
Dupont de Nemours and the origin of the maxim 'laissez faire, laissez passer'

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Abstract: Dupont de Nemours begins his 'Lettre à la Chambre de Commerce de Normandie' (1788) with an excerpt from the catholic bible. This quote refers to the Lazarus's miraculous re-birth: "Otez-lui fes liens, & laiffez-le aller."¹ The quote is Jesus' statement upon bringing Lazarus back to life. This reference begins our inquiry into the origin of the laissez-faire maxim. In this paper, we highlight some mistranslations, some historical shortcomings and present our perspective on the origin of the maxim.

Keywords: laissez-faire; capitalism; economic thought; political economy.

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1 Introduction

Maxims, according to MacGregor (1949, p.55), “are ordinary words which on some occasions are used with special emphasis in some reference.” ‘*Laissez-faire, laissez-passer*’ is without doubt the most well-known maxim of political economy. Regrettably, its exact origin has been lost to the history of economic thought. To be exact, it is not so much lost as that there are several conflicting claims, none of which are definitive. For example, Jacob Viner credits its origin to Adam Smith in a lecture delivered in 1749 in which Smith would have even used an English equivalent of the very phrase ‘*laissez faire*’: “Projectors disturb nature in the course of her operations on human affairs, and it requires no more than to *leave her alone* and give her fair play in the pursuit of her ends that she may establish her own designs...” (Viner, 1927). MacGregor (1949, p.54) identifies the core problem with this claim, “The English classical economists did not use this phrase at all, until Mill pronounced it a rule of general practice in 1848. Neither does it occur in Adam Smith, nor Malthus, nor Ricardo, nor McCulloch, nor Senior.”² As MacGregor notes, these omissions should be suggestive as Smith had met and befriended a number of the prominent French political economists during his extended visit to France.

This paper will argue that ‘*laissez-faire, laissez-passer*’ as a maxim of political economy, used in the sense that we deploy it today, can be ascribed to the physiocrats in general, and specifically to one of the first and most prolific promoters of the new field of political economy, Dupont de Nemours⁴. Traces of evidence in favour of such a view can be found throughout the literature. Viner (1927, p.200) ultimately ascribes its ownership to Smith and highlights that: “It even uses an English equivalent of the very phrase ‘*laissez faire*’, which The Physiocrats were soon to make the war cry of the system of natural liberty.” To develop our argument, it will be necessary to review several alternative claims first before buying out the evidence for Dupont’s primacy.

Let us begin with a well-known but apocryphal story concerning the origins of the phrase *laissez faire, laissez passer*. Consider the account by Sumner (1886): “The story goes that a certain French minister of state, desiring to exert himself for the benefit of the governed, called the merchants of Paris to a conference. He asked them what he could do for them. His idea of doing something for them was not as new as he supposed it was. In fact, they had had a large experience of that sort of thing already. They therefore answered ‘*Laissez-nous faire*’. Their answer has passed into a proverb and a maxim.” Sumner does not provide us with any reference to confirm his story. However, he could have found it in Turgot’s (1759) ‘*Eloge de Gournay*’.⁴ What can we infer from this absence of reference? First, it leaves us with the impression that the origin of the maxim *laissez faire, laissez passer* was common knowledge. Second and the more important for this essay, it suggests that there was, and is, no consensus over the origin of this famous maxim.

In the late 1880s, William Graham Sumner refers to *laissez-faire* as less a scientific theory than a practical maxim of policymaking. He specifically invokes it in opposition to the German *Verein für Socialpolitik*, the model of the many German trained economists who formed the American Economic Association in 1885 (Sumner, 1886; Coats, 1960; Rodgers, 1998). In his essay, Sumner wrote that: “Laissez-faire is so far from meaning the unrestrained action of nature without any intelligent interference by man, that it really means the only rational application of human intelligence to the assistance of natural development” [Sumner, (1886), p.228]. By referring to nature, one can readily observe how Sumner’s thinking is parallel to that of the physiocratic school.⁵

Over the years, the origin of ‘laissez-faire, laissez-passer’ has been ascribed to several different authors, indicating that no clear consensus exists. Viner (1927) warns: “There is always great danger lest what we credit to a writer as priority of doctrine may not in reality be merely an indecent exposure of our own ignorance concerning his predecessors.” This may explain why there is as of now no clear scientific evidence on priority or originality.

