

*A Treatise on
Political Economy*



*Antoine Louis Claude
Destutt de Tracy*

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Antoine Louis Claude
Destutt de Tracy

TRANSLATED BY
THOMAS JEFFERSON



EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JEREMY JENNINGS



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The text of this edition is the translation by Thomas Jefferson,
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*Introduction to the
Liberty Fund Edition*

Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy was born in 1754, the son of a distinguished aristocratic and military family that traced its lineage back to 1419, the year in which four Scottish brothers named Strutt joined the army of the future Charles VII of France to fight against the English. At his father's deathbed, the young Antoine promised to pursue a military career. This he duly did, joining the company of the Black Musketeers at the age of 14, later attending the school of artillery in Strasbourg, and eventually serving in the Revolutionary army as second-in-command of the cavalry under Lafayette in the war against Austria. After inheriting the lands of his family estate, in 1779 he married Emilie-Louise de Durfort de Civrac, a cousin of the Duke of Orleans. The king and queen of France signed their marriage certificate.

As the first stages of the French Revolution began to unfold, Destutt de Tracy was elected to represent the nobility of the Bourbonnais at the Estates General, called by Louis XVI to meet at Versailles in May 1789. We know little of his actions or views at this time, but it seems that he was in favor of the reform of the old monarchical and feudal system. This became clear in April 1790, when, first in a brief parliamentary speech and then in a short pamphlet, he sought to refute Edmund Burke's charge that the Revolution would end in bloodthirsty disaster.¹ Contrary to the claims of his illustrious adversary, Destutt de Tracy maintained that France was in the process of establishing a constitutional and hereditary monarchy that would guarantee the liberties of the individual. He was not of the opinion that France should slavishly imitate English institutions.

1. *M. de Tracy à M. Burke* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1790).

This early optimism was quickly dissipated as the Revolution pursued a course closer to the one predicted by Burke. On the grounds of his aristocratic birth, Destutt de Tracy was arrested and imprisoned in November 1793, securing his release the following October in the wake of the overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre and the end of the Reign of Terror. He had been lucky to escape the guillotine. It is in this experience that the origins of Destutt de Tracy's attempt to outline what he came to describe as the science of "ideology" can be first discerned.

Despite pursuing a military career, Destutt de Tracy did not neglect his academic studies. Moreover, as a parliamentary representative in Paris, he joined the elegant and influential *Société de 1789*, and it was here that he was to meet many of the great minds of his generation and many of those with whom he was to work closely in later years. In 1792 Destutt de Tracy moved his household to what was then the small village of Auteuil, on the western outskirts of Paris. The philosopher Condorcet likewise moved there in September 1792, and it was here that the widow of Helvétius held her famous literary and philosophical salon. At the home of Madame Helvétius, the spirit of the *philosophes* and of enlightenment still reigned supreme, and it was here that Destutt de Tracy began to absorb the sensationalist psychology of Condillac and the precepts of Helvétius's morality of self-interest. He also became close friends with the physiologist Cabanis, from whom he learnt that human nature was the proper object of study for both doctors and moralists. Together both might improve the nature of the human species.

Destutt de Tracy, therefore, became one of a group of intellectuals—later to be known by the collective name of the *Idéologues*—who sought to formulate a philosophical response to the violence and frenzied rhetoric of the Terror.² To explain the Terror, they believed, the springs of human

2. For further reading on Destutt de Tracy and the *Idéologues*, see Emmet Kennedy, *A Philosopher in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of "Ideology"* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978); Cheryl B. Welch, *Liberty and Utility: The French Idéologues and the Transformation of Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); B. W. Head, *Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985); and Martin S. Staum, *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

action had to be fully explored and the workings of our intellectual faculties soundly analyzed. Only then could the questions that had so divided opinion during the Revolution be settled. Philosophy would put an end to revolutionary barbarism and provide a solid foundation upon which the Republic could be established.

