

as a consumer of the goods he produced. The era of mass consumption had dawned: the same decades saw a hard-and-fast rationalisation of jobs. This was a transition which affected most of the Italian textile industry, irrespective of the size of the factory. But it was a system which was soon to show its inelasticity: the impact with the crisis of the 1970s revealed the cultural and social failure of the Taylorist production system a long time before its technical and production failure. However, the trade unions, in particular, did not manage to propose a valid plan as an alternative to the one which had hitherto been implemented.

At the end of this brief review, it must be pointed out that Maifreda shows that books which cover a broad time-span need not necessarily have recourse to simplifications which risk losing sight of the complexity of the course of history. Maifreda has succeeded in bearing this in mind, as he follows with intelligence the evolution, over the past two hundred years, of the working class in Italy, one of the protagonists of Italian economic history.

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CHERYL SCHONHARDT-BAILEY, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade. Interests, Ideas and Institutions in Historical Perspective*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2006.

This is a book on a well-known subject, but it is conceived and written in a very original way. It deals with the repeal of the Corn Laws in Great Britain in 1846, a subject which has been extensively studied and discussed by economists and nineteenth-century economic and political historians. It is deemed one of the most important events in nineteenth-century British politics and in the development of international economic policy in the nineteenth century.

In general, when the Corn Laws are mentioned, the historian is referring to a long series of legislative and statutory acts of various kinds which aimed to defend landowners' interests when there was an abundant corn harvest with low prices. Legislative acts with this aim go back to the fifteenth century, but a clearly recognisable policy, in this sense, did not take shape until a law of 1663.

However, this political decision did not attract too much attention among the commentators of the time, both because the influence of mercantilism was still strong and because international economic policy was not devised to maximise trade, but rather to achieve the aim of the power of the state. It was not until about 1750 that the matter began to be the subject of specific deliberation among politicians and economists, both because new schools of thought appeared and because of entirely new economic scenarios.

It was at the end of the eighteenth century that the subject became very fashionable. Shortly before, the 1795 famine and then the publication of Malthus' *Essay* had made people think; and the Napoleonic wars had made the English fear of a corn shortage very real.

It was the Corn Law of 1815 that made it clear why English agriculture was being favoured with the introduction of import duties on corn in order to guarantee a fair price. Provision was also made for forms of subsidies for the export of these products. In short, corn could be imported into England only when it had reached the price of 80 shillings per quarter. Of course this legislative measure did not please consumers. But manufacturers who produced particularly competitive and much-demanded goods were against it too. The classical economists played an active role in arousing this criticism. Adam Smith was the first to condemn these policies in that they were contrary to the principle of free trade; but it was Ricardo who stigmatised it as a means of increasing income and lowering the profit rate: it was, therefore, a measure which was opposed to national interests and favourable only to the class which, in the end, gained from the law of decreasing returns. On the other hand, the workers were hit by it because food prices were high and this affected wages.

It was, therefore, a law which many people opposed, and the governments of the time on several occasions tried to make it less severe, but they achieved only modest results, until, in 1846, the second Conservative government, under the leadership of Robert Peel, repealed the law. The decision caused a serious political crisis which split the Conservative Party, that had been returned to power in 1841 with a programme of openly defending the interests of farmers and of the aristocracy. Only one third of his party followed Peel, whose government very soon went into crisis. The Conservatives were blamed for this change in policy, and consequently they remained excluded from government for several decades.

Even though the repeal of the Corn Laws did not lead to a reduction in the price of corn, as had been predicted, but merely to a stabilisation of the corn market, that "turning point" very soon took on the symbolic significance of the ultimate triumph of free trade.

Henceforth, historical opinion has swung from one extreme to another in judging the repeal of the Corn Laws. And historiographical debate on the subject has been very lively. Some historians are of the opinion that the origins of the repeal of the Corn Laws and the final decision to repeal them lay in the triumph of an ideology; others identify the reasons for the repeal in the institutional and structural changes seen in international trade. Here Schonhardt-Bailey opts for a third reason: it was concrete interests which caused the Corn Laws to be repealed. And, up to this point, the only novelty is the clarity of the conclusion. The book's real novelty lies in the diverse and consequential research methods the author used.