We may never know the full answer. However, we can still investigate the question most germane from the perspective of the history of economic thought. This is not who first pronounced the actual words, so much as who reformulated and publicised them as a maxim of the emerging science of political economy: the physiocrats’ war cry according to Viner. As quoted by Webb (1926, p.436), Cairnes declared in 1870: “Political Economy is ... very generally regarded as a sort of scientific rendering of this maxim [of *laissez-faire*].” As we will show below, the maxim predates all economists. In fact it has a biblical origin. In order to sift through the various competing claims in the course of identifying who was the first to use the maxim, we will review several important original sources (Sections 2 and 3). We will also re-examine the intellectual context of this period as well as the educational background of these économistes. We will find that ‘laissez-faire, laissez-passer’ was elevated to a maxim of political economy by one of the most vocal of the physiocrats: Dupont de Nemours (Section 4). Section 5 will conclude.

2 De Gournay’s *laissez-faire, laissez-passer*

The maxim being in French, its association with the physiocrats must be granted high probability. In 1888, Auguste Oncken tentatively identifies Vincent de Gournay⁶ as the first to use the phrase ‘laissez faire, laissez passer’. Oncken writes: “L’addition *laissez passer* ne s’est d’ailleurs faite, paraît-il, que d’une manière complètement incidente” [Quesnay and Oncken, (1888), p.672]. It can be established that marquis de Mirabeau⁷ used to open his house every Tuesday to the *economists*. Abby Baudeau, Dupont de Nemours, Turgot, and de Gournay were known to be in regular attendance. Oncken suggests that de Gournay would have stated the maxim ‘laissez faire, laissez passer’ at one of these gatherings in late 1758: “vers la fin de l’année 1758, dans une réunion de l’école physiocratique à laquelle de Gournay assistait” (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888). However, there is no evidence that de Gournay left behind any writings that included this maxim. Oncken gives a few more details in an important footnote: “Ce n’est qu’à partir de 1768, et en se basant sur de Gournay, qu’elle fut usitée dans ce sens, en premier lieu par le marquis de Mirabeau dans son étude sur la *dépravation de l’ordre légal, lettre de*

M. B. à M.” (*Ephémérides*, 1768), où il dit: “Un autre (de Gournay), plus ardent encore (que M. Herbert), sut dans le sein du commerce ou il avait été élevé, puiser ses vérités simples et naturelles, mais alors si étrangères, qu’il exprimait par ce seul axiome qu’il eut voulu voir gravé sur toutes les barrières quelconques *laissez faire et laissez passer.*” [Quesnay and Oncken, (1888), p.671].

Dupont de Nemours, who published the *Lettre de M. B à M.* referred to in the above quotation, was also in regular attendance at the Tuesday meetings at Mirabeau’s house. Thus, if de Gournay were its author, Dupont would likely have known it. However, a year after Mirabeau’s attribution of this phrase to de Gournay, Dupont in his 1769 introduction to Turgot’s *Réflexions* in the *Ephémérides*, summarises Gournay’s doctrine as “Laissez faire, laissez passer pour la traduire” [Literally: let do, let pass to translate it]. Notice that Dupont does not say that de Gournay used these exact words. Yet, by presenting ‘laissez faire, laissez passer’ as Dupont’s own shorthand translation [traduire] of de Gournay’s doctrine, he in effect establishes the phrase as his own maxim.⁸

But the story does not end here. Consider the following important, but problematic, attribution to de Gournay that comes from Comte d’Albon.⁹ In Claude-Camille François (1775, pp.42–45) wrote:

“C’est ici que Quesnay s’est rencontré avec le sage M. de Gournay, Intendant du Commerce, son Contemporain, qu’il estimait, qu’il aimait & fut la personne & fut les disciples duquel il se plaçoit à fonder une partie de l’espoir de sa patrie. M. de Gournay étoit arrivé à ce résultat pratique, par une route différente: personne, disoit-il, ne fait si bien ce qui est utile au commerce que ceux qui le font; il ne faut donc point leur imposer des réglemens. Personne n’est si intéressé à favoriser si une entreprise de commerce, si un établissement de fabrique, si l’exercice d’une profession lui fera profitable ou non, que celui qui veut le tenter; il ne faut donc ni corporations, ni jurandes, ni privilèges exclusifs. Personne ne peut être sûr de tirer le plus grand profit de son travail, s’il n’est pas libre de le faire comme il l’entend, & s’il est soumis à une inquisition & à des formalités gênantes. Tout impôt sur le travail ou sur le voiturage, entraîne des inquisitions & des gênes qui dérangent le commerce, découragent & ruinent les Commerçants; il faut donc affranchir leurs travaux de ces impôts qui en interceptent le succès... *Laissez les faire & laissez-les passer.*”

The above paragraph represents Comte d’Albon’s summary of de Gournay’s doctrine. The question is whether the *laissez les faire & laissez-les passer* sentence appearing at the end of the above quotation is also Comte d’Albon’s own phrase or is it a direct quotation from de Gournay? Two elements of it are highly suggestive. First, if it were a direct quotation of de Gournay, Comte d’Albon would have written it inside quotation marks rather than in italics. Nevertheless, he chose italics: it is reasonable to suppose that he wanted to wrap up in one sentence – a maxim – de Gournay’s doctrine. Second, the absence of an explicit reference suggests that the phrase was common knowledge at that time.

More certain is that it was not Comte d’Albon’s sentence. As previously mentioned, Dupont’s 1769 introduction to Turgot’s *Réflexions* in the *Ephémérides* summarises de Gournay’s doctrine as “Laissez faire, laissez passer pour la traduire.” In light of d’Albon’s statement, the options are the following: first, it is Gournay’s maxim and everybody in 1775 knows it from Mirabeau’s *Lettre* in 1768, published in the *Ephémérides* by Dupont. Second is that it comes from someone else, and here the options are fivefold: Le Gendre, Quesnay, Boisguilbert, d’Argenson, or Dupont.

3 Le Gendre's *laissez-nous faire*

Turgot is an important reference for the position that Le Gendre was the first to develop and employ the phrase 'laissez-faire'. In 1759 in 'Eloge de Gournay'¹⁰, Turgot (1759) refers to the assumed reply of Le Gendre to Colbert¹¹:

"Il faut dire que ce prétendu système de M. de Gournay a cela de particulier, que les principes généraux en sont à peu près adoptés par tout le monde; que de tout temps le vœu du commerce chez toutes les nations a été renfermé dans ces deux mots : *liberté* et *protection*, mais surtout *liberté*. On sait le mot de M. Le Gendre à M. Colbert: *laissez-nous faire*. M. de Gournay ne différait souvent des gens qui le traitaient d'homme à système, qu'en ce qu'il se refusait, avec la rigidité d'un esprit juste et d'un cœur droit, aux exceptions qu'ils admettaient en faveur de leur intérêt."

In 1793 Dugald Stewart also credits Le Gendre with the 'laissez-faire' maxim: "The fortunate expression *laissez nous faire*, which an old merchant (Le Gendre) is said to have used in a conversation with Colbert; and the still more significant maxim of the Marquis d'Argenson, *pas trop gouverner*, are indebted chiefly for that proverbial celebrity which they have now acquired, to the accidental lustre reflected upon them by the discussion of more modern times" (Stewart, 1793). Most likely, Dugald Stewart read this version of Le Gendre's story in Turgot's *Eloge* as he often referred to the *Ephémérides* in this essay.