With a new constitution and the establishment of the Directory in 1795, it appeared that the Idéologues would have the opportunity to turn their ideas into practice. That same year saw the foundation of the *Institut National*, within which was to be housed a Class of Moral and Political Sciences. This itself was to contain the Section of the Analysis of Sensations and Ideas, and it was to this body that Destutt de Tracy was elected in February 1796. Now, for the first time, he came to formulate the goals and methods of “ideology,” or the “science of thought.” Upon the achievements of this new discipline, he believed, rested the possibility of all human advance. At a minimum it entailed an almost limitless enthusiasm for the possibilities of conceptual reform, a characterization of religious belief and speculative metaphysics as obsolete sources of wisdom, and the search for means of perfecting our intellectual capacities. The intellectual possibilities and practical applications of this new science appeared unbounded. Beginning with an analysis of the self, it would explore grammar (the science of communicating ideas) and logic (the science of discovering new truths) before moving on to investigate education, morality, and, ultimately, politics. Ideology, not religion or the discredited prejudices of the past, was to be our infallible guide.

The political thrust of this message was not unduly difficult to discern. Destutt de Tracy, like his fellow Idéologues, was against monarchy and the Church; he was for a secular morality and moderate republican institutions; he believed in progress through the diffusion of knowledge and educational reform. In brief, he defended the bourgeois republic established after the Thermidorian Reaction of 1795.

How, then, did he respond to the rise of Napoléon Bonaparte and the establishment, first, of the Consulate and then the Empire in 1804? Initially the Idéologues and Napoléon seemed to see each other as natural allies, but the emperor soon concluded that they were a disruptive and unwelcome presence. He came to see them as metaphysicians, prone to idle speculation and eager to meddle in the affairs of government. Moreover, in the

interests of stability and order, Napoléon was prepared to reach a compromise with the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, Napoléon closed down the Class of Moral and Political Sciences, thereby indicating that political theory would not be tolerated, and promoted the condemnation of the Idéologues as conspirators and atheists.

Faced with this new and hostile climate, Destutt de Tracy and his colleagues retired from public life and comforted themselves with their scientific and philosophical investigations. In Destutt de Tracy's particular case, this encouraged his resolve to complete his monumental inquiry into the component parts that, in his view, made up the various elements of ideology. Fortunately the investigation began at a level of abstraction that would ensure that all matters of practical application could be safely left aside for some time to come, as questions relating to politics and political economy could be answered only when the arduous philosophical groundwork of attaining "a complete knowledge of our intellectual faculties" (*A Treatise on Political Economy*, 9) had been finished.³

It is this that explains why *A Treatise on Political Economy* appears as the fourth part of the *Elements of Ideology* and why, on several occasions in the text, Destutt de Tracy insists that his is "not properly a treatise on political economy" but the "first part of a treatise on the will," which itself is "but the sequel of a treatise on the understanding" (*TPE*, 252). For us better to understand our text, therefore, we might briefly pause to consider the content of the first three parts of the *Elements of Ideology*. The first part appeared initially in 1801 and was subsequently republished in 1804 under the title *Idéologie proprement dite*. Destutt de Tracy here sought to establish, following Condillac, that the source of all knowledge lay in our sense impressions. From this he went on to analyze the four mental faculties of simple sensation, memory, judgment and will. The second part of the *Elements of Ideology* appeared in 1803 and was entitled *Grammaire*. According to Destutt de Tracy, grammar was not only the science of signs but also a continuation of the science of ideas. Accepting that it would not be possible to create a perfect language that would always accurately reflect reality, the

3. Page references to *A Treatise on Political Economy* are to the Liberty Fund edition and are cited in the text as *TPE*.

ambition was a more modest one of correcting and improving our present vulgar language in order that we might more clearly and correctly express our ideas. Destutt de Tracy was here partly inspired by a reaction against what he saw as the verbal excesses of the French Revolution. The third part of the *Elements of Ideology*, entitled *Logique*, was published in 1805. At this point Destutt de Tracy's purpose was nothing less than to establish a universal principle of certitude. Put simply, he did this by arguing that sense experience was free of error. As he explained in the "Supplement to the First Section of the *Elements of Ideology*" found in the present volume, he had reduced the whole science of logic to two facts: "we are perfectly, completely, and necessarily sure of all that we actually feel" and "none of our judgments, taken separately, can be erroneous" (32).

