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JEAN-BAPTISTE SAY  
AS A BENTHAMITE UTILITARIAN\*

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This article aims at solving one of the puzzles of Say's value theory – was it Smithian or utilitarian? – and discussing another one: was Say as a utilitarian following a French tradition or was he – as he pretended to be – a Benthamite? In the first (1803) edition of the *Traité d'Economie Politique*, Say took a rather Smithian position on value, although he had already distanced himself from the Scottish philosopher in his annotations of the *Wealth of Nations* in his own copy. Later it greatly annoyed him that the *Traité* had earned him the reputation of being a Smithian. Between 1814 and 1823 he fought another battle on value with David Ricardo. Between the latter's death and his own in 1832, it seemed that he was still struggling with Ricardo's ghost. By contrast, Say's relationship with Jeremy Bentham has not been a topic of great interest in the history of ideas. From Say's visit to England in 1814 till Bentham's death in 1832, they entertained a correspondence on a variety of subjects, generally more personal and political than economic. But Say was a self-confessed Benthamite, a position consistent with his subjectivist ideas on value. It remains an intriguing question why he did not trace back his own utilitarianism to French 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Helvétius, who had also influenced Bentham. It is my conclusion that Say is both a positive utilitarian (in his theory of value) and a normative one (in his political philosophy) and accordingly deserves to be ranked among the classical utilitarians.

## 1. Introduction: Jean-Baptiste, homme du dix-huitième

In John Bonner's delightful book on economic utilitarianism from Bentham to Edgeworth there are chapters on these two heroes, on Mill father and son, on Jevons and Sidgwick. But there is no mention at all of a self-confessed Benthamite who corresponded and was familiar with Jeremy himself, with Etienne Dumont and with the Mills: Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832). Bonner even states that "Perhaps the historical accident was that utilitarianism remained a particular British phenomenon for so long"<sup>1</sup>.

The French classical economist Say was Bentham's junior by almost twenty years, but he outlived him for only a few months. Not only did they both live through the eventful years of the French Revolution and the Restoration period, but they also shared a number of recognized intellectual ancestors – French no less than British. And there is even a parallel in their research agenda's, albeit Say's was a little more modest. Bentham's programme in law, economics and politics has been well

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1. J. BONNER, *Economic Efficiency and Social Justice*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1995.

known since his own time and through the work of his pupils. In recent decades the Bentham Project at University College (London) has greatly added to our knowledge by the systematic publication of manuscripts and previously published works.

Say's reputation is primarily that of a classical subjectivist economist with regard to value theory – apart from his fame as (one of) the author(s) of Say's Law and as one of the first economists to recognize the importance of the entrepreneur's role. Much less credit has been given to him for his utopian book *Olbie* (1800) and his *Essai sur le principe d'utilité* (1825). Only recently it has become fully known that he intended to publish a treatise on *Politique Pratique* and to elaborate his utility essay into a book on the subject. The "Oeuvres Complètes de J.B. Say" project at the University of Lyon II will make the Say papers as accessible as the Bentham manuscripts in the coming years, and has already succeeded in stimulating a broader interest in its author.

I will measure Say against John Bonner's seven criteria for economic utilitarianism, and argue that he deserves a high score by all of these. The criteria are: 1. A single overriding objective; 2. Consequentialism; 3. Welfareism; 4. Individualism; 5. Equality; 6. Aggregation; 7. Measurement. My conclusion will be that Say should be fully recognized as a worthy continental, classical utilitarian economist.

J.B. Say as an economist is a man of the nineteenth century. However, he had lived half his life in the eighteenth century (and not as an economist) before he published his utopian essay *Olbie* in 1800<sup>2</sup>. Three years later he published the first edition of his *Traité d'Economie Politique*, which earned him the reputation of being a Smithian, at first probably to his enjoyment but very soon to his great annoyance. What had been his eighteenth century past and his ideological formation?

Say's father had a commercial career in mind for his son, and even sent him – together with his younger brother Horace, who later died as a general in Napoleon's Egyptian campaign – to England on an apprenticeship in the eighteen-eighties. Soon after the French Revolution, Say moved from insurance into journalism, and for the larger part of the nineties he was the general editor of the republican organ *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique*. Now this was the organ of the movement of the *Idéologues*, the followers of Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy (the latter only coined the name *Idéologie* in 1796). The older generation of this movement had gathered in the salon of Helvétius' widow, where Benjamin Franklin was one of the visitors.

