

Special Session
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The ‘political element’ in the Corn Law Debates, 1813-1846

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The debates on the Corn Laws are generally presented as one of the first major policy issues in which classical economists’ ideas played a noticeable role, as well as an important landmark in the development of political economy itself. Proportionally to the great quantity of parliamentary speeches, petitions, pamphlets, books and administrative documents related to the Corn Laws, an impressive amount of literature has been devoted to the study of these debates, symbolising Britain’s turn to free trade.¹ However, their huge dimension makes it particularly complicated to assess the role economic ideas could have played, from the passing of the 1815 corn law to the rearrangements adopted in the following years, until their repeal in 1846.

That is why the question of the economists’ influence on the issue remains controversial. For example, Kindleberger defended “an ideological explanation [of the repeal of the Corn Laws] based on the intellectual triumph of classical political economists” (Kindleberger 1975, p. 36). Stigler argued against this “great-economist theory” (Stigler 1982, p. 64) and put the emphasis on social factors: “if Cobden had spoken only Yiddish, and with a stammer, and Peel had been a narrow, stupid man, England would have moved toward free trade in grain as its agricultural classes declined and its manufacturing and commercial classes grew” (*ibid.*).

This kind of dispute generally rests, to some extent, on differences regarding how influence is exactly defined, identified and measured. The main problem is that influence could take so many forms, highly dependent on the subject at stake, that the development of a general theory appears extremely complicated, and may be impossible (Senn 2008). This is especially relevant in the case of the Corn Law debates, which encompassed many different issues, while the political, economic and social environment changed dramatically. For this reason, any attempt to reach a straightforward conclusion about the influence of economic ideas on these debates would be unreasonable. The first step of the reasoning should rather be to define the terms of the relationship in which influence is exerted, by tracing the path of the arguments based on classical political economy throughout the policy making process.

One of the striking characteristics of the debates on the Corn Laws, despite the traditional opposition between Malthus and Ricardo, is that all the economists were

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¹ Historical researches have focused on specific aspects of the debates: the state of agricultural production, and the social and economic effects of an opening of the trade; the political setting of the debates, and the rise of new political movements, such as the Anti-Corn Law League; the place occupied in this framework by famous figures like Robert Peel or Richard Cobden. The most comprehensive attempt to explain the outcome of the debates has been made by Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey (2006).

favourable to free trade in principle. Divergences among them must have come from additional hypotheses, “found somewhere between, on the one hand, statements of facts and theoretical analysis and, on the other hand, political conclusions” (Myrdal 2017 [1953], p. xli). In other words, all the economists broadly shared the same ‘beliefs’ about the virtues of free trade, but had different ‘valuations’ of its benefits for society.² Although it is utterly impossible to disentangle value judgments from theoretical and empirical analyses, the study of the process through which political economy’s ideas were combined to other elements of dominant political languages, and by the way translated in the terms of political debates, is highly necessary to estimate their influence on the making of public policies.³ Indeed, language will be understood here in Pocock’s sense, as “the institutionalized mode of speech which makes [an act of utterance] possible” (Pocock 2009, p. 88), or as some sort of paradigm, which operates “so as to structure thought and speech in certain ways and to preclude their being structured in others” (Pocock 2009, p. 89).⁴

Working on political languages could explain why Ricardo’s stance on the Corn Laws first appeared as an awkward contribution in the debates, as Ryan Walter (2021, pp. 133, 143-144) has shown, and how it acquired a remarkable rhetorical power just a few years later. It could also shed some light on Samuel Hollander’s ‘discoveries,’ according to which Ricardo was in fact not so firmly opposed to the Corn Laws, and Malthus less protectionist than is generally claimed (Hollander 1977, 1992). Much of these reflections actually revolve about the gap between Ricardo’s and Malthus’ ideas on the one hand, and the way they were used in the discussions over time on the other. Our purpose here will be to study carefully the evolution of this gap: the elements added to or withdrawn from a theoretical view of free trade and its benefits, shared by all the economists, to fit in political discourses. This will lead us to characterize specific meanings and uses of political economy in the debates, in order to assess the role played by economic ideas on their evolution.