Schonhardt-Bailey has knowledge of political studies, and handles the theoretical categories of this discipline with ease and elegance. In addition, she has a marked tendency to use empirical analysis to verify hypotheses and conclusions. It could be expected that statistical-quantitative instruments would be used in the book, but they are accompanied by instruments of formal logic, by linguistic analyses and common narrative techniques.

Schonhardt-Bailey begins by verifying the three possible explanations for the repeal of the Corn Laws, distinguishing between ideas, interests and institutions, and by posing in analytical terms the problem of the causality between them, dwelling in particular upon interests understood both in economic and political terms.

This path leads the author to carry out research on how the Conservative Party and the Anti-Corn Law League were organised.

If the main aim of those who hold power is to hang on to it, Schonhardt-Bailey needs to show how Members of Parliament proposed to satisfy their electors' interests. Since Members of Parliament had to vouch for different interests according to the economy of their constituencies, they are identified according to the groups of interests they represented, both with reference to farmers and with reference to manufacturers who exported goods. The founding of the Anti-Corn Law League is explained as the establishing of specific economic interests.

A technique similar to that of connecting MPs with their constituencies is applied to "ideas". As was to be expected, the geographical concentration of the textile industry and of export industries played a decisive role in bringing to the fore certain interests and certain doctrines (see pp. 69-70).

As though the analysis were not already complicated in itself, Schonhardt-Bailey introduces a further distinction between two possible interpretations. The first, in line with Ricardo-Viner, tends to identify two opposing groups of interests. The second, proposed by economic historians, on the contrary considers that the shift in interests rendered the distinction between constituencies less rigid, in that agricultural constituencies were diversifying into manufacturing (see p. 107). In order to become a historically valid theory, this outline of interests and ideas needs to be linked with the Members of Parliament who must be differentiated both according to the parties to which they belong and according to their interests and idealistic trends. Members of Parliament are divided into four categories (Non-Peelite Conservatives, Peelites, Liberals and Reformers), and these are examined over the period from 1841 to 1846, putting each MP into a group according to every significant vote. It is shown that the breaking up of the Conservative Party was the consequence of the behaviour of the MPs in urban areas who did not follow Peel in his decision to repeal the Corn Laws.

This shift in interests was also responsible for a reappraisal of doctrine among MPs which led to the disappearance of the deep disagreements between the two alignments. Schonhardt-Bailey examines every speech made in Parliament (a total of 587 speeches made by 205 MPs) and analyses them according to some key words which are processed with a specific programme. Almost one million words are processed to see how words such as wages and prices, electoral connections and the market, and international trade are used in order to show the validity of the hypothesis.

The book ends with a historical analysis of the reasons why the aristocracy voted in favour of the repeal of the Corn Laws, together with a study of the way in which the local press influenced MPs' votes. There are several appendixes which provide all the data for judging the techniques used in the book.

The way in which the book is structured deserves praise. The main argument had already appeared in a paper which Schonhardt-Bailey had written in Los Angeles in 1987, and, at times, the search for ways of corroborating this

argument appears to be almost a desire to endorse a theory she was already convinced of. The wealth of instruments used also sometimes seems overdetermined. But we have to admire Schonhardt-Bailey's imagination in using the most varied research, and the competence with which she masters certain techniques.

The issue which this book aims to address is the fundamental methodological one concerning the connection between political decisions, interests and doctrines. We are not given to understand what exactly drives the chain of events, nor which events are determined by it, and why and by what. In some respects, the techniques used render the historical analysis somewhat rigid and lacking in persuasiveness. But the evidence which is supplied is entirely new and, for the most part, convincing.

Probably the "ideas" component is rather undervalued. At least that is our opinion, mindful of the lesson taught by the classical economists like Adam Smith and J.S. Mill which was very popular at the time. Schonhardt-Bailey is familiar with these writings but, on the whole, this is not the aspect which interests her most. In this respect she is consistent, but she does leave some room for our curiosity.

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J. SHOVLIN, *The Political Economy of Virtue. Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French Revolution*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2006.

This book is a fascinating and interesting comment on eighteenth-century France and on the origins of the social and political changes which took place shortly before the outbreak of the French Revolution. In a decidedly original way, Shovlin analyses the changes in French society (and consequently in European society) over two centuries.

In particular, Shovlin aims to show that, in the eighteenth century, the French élite (high-ranking bureaucrats, the aristocracy of trade, the bourgeoisie and the big financial lobbies) were "anxious" to experience the effects of French power and international competitiveness in everyday life, and thus to enjoy