2. *The Social Economics of Jean-Baptiste Say; markets and virtue*, ed. by Evelyn Forget; London-New York: Routledge, 1999. This is a very scholarly book, summing up the state of the art in J.B. Say studies as well as giving a translation of *Olbie*. However she maintains that Say held more or less the same Smith-cum-utility theory of value all his life. This paper disagrees on that point.

With the label *Idéologie*, De Tracy wished to establish the distinction between Condorcet's 'metaphysics' or 'analysis of sensations and ideas' and the 'old metaphysics'. There were two groups of *Idéologues*: the 'rationnels' or literary and – in a broad sense – philosophical researchers like De Tracy himself, and the 'physiologues' or biologists and men of medicine like Cabanis. But the two kinds had the intention of integrating their findings into one 'science of man' which would 'change the face of the world'. So they could rightly be called followers of Condorcet's belief in progress<sup>3</sup>.

The young J.B. Say was deeply influenced by this milieu. Joanna Kitchin ranks him with Sieyès and Chénier in the group whose members may not have contributed much to theoretical deepening of the *Idéologie* but did a lot to spread its ideas, as authors or as politicians. Say did it in both capacities, as a *Décade* editor, as the author of *Olbie* and as a member of the Tribunal.

Looking for utilitarian seeds in the formation of the young Say, we must conclude that reading Helvétius (1715-1771) has certainly been one of the first germs. To this agnostic, who had close contacts with the *Encyclopédistes*, Kitchin attributes an even greater influence than to Condillac as a forerunner of the *Idéologues*. 'Sensationalist' like the latter, Helvétius thought that all matter could – in principle – experience feelings. Man, born into this world a *tabula rasa*, should find his destination during his life on earth. To steer him on the road to pleasure, avoiding pain, good laws were better than sermons. 'l'Education peut tout', is one of his most famous dictums.

Some of these elements can be traced in Say's works. First of all in the importance attached to legislation and education in *Olbie* (1800). And around 1820 in his lectures at the Parisian Athénée, where he discusses the possibility that plants and animals may have feelings. More generally, there is utilitarianism in his subjective value theory.

The *Décade* editors had some sense of social justice, and were moderately egalitarian. Say's allegory *Les Enrichis* (1796) heckled the practice of swindling food dealers, and his colleague Andrieux warned the bourgeoisie against taking the place of the former aristocracy. J.B. Say's brother Horace wrote in favour of a progressive income tax and of succession tax reform. But the journal did not have a coherent economic programme. *Laissez faire* was the only recurrent recommendation. In 1795 J.B. Say wrote about his economic perspective for France in the age of industrial revolution (which he had already witnessed himself in England):

"I wish [...] that in this great republic there will not be one unhappy person who can complain of not being able to earn, by his work and good conduct, an easy way of making a living and lead a life which the English would call 'comfortable'"<sup>4</sup>.

3. JOANNA KITCHIN, *Un Journal 'philosophique': La Décade (1794-1807)*, Abbeville, 1966. Doctoral dissertation, Paris, 1956.

4. *La Décade*, 10 Germinal an IV, quoted in KITCHIN (1966), p. 193: "Je veux [...] que dans cette grande république, il n'y ait pas [...] un misérable qui puisse se plaindre de n'avoir pu, avec du travail et de la

Etienne Dumont, the protestant minister from Geneva and one of Jeremy Bentham's editors, sent a copy of the *Traité de Législation* (1801) to J.B. Say. So he knew Bentham's work before he was to meet the philosopher of Ford Abbey. The Say family was also of the protestant faith, with close Genevan family ties and friendship alliances. In the later utilitarian network of J.B. Say, we will meet other French and Swiss protestants.

Before examining the Say-Bentham relationship, we shall first look at Say's treatment of value and utility in relation to the ideas of Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

## 2. Say and Smith on value and price

Say owned a copy of the fifth edition of the *Wealth of Nations* (1789). His annotated volumes were donated to the Bibliothèque de l'Institut in Paris by his grandson Léon. They show that he disagreed with Smith from the first page: "The annual labour of every nation...". I believe this is an error ("Je crois que c'est une erreur"), was his comment. Nevertheless, he took a fairly Smithian approach in his treatment of value and price in the first edition of the *Traité d'Economie Politique* (1803). Unlike in later editions, he does not start with the subject of value and price, but only discusses it in book III, after production and money. The title of the first chapter seems still very Smithian: "Of the natural value of products, and of their exchange value or current price" ("De la valeur naturelle des produits, et de leur valeur échangeable, ou prix courant"). Its content confirms this impression. The factors nature, labour and capital determine the *natural value* of a product. In money terms, this is Smith's "natural price", which should be clearly distinguished from *market price*. The market price is determined by supply and demand. These forces also allocate the factors of production in such a way that there is always a tendency for the market price to move towards the natural price.