Higgs (1897) states: "Du Pont attributes to Gournay the origin of the famous maxim 'laissez-faire, laissez-passer' which Gournay indeed seems to have popularised. But a study of Turgot's *éloge de Gournay* shows that the expression *Laissez-faire* is really due to Le Gendre, a merchant who attended a deputation to Colbert about 1680 to protest against excessive state regulation of industry, and pleaded for liberty of action in the phrase *Laissez-nous faire*." Higgs defends the authority of this above quotation in the following footnote:

"See Professor Oncken's *Die Maxime Laissez-faire et Laissez-passer, ihr Ursprung, ihr Werden*, – (Berne, 1886). The erudite professor of history, Lord Acton, in his introductory lecture at the University of Cambridge, refers to "the economic precept *Laissez-faire*, which the eighteenth century derived from Colbert" [The Study of History, (1895), p.30], and quotes from the *Comptes rendus de l'Institut, vol. xxxix. p.93*, in support of this statement; but, as stated above, the phrase was really a remonstrance against the settled policy of Colbert, which was, except for the aim at economic unification of the nation, directly opposed to this precept."

Higgs argues for the priority of Le Gendre by referring to Turgot in the body of his text. He then refers to Oncken and Lord Acton in the footnote, although neither author gives very precise references. Lord Acton invokes the *Comptes rendus de l'Institut*. However, one must recall that from 1776 to 1781 (the year of his death) Turgot was a member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres* created by Colbert in 1663. It was the second oldest of the five branches of the Institut. The report Lord Acton referred to may have been influenced by Turgot's writings.

4 Boisguilbert

However, Higgs (1897) continues: “Boisguilbert¹² and D’Argenson had used it [laissez-faire] also before Gournay, who may, however, be said to have made it classical in its later form. His personal influence stimulated many persons, notably Turgot; and Du Pont mentions a number of writers as belonging to his ‘school’ – the commercial rather than the agricultural advocates of free trade.”

First, let us review the case of Boisguilbert. Higgs draws upon the authority of Beer to establish his priority. Beer (1939) locates the first hint of the phrase ‘laissez-faire’ in the writings of Pierre le Pesant, sieur de Boisguilbert (1646–1714). Beer claims that Boisguilbert’s book, *Traité de la nature, culture, commerce et intérêt des grains* (1707) influenced Quesnay. However, Beer misrepresented Boisguilbert’s statement. He cites Boisguilbert’s *Dissertation sur la nature des richesses, de l’argent et des tributs, ou l’on découvre la fausse idée qui règne dans le monde à l’égard de ces trois articles* (1707) as stating: “Il n’y avait qu’à laisser-faire la nature” (Beer, 1939). In fact Boisguilbert wrote ‘laisse faire’, and the precise passage from his text is in contradiction to what Beer presented,

“La nature donc, ou la Providence, peuvent seules faire observer cette justice, pourvu encore une fois que qui que ce soit [d’autre] qu’elles ne s’en mêle; et voici comme elles s’en acquittent. Elles établissent d’abord une égale nécessité de vendre et d’acheter dans toutes sortes de trafics, de façon que le seul désir de profit soit l’âme de tous les marchés, tant dans le vendeur que dans l’acheteur; c’est à l’aide de cet équilibre et de cette balance que l’un et l’autre sont également forcés d’entendre raison, et de s’y [sou]mettre.

La moindre dérogeance, sans qu’il importe dans lequel des deux, gêne aussitôt tout; et pourvu que l’un s’en aperçoive, il fait aussitôt capituler l’autre, et le veut avoir à discrétion; et s’il ne lui tire pas l’âme du corps, ce n’est pas manque de bonne volonté, puisqu’il ne tiendrait pas à lui qu’il n’en usât comme dans les villes pressées par un long siège, où l’on achète le pain cent fois le prix ordinaire, parce qu’il y va de la vie.