Thus it was that Destutt de Tracy began his examination of political economy by restating the previously established philosophical premises upon which this investigation was to be built. The first part of his argument was therefore as follows: Our needs and means, rights and duties, derived from the faculty of the will. Since to want something was to possess something, it followed that the idea of property and our conception of the self and of personality arose naturally. Thus, the concepts *yours* and *mine* were derived directly from the faculty of the will and the injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself was "inexecutable" (64). Our desires were the source of our needs, and from this derived our ideas of riches and poverty, for "to be rich is to possess the means of supplying our wants, and to be poor is to be deprived of these means" (72). Liberty was understood as the power to execute our will, to act according to our desires, and therefore was "the remedy of all our ills, the accomplishment of all our desires, the satisfaction of all our wants" (78). Constraint was the opposite of liberty and was "the cause of all our sufferings" (78). As such, liberty was to be equated with happiness and was "our only good" (80). It was our duty to satisfy our needs "without any foreign consideration" (87). The goal of the "true society," accordingly, was "always to augment the power of every one, by making that of others concur with it, and by preventing them from reciprocally hurting one other" (90). Only when these points had been established did Destutt de Tracy feel that he could move on to an analysis of the mechanisms of production and distribution.

Destutt de Tracy, like Thomas Jefferson, saw the difficulties that this approach might pose to his readers, fearing that they “will be impatient at being detained so long in generalities” and that his treatment of the subject might appear “too abstract” (10). He was, on the other hand, unrepentant. He would be very sorry, he avowed in the “Advertisement,” if anyone “should be able to accuse me of having passed over some links in the chain of ideas” (11).

However, life in Napoleonic France for a dissident philosopher was never without its difficulties. Destutt de Tracy’s original intention had been to supplement the first three volumes of the *Elements* with a further three volumes on the moral, economic, and political sciences. But views critical of the Imperial government were subject to rigorous censorship. In 1806–7, therefore, Destutt de Tracy interrupted the completion of the *Elements* and wrote an extended critique of Montesquieu intended to serve as the basis for his projected discussion of economics and politics. With no hope of its publication in France, Destutt de Tracy sent the manuscript to Thomas Jefferson, with whom he was already in correspondence. The latter, despite minor reservations over the nature of executive power, was sufficiently impressed with the text to secure its translation and anonymous publication in 1811 under the title *A Commentary and Review of Montesquieu’s “Spirit of the Laws.”*⁴ In general terms, Destutt de Tracy recommended a system of what he termed “national government,” resting upon free but indirect elections, civil liberty (including freedom of the press and from arbitrary arrest), legal but not economic equality, and a society in which every citizen would benefit from the liberalization of commerce and industry. Crucially, liberty was defined not (following Montesquieu) as doing what one ought to want but as the ability to do as one pleases. Moreover, he argued that the American constitution far better exemplified the principle of the division of powers than did its English counterpart admired by his illustrious predecessor. It is not difficult to understand why Jefferson was impressed by Destutt

4. On this episode see Gilbert Chinard, *Jefferson et les Idéologues d’après sa correspondance inédite* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1925), 31–96. In 1817 a French version appeared in Belgium without Destutt de Tracy’s permission. The authorized edition was published in Paris in 1819.

de Tracy's manuscript, since it harmonized quite remarkably with his own political philosophy and gave external confirmation of the soundness of the famed principles of Jeffersonian democracy. In a letter to Destutt de Tracy dated January 26, 1811, Jefferson wrote that he considered it "the most precious gift the present age has received" (Chinard, 74).

Encouraged by Jefferson's lavish praise, Destutt de Tracy resumed work on the proposed fourth part of the *Elements*, under the title *A Treatise on Political Economy*. In doing so he reproduced (at times verbatim) the arguments relating to luxury, taxation, public debt, and money to be found in the later sections of the *Commentary*. Again the text was sent to Jefferson with a view to securing its translation in the United States, and again it met with the enthusiastic approval of the American. To the publisher of the *Commentary*, W. Duane, Jefferson wrote on January 22, 1813: "The present volume is a work of great ability; it may be considered as a review of the principles of the Economists, of Smith, and of Say. . . . As Smith has corrected some principles of the economists and Say some of Smith's; so Tracy has done as to the whole. He has in my view corrected fundamental errors in all of them" (Chinard, 105). Nevertheless, publication in America was seriously delayed. The volume finally appeared in 1817, some two years after the French version was brought out under the title *Éléments d'Idéologie, IV partie: Traité de la Volonté*. The interminable delay in securing publication had many causes, but when, finally, Jefferson received the manuscript in English translation he found it, as his correspondence reveals, to be "wretched," "abominable," and "mutilated" (Chinard, 138, 141, and 140). To Lafayette, he remarked that it "had been done by a person who understood neither French nor English" (Chinard, 150). By his own account, therefore, Jefferson was obliged to revise it as best he could. Working up to five hours a day for two months or more during the spring of 1816, he eventually produced a translation that, if "unexceptional," was at least "faithful" to Destutt de Tracy's original version (Chinard, 138 and 141). It was, however, Jefferson who decided to depart from the pagination adopted by the author in order, as he told John Adams, "to prepare the reader for the dry, and to most of them, uninteresting character of the preliminary tracts" (Chinard, 145). Nonetheless, Jefferson did not begrudge his arduous labors on Destutt de Tracy's behalf. To the Frenchman he confided that "this, I believe, is the