Then he discusses the nature of demand. According to Say, it is a necessary condition for a good to possess utility in order to possess value. This capacity to satisfy human wants is not always the same. It can differ between individuals, according to climatic as well as social circumstances. Effectual demand is determined by the consumers' scale of wants and by their income. As far as income allows, wants are satisfied in order of urgency. He does not discuss substitution.

Demand is described as a pyramid. The height represents the price, and an intersection shows the amount demanded at the corresponding price. In the *Cours Complet* he shows a graph of the 'pyramid of fortunes', which can benevolently be interpreted as the pyramid of purchasing pow-

bonne conduite, gagner une subsistance facile, et mener une vie que les Anglais appelleraient 'comfortable'".

er, to read it in a Marshallian way (with  $p$  on the vertical, and  $q$  on the horizontal axis). According to Say, the cost of production determines the amount produced at the level (of intersection of the pyramid) which can be sold at the “natural price”.

In a separate chapter, short and long term price variations are explained. If there are only ‘relative’ price fluctuations, higher and lower prices of various goods have compensating effects; the value of total output remains unchanged. But innovations can have the result of real cost reductions, leading to lower prices. The effect of these is that former luxury products come within reach of the masses, and finally not only prices will fall, but the amounts of capital and labour engaged in the production of these goods will rise. It is Say’s conclusion that lower prices and the march of progress go hand in hand. We must keep this in mind when we come back to his ideas about the utility of altogether new products, which were formerly unknown and even unimaginable as a contribution to human satisfaction and happiness.

In a letter to Sismondi, accompanying a complimentary copy of the first edition of his *Traité*, Say commented on its degree of Smithianism:

“You will see that I have followed Smith on all principal points. But if I am not mistaken, I have clarified a number of other points he had neglected. Had he completely uncovered the great phenomenon of Production and Consumption? Had he shown how commerce is truly productive? Had he disentangled the concepts of real and relative dearth?”<sup>5</sup>.

This letter shows that already in 1803 Say summed up the Smithian influence as well as his own (perceived) original contributions. Note that he found it important to include the distinction between *real* and *relative* high prices as one of his own ideas.

In the second (1814) edition of the *Traité*, not only the definitive order of three books – production, distribution, consumption – is there, but already in the introduction he distances himself from Smith. We recognize the wording of his annotation of the *Wealth of Nations*:

“Il attribue au seul travail de l’homme le pouvoir de produire des valeurs. C’est une erreur”.

Although the subject of value is treated in the second book, the first chapter of book I has a lengthy exposé on wants, utility and value. The subjectivist Say concludes that “what one person finds essential, may be considered superfluous by another”. But apparently he is unable to found his analysis upon varying individual preferences, so he continues with “that

5. “Vous vous apercevrez que j’ai suivi Smith dans tous les points principaux. Mais, si je me ne trompe, j’ai éclairci d’autres points qu’il avait négligés. Avait-il complètement mis à découvert le grand phénomène de la Production et de la Consommation? Avait-il montré comment le commerce est véritablement productif? Avait-il débrouillé les idées sur la cherté réelle et la cherté relative?”: Say to Sismondi, 1803. Published in P. ROGGI (ed.), “Sette lettere inedite di J.B. Say a J.C.L. de Sismondi”, *Rivista di politica economica*, July, 1972, 963-979.

generally accepted estimation of utility” which is called “value in exchange” by Smith, “appreciative value” by Turgot and simply “value” by himself.

Chapter one of book II, “Des fondemens de la valeur des choses”, takes utility as the ‘primary foundation’ of value. Goods possessing utility can satisfy wants. However he does not continue his analysis along the subjectivist path, but takes the safer road of cost-of-production. As most goods cannot be had for nothing, another necessary condition for goods in order to possess value is formed by their costs. Just as in the first edition, in ‘normal circumstances’ supply and demand will determine the market price at cost price level.

One year later, in the *Catéchisme d’Economie Politique* (1815), a popular Economics for Everyone, he takes a more subjectivist turn. The subjective element of individual utility estimates gets the emphasis. “Vanity and passions can be equally urgent needs as hunger”. But to any observer, *price* (which equals *value*) is the only reliable measure of utility. Thus he reveals himself as a positivist subjectivist.

