

Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy

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Author

Listed:

- Whatmore, Richard
(University of Sussex)

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Abstract

Republicanism and the French Revolution reassesses Jean-Baptiste Say's political economy by locating the author's ideas amidst the intellectual upheavals of Old Regime and revolutionary France. Traditionally Say has been portrayed as a rather staid figure, the archetypal liberal and classical political economist devoted to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. This study reveals the historic Say to have been altogether different; a passionate and committed republican intellectual and French patriot, he was as opposed to Britain's constitution, commerce, and political culture as he was to Bonaparte's First Empire. The relationship between Say's political thought and political economy, evinced in the full range of his writings from 1789 to 1832, is scrutinized for the first time, elucidating the true origins of his republicanism. This derived from a rich seam of political speculation

among French and Genevan radicals concerning the possibility of transforming large and corrupt monarchies into modern republics whose political culture was characterized by commerce and virtue. By the 1790s such ideas had come to define the French Revolution itself, at once promising to restore French greatness and replace Britain as the leading cultural force in Europe. Say looked back to such luminaries as Diderot, Gibbon, and Franklin as members of the modern republican Pantheon and dedicated his life to formulating a political economy that would persuade legislators and ordinary citizens to embrace the republican creed.

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