The early parliamentary debates, ending with the passing of the 1815 corn law, were dominated by an eighteenth century, traditional whig style of political discourse, where references to political economy are relatively scarce, and are in fact references to Smith’s thought, more precisely to the exceptions he allowed to the application of free trade (section 1). The political setting considerably changed with the radical thrust of the 1820s, causing new arrangements and alliances to emerge. References to political economy and its ‘principles’ rocketed at that moment in the Corn Law debates, as they were integrated to both dominant political languages of the decade – a modern whig discourse influenced by the radicals, and a tory rhetoric drawing on Christian political economy (section 2). Following the victory of the whig-radical position at the 1830 general election, the idea according to which free trade was among the first conditions to economic prosperity, social progress and political liberty was widely diffused in the working-class press, and deeply impregnated social movements like Chartism or the Anti-Corn Law League. While these movements played a decisive role in achieving the repeal of the Corn Laws, the rationale on which they were founded – sometimes

² This refers to the early distinction made by Myrdal (1944, appendix 1, 1027-1034, and 1958, 71-88), between the judgments about what is and ought to be. Myrdal later realized that his belief in such a distinction was “naïve empiricism” (Myrdal 2017 [1953], p. xli), as “the beliefs are shaped by the valuations, but also the valuations depend upon the beliefs” (Myrdal 1944, p. xlix).

³ This kind of translation has been studied intensively by the proponents of the actor network theory. So much that translation has become one of its main concepts. Michel Callon distinguished four stages in the process: problematization, interessment, enrollment and mobilization (Callon 1986, pp. 180-199).

⁴ Pocock immediately adds that “we may not describe [languages] as paradigms if the term implies that preclusion has been successfully effected” (Pocock 2009, p. 89). This is because he also defines languages as “sub-languages: idioms, rhetorics, ways of talking about politics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style” (Pocock 2009, p. 89). These languages could coexist and compete, and “do not typically succeed in excluding one another” (Pocock 2009, p. 89).

associated to the Manchester School – appears very far from Ricardo’s, and most of classical economists’ ideas (section 3).

1. The “political element” in the 1813-1815 debates

The retrospective view of a clash between free traders and protectionists is particularly misleading to understand the discussions of the end of the Napoleonic era. The Corn Laws were presented at that moment as a necessary measure of transition from war to peace, “a war expenditure in time of peace” (Hilton 1977, p. 11) according to the Prime minister lord Liverpool, while his chancellor of the exchequer, Nicholas Vansittart, “defended the Corn bill as a transition from artificiality to normalcy” (Hilton 1977, p. 16). This idea was shared by most members of parliament, who massively approved the measure. The debates were rapidly settled, compared to the next decades, and the bill passed with huge majorities in the Commons and in the Lords.

Equally misleading is the image of a continuity of the influence of political economy on the discussions, from Smith to Ricardo. Political economy was hardly mentioned at all in these early debates, consistently with the works of many historians, who insisted on the fact that it was not yet a reference at the end of the 18th century (Semmel 1970, Willis 1976, Hilton 1977, Winch 1996). While Adam Smith is summoned sometimes in the discussions, it is mainly to support the Corn Laws rather than their repeal. All the references to his writings in the 1814-1815 debates are made by Henry Parnell, the leading defender of the bill, to demonstrate that Smith would not have recommended a liberalization of the corn trade.⁵ Parnell approved Smith’s claim for free trade in general: “were all nations to govern themselves by a liberal policy, it would be their interest to have a free trade in corn” (Hansard 1814, p. 713). As this was obviously not the case, “Dr. Smith does not himself apply this reasoning to the corn trade” (Hansard 1814, p. 713). That is why Parnell insisted on the three exceptions granted by Smith to the principle of free trade: “when a commodity of our growth is essential to our security as a state; [...] when an article of domestic produce has been made subject to internal taxation; [...] when a particular trade has for some time been protected by a restraint on importation (Hansard 1814, pp. 714-715).