### 3. Say and Ricardo

In the third (1817) and fourth (1819) editions of the *Traité*, the treatment of value is clearly influenced by Say’s meeting and correspondence with David Ricardo. Sent to England as a kind of official spy for the first Restoration government in 1814, Say not only visited many factories and industrial cities, but also met a number of economists and philosophical radicals. Francis Place and James Mill were very active in bringing about the meetings with Ricardo and Bentham. As Mill wrote to Ricardo:

“Mons. Say, the author of the excellent book with which you are well acquainted, entitled *Economie Politique*, is in this island. It would be a thousand pities that you and he should not see one another. I have therefore been endeavouring to plan a meeting between you. [...] On mentioning to Mr. Bentham my project of bringing together you and Mons. Say, he started an idea which is perfection itself. If you can prevail upon M. Say, said he, to go to Mr. Ricardo’s, perhaps we may prevail upon both Mr. Ricardo and Mr. Say to come here. I am persuaded *you* will not think much of the journey. It is little more than 50 miles hither from Bath; and if Mr. Say should here leave you to go to London, the Bath and Exeter Stage passes at a few miles distance every day, so that you can return any way you chuse. It would be a high treat to me to see you here, and to see you along with Say. To him I have no doubt it will be an object to meet with Mr. Bentham; and I am sure you will be gratified to be made acquainted with him”<sup>6</sup>.

So it happened, and Say visited Gatcomb Park and Ford Abbey in December 1814. Ricardo’s first impression of his French colleague was recorded in a letter to Malthus:

6. D. RICARDO, *Works and Correspondence*, ed. by P. SRAFFA VI, 156-157.



“He does not appear to me to be ready in conversation on the subject on which he has very ably written, and indeed in his book there are many points which I think are very far from being satisfactorily established, – yet he is an unaffected agreeable man, and I found him an instructive companion”<sup>7</sup>.

Other meetings between the two economists took place in Paris in 1817 and 1822. About their last meeting, Ricardo wrote to Hutches Trower:

“At Paris I saw M. Say several times, but never found him much inclined to talk on the points of difference between us. I believe M. Say finds it difficult to converse on these subjects; his ideas do not flow in a sufficiently rapid flow for conversation”<sup>8</sup>.

For a reconstruction of the content of their discussions we must rely on their textbooks and correspondence, first published as a selection in Say’s posthumous *Mélanges et Correspondance*, and later in full in Sraffa’s *Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*. The Say papers in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris also throw some light at his side of the debate.

It was kicked off by Ricardo in 1815 with a reaction to his complimentary copy of Say’s *Catéchisme*:

“You have I perceive a little modified the definition of the word *value* as far as it is dependent on *utility*, but with great diffidence, I do not think that you have mastered the difficulties which attach to the explanation of that difficult word”.

So Ricardo was not hostile to connecting value and utility. Nor was he very explicit on what he really objected to Say’s treatment of these two notions. Their discussion reached a climax in 1819 and 1820, the years of Ricardo’s second and Say’s fourth edition, and of the latter’s *Letters to Malthus*. Between 1815 and 1820, Say is moving away – no doubt under Ricardo’s influence – from a subjectivist utilitarian theory of value in the direction of a more cost-of-production oriented viewpoint. He still starts from utility as the foundation of value, but no longer asks the question: But how to measure it? In the fourth edition he even ridicules his brother Louis Say (more famous as the founder of the *Sucreries Say* than as a theoretical economist) for ranking the value of goods by measure of their utilities. That may be true ‘en morale’, but in economics only the market price is the yardstick. Without explicitly naming Ricardo, he admits that certain critics have made him adjust his theory about the measure of the value of a good: not the “value” of another product is the measure, but its “quantity”<sup>9</sup>.

A full reconstruction of Say’s theory of value is not the purpose of this article. In his later years, set free from his tormentor Ricardo, he returned a

7. *Ibid.*, 161-165: Ricardo to Malthus, Dec. 18, 1814.

8. *Ibid.*, IX, 241-247.