Tant, encore une fois, qu’on laisse faire la nature, on ne doit rien craindre de pareil; ainsi ce n’est que parce que l’on la déconcerte et qu’on déränge tous les jours ses opérations que le malheur arrive.” (Daire, 1966)

Two lessons can be drawn from this passage: first, Boisguilbert may be one of the first to apply ‘laisse faire’ as a doctrine of political economy, as opposed to a policy specific to a particular industry or sector. Boisguilbert’s ‘laisse faire’ as a political economy rule should be contrasted with Le Gendre’s ‘laissez-nous faire’ as a specific request from the merchants of France. Nevertheless, as Boisguilbert writes this passage in 1704 (first published in 1707), he may also have benefited from Le Gendre’s earlier statement. Second, and this is important, is the reference to the role of providence.

5 Quesnay and d’Argenson

From our above analysis of Comte d’Albon still remain Quesnay, d’Argenson, and Dupont. To begin with Quesnay¹³, Beer (1939) ascribes the phrase ‘laissez passer, laissez faire’ directly to Quesnay, and supports this attribution by referring to Quesnay’s writings

published by Oncken (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888). The chapter in question is titled *Lettre de M. Alpha, maître es-arts, à l'auteur des Ephémérides sur le langage de la science économique* dated from October 1767. It is an anonymous letter written by M. Alpha – in fact Quesnay – to Dupont de Nemours in response to a letter sent by an anonymous M.A.B.C.D. This anonymous author criticised the expressions used by the *economists* and published in the *Ephémérides*.

In his *Notice abrégée* from October 1767 preceding this letter written by Quesnay, Dupont writes: “On trouve ensuite une *Lettre de M. Alpha, maître es-arts, sur le langage de la science économique*. Cette *Lettre* est une discussion fort exacte et fort gaie, à laquelle l’auteur du *Tableau économique* s’est livré vis-à-vis d’un anonyme qui, sous le nom d’A.B.C.D., critiquait quelques expressions employées par les meilleurs écrivains économiques, dans le temps même ou il était involontairement forcé de convenir de leur justesse.” According to Dupont, Mr. Alpha is Quesnay, and according to Oncken (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888) Mr. A.B.C.D. must be one of Quesnay’s rivals: M.F. Veron de Forbonnais.

In his letter, Quesnay writes:

“Vous, Monsieur [referring to Dupont], avec les auteurs que vous appelez vos maîtres, et avec tous les économistes leurs disciples, vous prétendez que la liberté et la facilité du commerce de toute espèce doivent toujours être parfaites, entières, absolues, afin qu’il en résulte *la plus grande concurrence possible*; vous ne connaissez qu’une seule règle du commerce, c’est (pour me servir de vos propres termes) de *laisser passer* et de *laisser faire* tous les acheteurs et tous les vendeurs quelconques; vous soutenez que par cet *unique* moyen on est assuré d’acheter toujours au meilleur marché possible tout ce qu’on achète, et de vendre toujours tout ce qu’on vend au meilleur prix possible.” (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888).

Quesnay uses the phrase *laisser passer et laisser faire* but attributes the maxim directly to Dupont.

Beer, in drawing upon the authority of this exchange to attribute authorship of the maxim to Quesnay, may have been misled by Oncken’s first footnote on p.671: “Nous sommes ici en présence du seul endroit où Quesnay a touché en passant la maxime: *Laisser faire et laisser passer*.” Hence, Beer could have misinterpreted the use of the verb ‘touche’. He may also have been misled by the title of the letter itself: *Lettre de M. Alpha, maître es-arts, à l'auteur des Ephémérides sur le langage de la science économique*, which could be interpreted as a letter to the author of the piece on the language of economics published in the *Ephémérides*. In understanding it this way, Quesnay would not address Dupont but Mr. A.B.C.D. as the author of the piece on the language of economics. However, when reading the opening of the letter, it is evident that Quesnay is addressing Dupont: “J’ai lu, Monsieur [referring to Dupont], dans le *Journal d’agriculture* du mois d’août dernier, la *Lettre*, d’un adversaire [referring to Mr. A.B.C.D.] de la nouvelle science économique où l’on tâche de tourner en dérision cette science, ses auteurs et ses adhérents, et de répondre à la réfutation que vous avez faite, dans vos *Ephémérides*, du livre des *Principes et observations économiques*.” (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888)