country which will profit most from your lessons” (Chinard, 170). For his part, Destutt de Tracy returned the compliment, indicating that, as an inhabitant of a Europe where the spirit of liberty had been oppressed and broken, all his hopes and affections lay with the United States (Chinard, 179).

What, then, were the distinguishing features of Destutt de Tracy’s outline of political economy? Most obviously he disputed the theory of production associated with the physiocratic orthodoxy of the eighteenth century. This entailed, first, a rejection of the physiocratic notion that agriculture was the primary source of wealth and, second, a repudiation of the attachment of the physiocrats to a centralized state as a vehicle of economic progress. At issue was a fundamental disagreement about the nature of productive activity, for Destutt de Tracy wished to argue that to produce was to give to things a utility they did not previously possess and, therefore, that all labor from which utility arose was productive. This meant, in contradiction to physiocratic doctrine, that agriculture could be reduced to a branch of manufacturing industry possessing no distinctive characteristics. A farm was “a real manufactory” and a field was “a real tool” (*TPE*, 106). All those who labored and who belonged to “the laborious class” (107), be they manufacturers or merchants, were producers of utility and, therefore, of riches or wealth. This had a further radical implication: whereas the physiocrats had been prepared to argue that the “sterile” class was largely composed of those not engaged in agriculture, Destutt de Tracy overturned this idea, countering that “the truly sterile class is that of the idle, who do nothing but live, nobly as it is termed, on the products of labours executed before their time, whether these products are realized in landed estates which they lease . . . or that they consist in money or effects which they lend for a premium” (107).

Viewed thus, society could be described as “nothing but a succession of exchanges” (95) from which all the contracting parties can be said to benefit. “It is,” Destutt de Tracy clarified, “this innumerable crowd of small particular advantages, unceasingly arising, which composes the general good, and which produces at length the wonders of perfected society, and the immense difference we see between it and a society imperfect or almost null, such as exists amongst savages” (97). This multiplicity of exchanges rested upon three causes of prosperity: the concurrence or uniting of men to labor

in a common endeavor, the increase and preservation of knowledge, and the division of labor. Accordingly, the richest society was one where those who worked were “the most laborious and the most skillful” and who produced the greatest utility (109).

Following Jean-Baptiste Say, Destutt de Tracy believed that all productive activity could be divided into three operations: “theory, application and execution” (113). Seldom in advanced societies were these three activities now performed by the same person, and, consequently, it was possible to identify three species of laborer: the savant or man of science concerned with invention, the entrepreneur who directed and financed the enterprise, and the workman who executed the physical labor required to complete the process of fabrication. All three were entitled to financial reward, but the savant and the workman would always be in the pay of the entrepreneur. Such, Destutt de Tracy declared, “decrees the nature of things” (116), and it was, therefore, only just that the entrepreneur should be rewarded for “the quantity of utility which he will have produced” (116). Next, Destutt de Tracy extended this analysis to include the activity of trade or commerce, arguing that the merchant, being “neither a parasite nor an inconvenient person” (133), was also, exactly like the industrial entrepreneur, a producer of utility. It was thus no exaggeration to say of these two groups that they were “really the heart of the body politic, and their capitals are its blood” (201).