9. *Traité* (1819), vol. II, p. 4, fn.: “Dans les premières éditions de cet ouvrage, j’avais dit que la mesure de la valeur était la valeur d’un autre produit. Cette expression n’était pas exacte. La mesure de la valeur est la quantité d’un autre produit. Il résultait de cette erreur du louche dans plusieurs démonstrations. C’est que diverses critiques, même injustes, m’ont fait apercevoir. Fas est ab hoste doceri”.



little to his former ideas on utility and demand in the fifth (1825) edition of the *Traité* and in the six volumes of the *Cours Complet* (1828-1829), although there are hints of a consumer surplus in the latter work. We know that he failed to arrive at the notion of marginal utility, which might have carried him a lot further in the direction of deriving a better founded demand curve. But he does not get further than the observation that ‘every individual or family has to make a ranking of its needs, to satisfy the urgent ones before the less urgent’. Although he maintains that every individual is the best judge of his own wants, a paternalistic Benthamite is peeping around the corner in various passages. In the first volume of his fifth edition he writes:

“This is not the place to examine whether the value people attach to a good is in proportion to its real utility. The just appreciation of goods depends of the judgment, the enlightenment, the habits and prejudices of those who value them. A moral health and a precise knowledge of their true interest conduct the people towards a right appreciation of the truly good. Political Economy considers this valuation as a fact, and leaves to the moral and societal sciences of man the task to clarify them and to guide them in this matter like in the other acts of life”.

And in the second, speaking about the classification of wants:

“This classification exerts a very big influence on the happiness of families and of mankind in general. The most useful morals are perhaps those which procure the notions to man how to make it up judiciously; but this consideration need not occupy us here; we still only consider this classification as a fact and an observation”.

Here we meet the two utilitarian Says: 1. The positivist value and price theorist; 2. The scholar of morals and politics. The second had stepped back after the publication of *Olbie* in 1800. But he had always been there, and had surfaced again already in his lectures as will be shown in a later section. First the relationship between Say and Bentham must be sketched.

#### 4. Say and Bentham

“Ricardo and Say came here yesterday at dinner unexpected; whether they go, however, or no, tomorrow, as was originally intended, I know not. Both very intelligent and pleasant men, and both seem highly pleased”.

These were Bentham’s first impressions of Say’s visit at the end of 1814, which marked the beginning of a lifelong and friendly relationship<sup>10</sup>. Say’s feelings have been recorded by Francis Place in a letter to James Mill:

“He spoke with rapture of you all, Mr. Bentham’s Philosophy, and, as Mr. Say expressed it, ‘his heart full of benevolence in every thing’ made his eyes sparkle as he pronounced the words. – You and Mr. Ricardo are, he says, profound economists, from both of you, he says, he has learnt much that will be useful”<sup>11</sup>.

10. D. RICARDO, *Works*, VI, p. 161, fn.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Bentham's influence on Say was at least as considerable in political and moral philosophy as in economics. It remains a remarkable fact that Say, who was not ready to accept other minds as superior, surrendered himself to the philosopher of Queen's Square Place. In 1817 he wrote to Dumont in Geneva:

"In my small sphere I have made efforts that some justice be rendered to our great Bentham and to his worthy interpreter".

Later that year he had to wait two months for books sent by Place and Bentham. When they finally arrived, he wrote to the former:

"At last I have them, and I thank you for them, as well as our Friend from Ford Abbey. I am convinced that you have not wasted your time with him; the service which his friends could render to him, would be to extract from his works that which is *directly useful*, and to translate this into ordinary language. In less bulky volumes, easier to read, and cheaper to buy, it would circulate more easily and produce more immediate effects. If this excellent man lived more in the world, he would notice that the people, carried away by the turmoil (public and private) of the moment, scarcely have the time to read and to reflect. So that task must be facilitated for them. This is what I tried to do for France, by putting into one leaflet, the substance of *The Parliamentary Reform*, of which I send you some copies"<sup>12</sup>.

Say had become a convert, a Benthamite. This also meant that he was enlisted in a European network that would be used by the master for a variety of odd jobs and responsibilities, from taking care of the young Richard Doane or the young Mill on their visits to Paris and sending books to Sir Samuel Bentham in the South of France, to reporting to Bentham himself on the state of public opinion in Paris. A number of French names appear in this context. Also in 1814 Say had met the Huguenot Sir Samuel Romilly in London, who also moved in the circles of Mill and Bentham. On the same journey, he paid a visit there to his friend and distant relative Michel Delaroche, the director of a trading company in le Havre. The Delaroches were equally of Genevan-protestant descent, and played their role in the cultural life of Paris around 1800. Say's son Horace wrote about the 'salon' of the older Mrs. Delaroche:

"The salon of Mrs. Delaroche the mother was then what had been, some years before, the one of Mrs. Necker; she did the honours with grace and dignity; scientists and men of letters were welcome, the conversation was varied and interesting, but, it must be said, strongly contained by a certain puritan austerity".