Furthermore, Oncken states in the same footnote that Quesnay never used the maxim in his own writing: “Ainsi qu’on le voit, elle [referring to the maxim] se trouve seulement dans une citation, mais non dans les propres explications de l’auteur où d’ailleurs on ne la rencontre jamais;” and p.672: “Dans tous les cas, il est faux que la rédaction première de

cette maxime ait été attribuée à Quesnay. Cela est arrivé, par exemple, dans un article intitulé: *François Quesnay* par Réveillé-Parise, et quelquefois cité, qui a paru dans le *Moniteur* du 26 novembre et du 14 décembre 1848, et dans lequel il est dit: "C'est à Quesnay qu'on dut la [grammatical mistake] fameux axiome: Laissez faire et laissez passer" (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888). The two lessons we can take from this are that Quesnay is not the author of this maxim, and that he attributes it to Dupont in 1767.

Let us now check the case of the Marquis d'Argenson¹⁴, as raised by Higgs. D'Argenson is known to have said 'pas trop gouverner' (do not govern too much) (Stewart, 1793). Oncken wrote with precaution: "Dans les manuscrits, la devise s'est, à notre connaissance, présentée pour la première fois, mais sous la forme de *laissez faire*, dans les Mémoires du marquis Voyer d'Argenson, vers l'année 1736, où il dit (t. V, page 364 de l'édition de 1858): "Laissez faire, telle devrait être la devise de toute puissance publique, depuis que le monde est civilisé" (Quesnay and Oncken, 1888). However, Boisguilbert wrote 'laissez faire' prior to d'Argenson who may have later been influenced by him.

6 Dupont de Nemours's laissez-faire

Was Turgot mistaken on the origin of the 'laissez-faire' maxim? As we have seen, there is evidence for two claimants: either Le Gendre or Gournay. Turgot was a close friend and protégé of Gournay. In 1755 and 1756 he accompanied Gournay, then intendant of commerce, in his tours of inspection in the provinces. In light of this, it is striking that in the *Eloge de Gournay* – a 1759 essay written explicitly to celebrate his friend Gournay's accomplishments – Turgot attributed the origin of 'laissez-nous faire' to Le Gendre.

Interestingly, Gournay has been attributed the authorship of 'laissez-faire' by Dupont de Nemours in 1808, but not in 1769 when Dupont assigned credit for the maxim to himself. Yet, it is also the case that Dupont clearly knew of Turgot's reference to Le Gendre. This is affirmed by his reference to 'laissez-faire' in the introduction to Turgot's *Réflexions* published in Turgot's oeuvres by Dupont de Nemours in 1808. Apparently we have a contradiction, or at least a puzzle. Especially since Quesnay also credits Dupont with its origin in his Letter of 1768.

To resolve this puzzle let us take another, closer, examination of the terminology used in each of these texts. Eugene Daire in his 1844 introduction to Turgot's *Eloge de Gournay* credits the maxim *laissez-faire et laissez-passer* to de Gournay. However, Daire draws upon Dupont's earlier introduction to Turgot's *Eloge de Gournay* for his source. Dupont states: "Il en conclut qu'il ne fallait jamais rançonner ni régler le commerce. Il en tira cet axiome: *Laissez faire et laissez passer*" (Dupont, 1808). Daire took this last sentence of Dupont's as if it were drawn directly from Turgot's text. It was not.