Parnell’s developments are, according to Ryan Walter (2021), representative of ‘casuistry’ – a mode of arguing based on the distinction between a principle and the conditions of its applications, which characterized British parliamentary debates until the beginning of the 19th century. This would explain why theoretical arguments based on political economy were inaudible in the British political arena, and also why the economists tried to present their ideas in this manner. Walter argues in this sense that both Malthus and Torrens, in their pamphlets on the Corn Laws, adopted this style of reasoning. Indeed, both of them begin with the affirmation of the theoretical benefits of free trade for the greater number. Their demonstration consisted in introducing concrete hypotheses to determine whether or not it would be profitable in the present state of affairs.

The structure of Ricardo’s argument is different. His reflections on profits and distribution showing the benefits of free trade were developed independently from his policy analysis, and “then collocated in the same pamphlet” (Walter 2021, p. 133). That is why, as opposed to Parnell, Malthus and Torrens, Ricardo’s *Essay on the Influence of a Low Price of Corn* rested on the demonstration of the unconditional benefits of free trade on the one hand, to reject all the exceptions advanced to prevent its application on the other. His essay seemed incompatible with the terms of British political debate and appeared as an odd contribution to the discussions (Walter 2021, p. 133). William Grenville was the only one to employ a rhetoric corresponding to Ricardo’s stance, in the House of Lords. He protested against “the fashion

⁵ Parnell also refers a few times to Chalmers’ accounts (Hansard 1814, p. 710, 942).

always to admire in theory, but always to abandon in practice” (Hansard 1815, vol. 30, p. 193) and declared that: “If the principle were inapplicable, then it must be false and not true. If applicable – if not an abstract speculation, but capable of being adopted as a rule and guide for the conduct and government of nations, it was applicable to all circumstances and to all seasons” (Hansard 1815, vol. 30, p. 194). Grenville devoted the last part of his speech to dismiss all the exceptions listed by the supporters of the Corn Law, which would legitimate protection – the stimulus given to British and Irish agriculture, the independence upon foreign supply, the increase of the price of bread – to conclude that all these considerations “were called upon by no immediate urgency; but, in opposition to all true theory” (Hansard 1815, vol. 30, p. 195).

Lauderdale, one of the leading defenders of the bill, immediately responded that: “There was not one of the general principles contended for by the noble lord (Grenville), that he was not deeper pledged to than most men; but it was necessary to look at the real situation of the country at this time, in measuring the application of these general principles” (Hansard 1815, vol. 30, p. 204). Unlike Ricardo, it is impossible to suppose that Grenville – the son of a Prime Minister who himself became Prime Minister – did not perfectly understand the codes of parliamentary debate and blame him for his inability to use casuistry. His position actually derived from a deeper movement that was engaged a few decades before. Grenville was one of the followers of William Pitt, who seceded from the Whig party in the 1780s (Mitchell 1971, Mitchell 1967, p. 81) and abandoned some parts of the political language associated to it, which continued to play a dominant role in these early years of 19th century British politics. Based on the preeminence of Parliament over the Crown, this language also primarily rested on a critique of the capture of democracy by commercial interests through public finance. In this framework, and despite the complexity of its many varieties (Pocock 1985, pp. 215-310), the Whig political language of the 18th century globally involved, for both political and economic reasons, a sympathy toward the landowner, or an “agricultural bias” (Hollander 1992, p. 657).

