his method, Labrousse believed in an 'objective' history, supportable by facts as reconstructed by an historian's craft. Perhaps a more important reason is that he represents a particular moment in the development of French historiography that warrants a full-fledged history.

George Grantham

Guy THULLIER, *La Réforme monétaire de 1785 : Calonne et la refonte des louis*, Paris, Comité pour l'Histoire Économique et Financière de la France, 2005, 880 p.

C'est un conséquent recueil de documents que nous offre Guy Thuillier, directeur d'études à l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, sur la dernière réforme monétaire de l'Ancien Régime, celle des louis d'or en 1785. Il s'était auparavant attelé à celle de l'an XI qui créa le franc germinal et il est heureux qu'il ait décidé de remonter le temps.

La réforme monétaire de l'automne 1785 fut l'œuvre du contrôleur général Calonne. Elle haussa le rapport de l'or et de l'argent de 1 à 15,5 contre 1 à 14,5 depuis 1726. Celui-ci demeura jusqu'en 1928, exemple rare de longévité et de sta-