Earlier, Dupont in his introduction to Turgot's *Réflexions* published in 1769 (written 1766) in the *Ephémérides* summarises Gournay's doctrine as "Laissez faire, laissez passer pour la traduire". Note that Dupont earlier ascribes this maxim as one to be inferred from Gournay, whereas later, in 1808, he directly attributes it to him. It is this latter reference that Daire, and then the economics literature, picks up on. So which of Dupont's texts is in error? The introduction to the *Réflexions* in 1769 or the introduction

to the *Eloge* in 1808? Additional references will, we believe, tilt the balance toward the earlier reference being the most accurate.

First is the *Notice abrégée* to the *Ephémérides* in 1769. Second, is the *letter to Normandie* of 1788, when Dupont cites the biblical source. Clearly, this establishes priority over all earlier uses, and at one level, renders moot the point as to who was the first to actually give voice to the phrase.

The use of *Laissez-faire* et *laissez-passer* as a maxim was, it is now apparent, embedded in the intellectual debates of this era. For example, the authors of the Report to the National Convention of 1792 pleaded in favour of a policy of internal free trade in grains. Specifically, they asked for *laissez-passer*.

This establishes its ‘common knowledge’ along with its use as a maxim. To most listeners and readers of that time, *laissez-faire* would be an idea associated with a miracle: bringing France’s economy back to life, just as Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. Insofar as *laissez-faire* was considered a natural law that is drawn upon natural order (see esp. Quesnay and, to a lesser extent Turgot on this), it is appropriate to locate the ultimate origin of this maxim in the French translation of the bible.

7 Conclusions

Turgot ascribes the phrase to Le Gendre in *Eloge de Gournay*. Dupont ascribes the phrase to Gournay in his *Notice historique sur Turgot*. Comte d’Albon ascribes the phrase to Gournay in his *Eloge to Quesnay*. Quesnay ascribes the phrase to Dupont in 1767 in his letter to the author of the *Ephémérides*.

Three origins may be in fact described: one is for *laissez-faire*, one is for *laissez-passer*, and one is for *laissez-faire, laissez-passer*.

First, Le Gendre is likely the author of *Laissez-nous faire* in 1680. The political economy meaning came later in 1707 with Boisguilbert. D’Argenson refined it in 1738. Although without a real political economy background, the earlier source – Le Gendre – is the story retained by Turgot in 1759.

Second, *Laissez-passer* is likely to have been said by de Gournay in 1758. It was an addition to the already existing *Laissez-faire* which was common knowledge among these *économistes*. Mirabeau in 1768 – published by Dupont – ascribes the maxim ‘*laissez-faire, laissez-passer*’ to de Gournay. However, it was well-known that Dupont took some liberties in editing the texts of his authors.

Third, *laissez-faire, laissez-passer* is most likely Dupont’s maxim. If Dupont were not its actual creator, then at a minimum he was the intellectual who publicised the maxim, and made it famous. Quesnay clearly ascribes the maxim to Dupont in 1767, Dupont takes the ownership in 1769. Repositioned as a maxim, after this date it appears regularly in the *Ephémérides*.

Ultimately, each of these authors of ‘*laissez-nous faire*’ is invoking the biblical reference. We also know that every intellectual of that time had received a strong religious education. It follows that everybody was familiar with the Lazarus episode. We also know that they frequently drew upon biblical citations while discussing political economy. The ‘*laissez-aller*’ – according to Dupont – is a political economy reinterpretation of the biblical episode. Le Gendre, Boisguilbert, d’Argenson, and perhaps even more importantly Turgot, were aware of this. Hence the real question is not the creation of the sentence, but who was the first to employ it in the context of political

economy? Here, if nobody could claim the full ownership because of its origin in the bible, the one who should be attributed the most credit as the real 'trumpeter' is, without any doubt, Dupont.