The proximity and adherence to this discourse strongly determined the protagonists’s positions regarding the Corn Law. Lauderdale and Malthus, like Smith and Burke, “thought of themselves as [...] political animals belonging to the Whig genus” (Winch 1996, p. 14). All the arguments they develop in support of the corn bill – the justifications to make an exception to the principle of free trade – were deeply impregnated by these values. Malthus’s weighing of the benefits of stable prices and national security on the nation’s happiness in his *Observations on the effects of the Corn Laws* of 1814 or of the consequences of free trade on the revenue of the different classes of society in *The Importation of Foreign Corn* (1815) could not be separated from his political perspective: a lower growth, with a better balance between agriculture and manufacture, limiting the power of the financial elite – the only class which would benefit from free trade (Malthus 1815, pp. 36-42) – and strengthening the position of the landholders, “whose interests are more nearly and intimately connected with the prosperity of the state” (Malthus 1815, p. 34).

The same conclusion could be drawn about Lauderdale’s *Letter on the Corn Laws* (1814), although his arguments were quite different. After having stated freedom of intercourse as the “primary axiom on commercial legislation” (Lauderdale 1814, p. 4), Lauderdale’s whole argument consisted in showing how, in the present state of duties and taxes, free trade in corn would produce the most injurious effects. He tried to demonstrate that “all the various regulations for the conduct of the Corn Trade, from the year 1766 to the present time, have more or less tended to encourage the importation of that commodity” (Lauderdale 1814, p. 21). In other words, British agriculture has for a long time been disadvantaged compared to manufacturing sectors, most of which were protected by import duties, and benefited anyway from “the complicated system of taxation which our great public expenditure has rendered necessary” (Lauderdale 1814, p. 5). Lauderdale alluded here to the sinking fund, which he had denounced at length in his earlier pamphlets (Thomson 1970). This mechanism is accused of

lowering the prices of commodities compared to investment goods, through an artificially low interest rate, whereas the farmers have been exposed to an increased property tax (Lauderdale 1814, p. 52).

As in Malthus's case, it is impossible to disentangle Lauderdale's 'beliefs' – to use Myrdal terms again – regarding the effects of British commercial policy from his 'valuations,' i.e. his preference for a strong agricultural industry (Lauderdale 1814, pp. 53-54; 1805, pp. 44-45) as a way to alleviate the drawbacks of commercial society. It is this preference which sharply distinguishes Lauderdale and Malthus on the one hand, who were raised in "the Whig World" (Mitchell 2005), from Torrens and Ricardo on the other, who were totally alien to this intellectual environment. As Donald Winch has noted: "There could be no more decisive break with the common assumption of eighteenth-century writers, including Smith, that the interest of landowners was always at one with that of the nation under progressive conditions" (Winch 1987, p. 72). And indeed, for Ricardo, "the interest of the landlord is always opposed to the interest of every other class of society" (Ricardo 1815). This political element greatly contributes to explain why, despite their common belief in the merits of free trade, early political economists could reach opposite conclusions in terms of policy.

The 1813-1815 Corn Law debates were still dominated by the political language of the 18th century, associated to the rhetoric of casuistry and Whig political values. The legitimacy of economic arguments was assessed through the reference to Adam Smith more than political economy as a consistent body of knowledge. In this framework, while the Corn Law appeared as a necessary measure of transition right after the war, there was not enough voices in parliament, alongside Grenville, to challenge this political order. The famous clash between protectionists and free traders, personified by Malthus and Ricardo is the fruit of a "retrospective projection" (Walter 2021, p. 132), and simply did not occur at that moment. The role played by Ricardo's ideas was marginal, and the prohibition of foreign corn when the domestic price was below 80 shillings per quarter was easily adopted, thanks to a large consensus.

2. Uses (and abuses) of political economy in the 1820s

The effects of the 1815 Corn Law were disappointing, even for their supporters. Most of them wished for high and stable agricultural prices, but the quarter of wheat fluctuated considerably below (1815-1816) and above (1817-1818) the 80 s. mark before falling dramatically from 1819 to 1822 (Mitchell and Deane, pp. 488-489). Low prices lasted during the whole decade, due to record crops in some regions. Farmers of low yield lands, however, severely suffered from this situation. A new political campaign was launched by the agriculturists and a corresponding series of parliamentary debates ensued on 'agricultural distress' in 1820-1822, punctuated by two select committees in 1820 and 1821. The farmers's demands could hardly stay focused on protective duties, given the actual prohibition of foreign corn. They were now associated to the themes of tax relief – proposing massive cuts in various duties – and currency – asking for cheaper money and criticizing the too rapid resumption of cash payments (Hilton 1977, pp. 127-140).