When he gave an introduction for his old friend Scipion Mourgues to Place in 1824, Say not only called him 'a friend of enlightenment and liberty', but also expressly mentioned his protestant faith. These names – together with Dumont's – are perhaps not a fully conclusive evidence for

12. Place papers in the British Library. See also my article "Bentham, Say and Continental Utilitarianism", *The Bentham Newsletter*, 6, 1982, pp. 8-18.

the existence of a continental-protestant utilitarian network, but they seem to be more than a coincidence.

When Say did not provide the information Bentham wanted, he received a proper scolding, like in March 1820:

“For mere letters of kindness we have neither of us any time. For letters about politics from me to you, there is no use. Why? Because here there is everything being published in a certain sense freely, there is no *dessous des cartes*, or at least none which you would care about. The opportunity being *first rate* secure, I would have been very grateful for a shorty view of the state of public opinion in Paris. You gave me nothing at all: and Swediaur nothing about that”.

Say himself and his family suffered from the illiberal political climate under the Restoration. Say’s son-in-law Charles Comte, who edited the *Censeur Européen* together with the economist Charles Dunoyer, had to flee to Switzerland when prosecuted on a libel charge, and for the same reason he lived in England from 1823 to 1825. The “Plan of Parliamentary Reform”, mentioned above, appeared in the *Censeur*. It was also published separately as a pamphlet, *De l’influence ministérielle sur les élections en Angleterre*. And in the same periodical, Say reviewed Bentham’s *Tactique des Assemblées législatives* in its French translation. So as a Benthamite he was primarily a political thinker and writer, and a humble translator. As an economist he was a positivist and a revealed preference utilitarian. But as the young author of the utopian essay *Olbie*, and later as the mature thinker about society, he was concerned with normative utilitarianism and did not hesitate to pronounce value judgments.

## 5. Say as a mature utilitarian

The *Cours Complet*, published in 1828-1829, grew out of the lectures Say read at the Parisian Athénée. These were evening classes taught to a mixed audience of professionals, businessmen and interested laymen. In his final textbook, the followers of Quesnay and those of Ricardo are firmly lectured to in the introduction: in recognizing only the cost of labour, they wrongly deny the importance of supply and demand. In a number of unpublished manuscript notes of the lectures at the Collège de France, where he read more or less the same material as at the Athénée, he praises Smith as the founder of modern political economy, although he has obscured the correct notion of value by introducing “value in use” and “value in exchange”: “This same confusion makes so obscure and so little conclusive the works of a more modern economist, David Ricardo”<sup>13</sup>.

13. “C’est la meme confusion qui rend si obscurs et si peu concluans, les ouvrages d’un économiste plus moderne, David Ricardo”: Say Papers, Lecture notes Collège de France, E 289-290.

The older Say had difficulties in restricting himself to the viewpoint of the political economist, who only observed the subjective utility judgments of the individual agents and their subsequent economic behaviour. As a moral and political scientist, he wished to pronounce a judgment on what was to be considered as really useful. The Say papers show that already in his Athénée course of 1819 he made the same distinction<sup>14</sup>.

In another, undated manuscript note he reminded himself to write an essay *Du principe d'utilité*:

"In political economy I regard utility as a given fact, the foundation of which I do not examine. In this work I examine the use and the real advantage we draw from the goods we use.

In pol. econ. I examine the price we fix for a good. Here I examine whether we have a reason to fix a price for it. Yes for a healthy nourishment. No for the satisfaction of a harmful luxury snack. Yes for what produces a real and durable good; no for what brings harm directly or after a while"<sup>15</sup>.

When he finally got around to fulfill this intention, Bentham was credited in the first explanatory footnote:

"The *Principle of Utility*, clearly defined by Jeremy Bentham in his *Treatises of Legislation* has, by lack of clear understanding, given occasion to exaggerated statements and disagreeable accusations".