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Notes

- 1 Evangile Felon S. Jean, C. XI, v. 44.
- 2 According to Max Handman: "The term 'laissez faire' was first used in English by Franklin in his *Principles of Trade* (1774). He cites the story of the colloquy between Colbert and Le Gendre but without much regard to all the implications of the term." (Handman et al., 1931)
- 3 Dupont de Nemours (1739–1817) was the eloquent popularizer of physiocracy, editor of the *Gazette du Commerce* and, from 1769, the *Ephémérides du Citoyen*.

- 4 Jacques Turgot (Baron de l'Aulne) (1727–1781) was perhaps the leading economist of 18th Century France. Turgot had close friends and disciples in Abbé Morellet, Dupont de Nemours, and the Marquis de Condorcet.
- 5 This name was coined by Dupont in 1767 in *La Physiocratie: ou constitution essentielle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain* to identify the emerging French school of economics. *Physis* and *Kratein* mean respectively 'nature' and 'rule', in other words the 'rule of nature'.
- 6 Vincent de Gournay (1712–1759) was a wealthy merchant. He was in government service as intendant du commerce from 1751 to 1758.
- 7 Victor Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau (1715–1789) was one of the first members of Quesnay's inner circle. Mirabeau was also the Physiocrat best-acquainted with Cantillon, whose work he consulted when crafting his 1756 treatise. Most of the public first became acquainted with Quesnay's Tableau through its reproduction in Mirabeau's *L'ami des hommes*: Pt. 6 (1760).
- 8 Another query that we will never be able to answer is whether de Gournay was himself inspired by Turgot's story. If yes, and as the story was written in 1759, it means that the 'laissez-faire' axiom was already common knowledge and may truly be attributed to Le Gendre.
- 9 Claude-Camille Francois Comte d'Albon (1753–1789) was a model of a liberal aristocrat of the pre-revolutionary period in France – philanthropist, agricultural improver, town planner, pamphleteer, minor politician, even lesser littérateur, and patron of the arts. He associated with the physiocrats, and was an editor of Abby Baudeau's *Nouvelles Éphémérides* (1775–1776).
- 10 The 'Eloge de Gournay' began as a letter intended to be of assistance to M. Marmontel who, as an older and more established person, was charged with writing a memorial to the recently deceased de Gournay.
- 11 Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683) was the quintessential statesman of the Ancient Regime: he was the Intendant of Mazarin and Superintendent of Louis XIV. For over 20 years, he was the actual administrator of the kingdom's affairs.
- 12 Pierre le Pesant, sieur de Boisguilbert (1646–1714) was a radical anti-Colbertiste. Residing far away from the French court he had some space to think and speak. An avid proponent of minimalist government, he has been credited as the 'father' of the physiocrats and for that reason a 'grandfather' of the French Liberal School.
- 13 Francois Quesnay (1694–1774) became in 1749, the personal physician of the King Louis XV's mistress, the Madame de Pompadour. Quesnay settled in Versailles, and for this reason had access to the highest circles of power. He was elected to the Académie des sciences in 1751 and became acquainted with the philosophes, who admired his accomplishments in the field of medicine despite his relatively humble origins. Quesnay's interest in economics emerged in 1756, when, hoping to draw on his country background, he was asked to contribute several articles on farming to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert. Quesnay drew upon the works of the Maréchal de Vauban, Pierre de Boisguilbert and Richard Cantillon to formulate his own well-regarded economic theory. In 1757, the Marquis de Mirabeau became his first convert. Mirabeau was followed by Mercier de la Riviere, DuPont de Nemours, and several others. In 1758, Quesnay wrote his Tableau Économique – renowned for its well-known 'zig-zag' depiction of income flows between economic sectors. While its purpose was to explain his doctrine, and was greatly acclaimed by his contemporaries, it must be admitted that it has left many of today's scholars perplexed.
- 14 René-Louis de Voyer Marquis d'Argenson (1694–1757) was state secretary of foreign affairs from 1744 to 1747.