The government strategy was to attribute all the problems outlined by the landowners to overproduction. This was contested by the agriculturists' representatives, who put the emphasis on an insufficient demand caused by low wages. They stressed the need to invest more in marginal lands, in order to reduce unemployment and feed the whole population. Those who had supported the Corn Law in 1815 were forced to recognize, however, that protection did not permit to maintain high prices, which was their chief objective. That is why many of them progressively abandoned the goal of obtaining high protective duties (Hilton 1977, pp. 128-132). Ricardo perceived this change and noticed "a decided improvement in the public mind" (Sraffa 1951, vol. 9, pp. 151) on this subject. The farmers' flight from high

protection is particularly well illustrated by William Jacob, one of the most influential advocates of the Corn Laws, who later “recommended free trade, as in 1814 he had recommended protection, on the premise that European powers of supply (and competition) were mythical” (Hilton 1977, p. 297). Jacob was a witness of the 1821 committee, and was also summoned before the Lords by Liverpool, to give the conclusions of his enquiries on European agriculture. He delivered a straightforward testimony, stating the great difficulties encountered by farmers on the continent (Hansard 1822, vol. 6, pp. 690-691). This contributed to annihilate a central argument used in support of the Corn Laws, according to which European products would pour in if trade were opened, threatening both Britain’s independence and economic stability. On the contrary, a freer trade – through a rising demand – could now appear as a way to increase British prices, and to cope with temporary agricultural crises. The analytical reorientation of Malthus’s perspective pointed by Samuel Hollander could not be separated from this general change, that led Malthus and many others to consider that “the long-recognized efficiency advantages of free trade” (Hollander 1992, p. 658) now clearly outweighed its costs. In a word, protection was not the issue anymore in the beginning of the 1820s. The programme of prospective corn law reduction and repeal laid down by the 1821 Committee in his report, through his twenty-two resolutions – which include the recommendation for a permanently free trade – illustrates “the important break in official thought on agricultural protection between 1815 and 1846” (Hilton 1977, p. 109).

William Grampp (1982, 1987) put the emphasis on Thomas Tooke’s 1820 ‘petition of the London Merchants for Free Trade’ to demonstrate the same point: that the commitment to free trade policy was irrevocably sealed at that moment. This turn could be seen, according to him, as “an example of the influence of economic theory on the course of policy (Grampp 1987, p. 87). Indeed, the place occupied by political economy changed strikingly in the Corn Law debates. Whereas the term was barely mentioned at all in the first discussions, it had now become common ground to invoke ‘political economy’ and its ‘soundest principles,’ ‘maxims’ or ‘axioms.’ Conversely, references to Adam Smith almost entirely disappeared, as a sign of the fading of the traditional Whig political language and its casuistry arguments. Grampp tended to interpret this change as a progressive conversion of first-rank politicians – particularly Liverpool and Huskisson – to the ideas of political economists, or at least to the idea that “free trade would increase the nation’s income” (Grampp 1987, p. 111). It is true that Huskisson got closer to Ricardo, especially during the 1821 Committee. So much that the latter wrote that “there were very few points on which Mr Huskisson and I differed” (Sraffa 1952, vol. 9, p. 37), as Tooke “believed Liverpool did want the country to practice free trade” (Grampp 1987, p. 90).