Having explained how wealth was created and who created it, Destutt de Tracy turned his attention to issues of consumption. Consumption, in his view, was the contrary of production and we were all consumers. However, consumption came in various forms, and Destutt de Tracy was eager in particular to make a distinction between that of “idle” and “active” capitalists (199). The expenditure of the former, he contended, largely deriving from a fixed income in the form of rent or interest on capital, was devoted to their personal satisfaction and, as such, was “absolutely pure loss” and “sterile” (199). In its extreme form it degenerated into “unbridled luxury” (199), the excessive and superfluous expenditure that was both “repugnant to good sense” (204) and damaging to the economy. In contrast, the active capitalist was modest in his consumption patterns. “Industrious men,” Destutt de Tracy wrote, “are commonly frugal, and too often not very rich” (200). They spent little to satisfy personal and family needs and returned their capital

to the productive process, thereby increasing the growth and circulation of wealth throughout society.

Patterns of consumption were linked to questions of distribution. This, in turn, raised the issue of the unequal possession of wealth. According to Destutt de Tracy, a natural inequality existed between individuals, deriving from their differing faculties and abilities. This natural inequality was extended as our material wealth increased. Conflicts of interest were inherent to this situation. Did this mean that class conflict was inevitable and permanent? Destutt de Tracy did not think so. First, although we each had particular interests, these were frequently changing. Next, all of us—employers and employees—were united by the “common . . . interests of proprietors and consumers” (167). In brief, we all benefited if property was respected and industry prospered. This was best attained through “the free disposition” (189) of labor and, in Destutt de Tracy’s view, if wages were both sufficient and constant. As he commented: “humanity, justice and policy, equally require that of all interests, those of the poor should always be the most consulted” (179), but to this he added that “the real interests of the poor” were “always conformable to reason and the general interest” (180). For example, to reduce the lowest class of society to “extreme misery” would be to encourage “the death of industry” (182–83).

It was clearly no part of Destutt de Tracy’s plan that government should seek to eradicate the consequences of natural inequality. To attempt to do so would be vain. Rather, in his view, “in every society the government is the greatest of consumers” (217) and its expenditure, even when necessary, was unproductive and thus sterile. To the extent that taxes encroached on productive consumption and took “from individuals the wealth which was at their disposition” (220), it should be reduced to a minimum. It was even more desirable that governments should not contract debts as the evidence of the recent past proved that “public credit is the poison which rapidly enough destroys modern governments” (250). Destutt de Tracy similarly lamented the government issue of paper currency, seeing it as a form of theft and a cause of inflation.

Destutt de Tracy was never to finish his *Elements of Ideology*. Around 1815 he started to go blind, and his plan to extend his inquiries from economy to morality got no further than an essay on love (duly sent to Jefferson but

first published in Italy in 1819). He lived until 1836, sitting in the Chamber of Peers and maintaining a distinguished salon frequented by both Benjamin Constant and the novelist Stendhal. Long before his death the philosophical climate had turned against the scientific aspirations of *idéologie*, but this could not detract from the fact that in his *Treatise on Political Economy* Destutt de Tracy had written one of the classics of nineteenth-century French economic liberalism.

Note on the Text

As the introduction makes clear, when Thomas Jefferson finally received the translation of Destutt de Tracy's text, he was not pleased with what he found and thus set about revising and correcting it as best he could. "The claim of the present translation," he wrote in the Prospectus, "is limited to its duties of fidelity and justice to the sense of the original." In preparing this edition I have sought to approach Destutt de Tracy's text and Jefferson's translation in the same spirit and have, therefore, kept revisions to a minimum.

Certain changes have been made in terms of presentation. I have restored the paragraph structure of the original French text. I have done the same with the use of italics and capitalization, as the English version used these randomly. I have similarly removed the vast number of dashes deployed needlessly in the translation. I have likewise endeavored to correct typographical errors and, upon a few occasions and where necessary, have corrected the translation. I have retained the page order of the English translation, where the Abstract or Analytical Table appears at the beginning rather than at the end of the book.

All translations present the translator and editor with dilemmas. Destutt de Tracy's text in its Jeffersonian version is no exception to this rule. As far as possible I have modified the translation of key terms only when if left unchanged they would confuse the modern reader or obscure the meaning of the text. Below I set out the specific decisions I have made with regard to key terms.

Agriculteur: Rather than the original "agricoliste," I have chosen the more familiar "farmer."

Besoin: Although we might more normally translate this as "need," I have retained its translation as "want."