This *Essai sur le Principe de l'Utilité*, written after the completion of his *Cours Complet* in 1829, and posthumously published in the *Mélanges et Correspondance* (eds. Charles Comte and Horace Say) starts with an economic discussion of utility, summarizing what he wrote in the first chapters of the *Cours Complet*. Economics is a social science, so he is not interested in Robinson Crusoe economics. In economic matters, every man is the best judge of his own preferences, but Say has an ingenious reasoning to bridge the gap between economic and moral reasoning:

"But man as a social being, who measures his estimation of goods by the greater or lesser amount of utility they have to man, i.e. his measure of the greatest good for the greatest number, is eminently virtuous; and I will add that if he only employs to that purpose the means which are compatible with the nature of the people who surround him and of the society to which he belongs, his principles not only display a respectable sentiment, but do conduct towards the truest and most durable good for humanity, or for his country, or for himself"<sup>16</sup>.

14. Say Papers, Dossier G 385, *Principe d'Utilité*; taken from his lecture notes:

"1819 5e Séance (à remplacer dans le 2e cours d'Athénée quand j'y aurais rejoint les feuillets dont je me sers)".

15. Say Papers, Dossier G 385, suite du *Principe de l'utilité*:

"Dans l'économie politique je regarde l'utilité comme une chose de fait, dont je n'examine pas le fondement. Dans cet ouvrage ci j'examine l'usage, l'avantage réel que nous retirons des choses dont nous faisons usage.

Dans l'Econ. pol. j'examine le prix que nous attachons à une chose. Ici j'examine si nous avons raison d'y attacher un prix. Oui pour une nourriture saine. Non pour satisfaire une gourmandise nuisible. Oui pour ce qui fait un bien réel, durable; non pour ce qui nuit immédiatement ou après coup".

16. "Mais l'homme social, qui mesure l'estime qu'il fait des choses, sur le plus ou moins d'utilité qu'elles ont pour l'homme, c'est à dire qui mesure son estime sur le plus grand bien du plus grand

He illustrates his ideas with a number of examples, and concludes that a house is a more useful object than an ornament like a ring (he wisely avoids listing the market price of both). Then the problem is brought up that one person's satisfaction can be a nuisance to another's.

Before answering this question, there is a digression on Bentham and his pleasure/pain and utility analysis. And instead of providing us with an instrument for making choices between conflicting interests, he refers to Bentham's catalogue of pleasures and pains in the *Traité de Législation*. The first paragraph ends with refutations of "ascetism" and "arbitrariness", illustrated with a number of his own examples.

In the brief second paragraph he refutes the following objection against the principle of utility: why would people pursue something useful if it is not in their own interest?

The concluding third paragraph answers the question whether errors can be useful to man. Starting with a brief quotation from Madame de Staël, and a lengthy one from Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics*, he concludes that Italy is a clear example of a society where an institution – the church of Rome – is an evil to society, because it benefits a small group at the expense of the majority. He paints a gloomy picture of such a situation:

"When the good things produced by an institution (like wealth and power) come to the benefit of only a small class in society, and when the bad things produced by the same institution (like costliness, idleness, false judgement, disappearance of morality) fall upon the most numerous class, the result will be misery, depopulation, degradation of national character, etc."<sup>17</sup>.

This is the introduction to lengthy quotations from an historical poem by Marie-Joseph Chénier, one of his old companions from *Idéologie* circles. He does not fail to mention that this author was a victim of the Empire – in writing this passage, Say might have contemplated the boycott of a second edition of his own *Traité* by the emperor Napoleon. The poem is an historical description of tyranny and feudalism, culminating in a diatribe against religious intolerance and a plea for individual freedom. Thus in his last essay, Say stresses the importance of institutions. In doing so, he does not really take us any further than his hero Jeremy Bentham.

nombre, est éminemment vertueux; et j'ajouterai que pourvu qu'il n'emploie, pour parvenir à ce but, que des moyens compatibles avec la nature des hommes qui l'entourent et de la société dont il fait partie, ses principes non seulement dénotent un sentiment louable, mais, au total, conduisent au bien le plus réel et le plus durable, soit pour l'humanité, soit pour sa nation, soit pour lui-même".  
 17. "Quand le bien que produit une institution (la richesse et le pouvoir) est appliqué à une classe peu nombreuse de la société, et quand le mal que produit la même institution (la dépense, l'oisiveté, la fausseté du jugement, la dépravation de la morale) tombe sur la classe la plus nombreuse, il en résulte la misère, la dépopulation, la dégradation du caractère national, etc." (SAY 1836, p. 674).

## 6. Conclusions

How should we value Say as a utility theorist and as a utilitarian? No doubt, the subjective economic theorist has brought the analysis of value a little further. I hope to have shown that when he presented himself as a faithful Smithian in his textbook in 1803, in fact he already embraced a more subjectivist position.