On the contrary, Boyd Hilton has argued, basing on the study of their private correspondence, that “Liverpool and his ministers did not believe a word of their public rhetoric” (Hilton 1988, p. 151). Overwhelmed by the numerous and complicated issues of the afterwar period, political economy and *laissez-faire* principles appeared as very useful tools to offer a “do-nothing conservatism” (Hilton 1977, p. 125). This perspective was combined to “Liverpool’s strategy of separating policy and politics” (Hilton 1988, p. 165), real policy-making from the cabinet. That is why Huskisson, despite his remarkable achievements, was promoted president of the Board of Trade in 1823 rather than minister. The Board of Trade played a key role in the policy changes of the following years, supported by the radical Whigs and Tories – an alliance to which Paul Richards referred to as the “Board of Trade party” (Richards 1979, p. 98). Figures like Francis Place or Joseph Hume orchestrated in the shadows the joint repeals of the Spitalfields Acts and the Combination Laws (Gordon 1979, p. 26, 31, Hupfel 2022). Again, the rhetoric of the principles of political economy was widely resorted to during these discussions, and dominated the House of Commons, while the Lords were generally more skeptical. One of the best examples of this new political language, associated to the diffusion of Ricardian orthodoxy (Checkland 1949, Gordon 1979), is certainly given by John Stuart Mill’s articles on the opening of the Silk trade, in 1826. Mill argued exactly in the

way Ricardo had introduced, stating the reasons why free trade would most likely improve the weavers's situation, after having admitted that trade must be opened anyway (Hupfel 2012, pp. 175-177). In other words, Ricardo's rhetoric, which appeared awkward in 1815, triumphed after his death, and the "gradual approach to a free trade system" (Ricardo 1822, p. 1) became the basis of the debates in the 1820s.

However, Ricardian economics never perfectly coincided with a whole set of policy measures. Choosing such a set required additional hypotheses – the political element –, which did not primarily concern the conditions of application of general principles anymore, as it was the case in 1813-1815, but bear on the articulation of a freer trade with fiscal, monetary and social policy. This task was performed by a variety of actors, including the economists themselves, through their essays and pamphlets, but also journalists and leaders of social movements who published articles in the press, or political actors who build alliances in order to control parliament. The role of intermediary actors – which are acting in different of those arenas – seem of primary importance in this process. Huskisson could be considered as one of these actors, who translated economic principles in a coherent political discourse (Winch 1996, p. 25, Waterman 1991). As in 1815, this discourse was definitely conservative. It justified the recourse to market mechanism as natural adjustments, which should in the end guarantee the stability of the social order, the food supply and the currency. Whately and Chalmers, together with other authors associated to Christian political economy, were elaborating their theories in the same spirit. On the opposition side, the radicals criticized the dogmatic resumption of cash payments, and connected free trade policy to the setting up of a liberal political regime, through free association, freedom of the press and, above all, parliamentary reform.

After some slight modifications of the Corn Laws were adopted in 1822 – the limit to allow importation being fixed as 70s. per quarter, with a countervailing duty applied above this price –, new debates occurred amidst the 1825-1826 crisis. Exceptional measures were decided on this occasion to allow foreign corn, which had to be replaced by a more stable framework. The discussions finally led to the adoption of the sliding scale, in 1828: the application of regressive duties beginning when national corn prices equated to 52 s. per quarter and ending ay 73 s. This corresponded to the recommendations made by Ricardo in 1821.

3. The gospel of free trade, from the Reform Act to the rising of the Anti-corn law league

The radical position triumphed in the general election of 1830 that enabled the whigs to come back to power, with the passing of the Reform Act in 1832, and was widely diffused and developed in the working class' press of the 1830s. It is in this context that the idea according to which free trade was the first condition to economic prosperity, social progress and political liberty became so popular. Such a belief deeply impregnated the social movements of the end of the 1830s, like chartism, and especially the the Anti-corn law league, which were the main political forces leading to the repeal of the corn laws in 1846. The rationale on which they were founded were, however, very far from Ricardo's ideas, for example. That could inspire a reflexion about the changes that necessarily should be added to any economic theory in order to fit in the political debate, and achieve any concrete policy reform. This article is an attempt to study the nature of the process at stake, instead of regretting that leading economic theories are not straightforwardly translated into public policies.

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