

TURGOT, ANNE-ROBERT-JACQUES (1727–1781)

Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot was an economist and a statesman. Turgot was associated with the Physiocratic school of economics and was a strong supporter of reforms during his political career. He came from an old Norman family, but seldom used his title, Baron d'Aulne. His family wanted him to become a priest, so he was educated at the college of Louis-le-Grand before taking a degree in theology at the seminary of St. Sulpice and at the Sorbonne. It was while studying theology that Turgot discovered political economy and wrote his first essays on economics and history, most notably, "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" (1750), in which he made the first of several contributions to the development of the "four stages theory," also called the stadial theory, of economic and social development from hunter gatherers, to pastoral society and herding, to settled agriculture, and to the peace and prosperity made possible by commercial society. In 1751, he decided not to enter the priesthood, preferring instead a career in royal administration. In December 1752, he was appointed a councilor to the Paris *parlement*, where he served from 1753 to 1761; in 1753, he purchased the office of *maître des requêtes* (or legal advisor).

Turgot's early writings included a defense of religious toleration (in *Lettres sur la tolérance*, 1753) and several articles written for Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in 1755 (including "Fairs and Markets" and "Foundations"). Although Turgot was forced to withdraw from any further formal association with the Encyclopedists because of his official position, he was able to maintain contact with enlightened circles through the salon of Madame Geoffrin. It was during the mid-1750s that Turgot came into contact with members of the French free-market school of economics known as the Physiocrats. He met Dr. François Quesnay and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours and traveled extensively with Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay (who was then the Intendant for Commerce) on his tours of inspection around the country during 1753–1756. Gournay is reputed to have coined the expression "laissez faire, laissez passer" when asked what government economic policy should be. When Gournay died in 1759, Turgot wrote a lengthy "Eloge de Gournay" in which he defended Gournay's laissez-faire economic policies with an eloquence often lacking in other members of the Physiocratic school.

Turgot had two opportunities to put free-market reforms into practice: on a local scale when he was appointed Intendant of Limoges in 1761–1774 and on a national level when the new King Louis XVI made him Minister of Finances. During the first period, Turgot combined economic

and legal reform with a concerted propaganda effort to defend his reforms in a series of memoirs, memos, and formal opinions that were disseminated both within the government and publicly. Turgot's attempted reforms were extensive and comprise a veritable "revolution in government." Had they succeeded, the French Old Regime might well have opened up its economy, overcome its internal economic problems, and thus averted the Revolution that was to break out in 1789. Turgot aimed to make taxation more equitable, spend tax revenue on roads and other infrastructure, replace forced labor obligations (such as the *corvée*) with paid labor, end military requisitioning of goods and transport, and make service in the local militia voluntary. Those reforms were accompanied by the publication of his most important economic works, the *Mémoire sur les prêts d'argent* (*Memoir on Lending Money*) (1770); and the *Lettres sur la liberté du commerce des grains* (*Letters on Free Trade in Grain*) (1770), which were addressed to the Abbot Terray in an effort to prevent the free trade regulations that had been promulgated in 1764 from being revoked. His major work, *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1766), offers one of the clearest statements of the Physiocratic position. What emerges from those works is a clearly articulated and impassioned defense of individual and economic liberty. One distinguishing feature of Turgot's approach is that he did not share his fellow Physiocrats' faith in enlightened despotism, preferring more extensive political liberty (such as constitutional limits on royal power and strong regional government), more in keeping with Montesquieu's ideas. When the American Revolution broke out, he followed events there with a keen interest.

The death of King Louis XV in May 1774 gave Turgot his second opportunity to introduce free-market reforms to France. Louis XVI appointed Turgot first as minister of the navy and then as finance minister in 1774–1776. As finance minister, Turgot attempted to reproduce on a larger scale the reforms he had pioneered at Limoges. In his Six Edicts of 1776, Turgot tried to bring an end to official corruption and military requisitioning, abolish many local monopolies, introduce reforms in banking and taxation, and return to internal free trade in grain. Unfortunately, his efforts failed due to the political inexperience of the new king, the ability of the vested interests who were being harmed by reform to organize against it, and the food riots that broke out as a consequence of a food shortage and rising prices (the famous "guerre des farines"). Turgot was forced to resign in May 1776, and France's experiment in free-market reform came to an abrupt end.

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See also Cantillon, Richard; Enlightenment; Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat de; Physiocracy; Smith, Adam

Further Readings

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