It is regrettable that his battle with Ricardo, fought between 1815 and 1823, again set him on the road of a cost-of-production oriented analysis of the value problem, where he was inferior to his opponent, or rather where he was unable to follow him because their paradigms did not meet.

As a Benthamite, Say was not primarily an economic but a moral and political utilitarian. He had not so much difficulty in reconciling the notion of the maximizing agent with his individual preferences, with the concept of aggregate measurement and ranking of the pleasure and pain for society as a whole; but rather he struggled with the contradiction between a positivist appreciation of any individual preference or folly as equal, and the normative moral assessment of the societal outcomes of the market process. Comparing Say and Bentham it can be said that the latter was perhaps more inclined to paternalism and more willing to give a role to government intervention. Say, with his own experience of the French Revolution and Napoleon's dictatorship, was keen on giving only a minimal role to governments.

When we look at modern scholarship on utilitarianism, we see that the following quotation from James Mirrlees could almost have been written by Bentham:

"Roughly speaking, the totality of all individuals can be regarded as a single individual. Therefore total social utility, the sum of the total utilities of the separate individuals, is the right way of evaluating alternative patterns of outcomes for the whole society"<sup>18</sup>.

When we consider professor Bonner's seven criteria for economic utilitarianism, Say deserves a high score. These seven are:

1. A single overriding objective;
2. Consequentialism;
3. Welfarism;
4. Individualism;
5. Equality;
6. Aggregation;
7. Measurement<sup>19</sup>.

### 1. A single overriding objective

In his value theory, from the first edition of the *Traité* in 1803 till the

18. J.A. MIRRLEES, "The economic uses of utilitarianism", in: AMARTYA SEN and BERNARD WILLIAMS (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, 1982, p. 71.

19. J. BONNER, *Economic Efficiency and Social Justice*, Aldershot: Elgar, 1995, pp. 10-13.

appearance of the last volume of the *Cours Complet* in 1829, Say set out from utility as the foundation (*premier fondement*) of value. Individual and societal well-being are to be measured by this yardstick.

## 2. Consequentialism

In Say's economics, tastes and needs may vary between individuals, between cultures and climates, but the purpose of economic agents is always to maximize their utility.

## 3. Welfarism

What counts in individual and societal welfare maximization is the maximizing of individual utility functions. The specification into these functions of non-monetary values like democracy and justice can make this criterion look quite vague, and Say is no exception in this respect.

## 4. Individualism

Say is the methodological individualist par excellence. He does not even recognize any difference between micro- and macro-economics. But, as Bonner writes:

"Individuals may not always be the best judges of their collective welfare. The unfettered pursuit of private interests may produce conflict rather than harmony. Citizens have to be educated in the public virtues, and their selfishness harnessed to the common advantage"<sup>20</sup>.

This idea emerges already in Say's *Olbie* (1800). To this purpose a good textbook of economics was required in the first place (so he wrote it for his fellow citizens).

## 5. Equality

To the economist Say, though perhaps not always to the moral philosopher in him, no person's utility is worth more than anyone else's. But he is not a complete egalitarian although in *Olbie* he denounced luxury and already as a *Décade* editor advocated just a comfortable life for all Frenchmen.

## 6. Aggregation

The highest sum of personal utilities is the most desirable state of affairs in society. An awareness of the truly useful in enlightened individuals, or men "in a state of perfection" (compare Say's lecture note in the appendix) will serve this purpose. In other parts of his work, the peace-loving Say demonstrates an understanding of experienced adults as a stock of human capital, which is worth preserving. A science of economics which takes these enlightened interests into account is "in this respect a moral and political science".

20. BONNER (1995), p. 12.



## 7. Measurement

In many places Say shows a dislike of mathematical reasoning in economics. But he advocates the measurement or at least comparison of utilities by comparing quantities or bundles of goods which procure equal amounts of satisfaction or utility.

These dimensions make Say a worthy classical utilitarian and Benthamite. His intellectual history makes it plausible that he reached many of his ideas by means of his own French 18<sup>th</sup> century reading of Helvétius and other proto-utilitarians, and his moving around in *Idéologie* circles. It remains an intriguing question that he, who was not ready to recognize other minds as superior (not even Smith's or Ricardo's) succumbed to Jeremy Bentham and his ideas in such a way as to call himself his follower. Bentham recognized him as such and put him on the list of the select dozen who were to receive the sign of membership of this sect after his death: the ring with Jeremy's profile<sup>21</sup>.

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21. SCHOORL (1982), p. 18.