

THE BEST OF THE OLL #65

COMTE DESTUTT DE TRACY, “OF SOCIETY” (1817)

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“Society is purely and solely a continual series of exchanges. It is never any thing else, in any epoch of its duration, from its commencement the most unformed, to its greatest perfection. And this is the greatest eulogy we can give to it, for exchange is an admirable transaction...”



Comte Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836)

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[August, 2014]

Editor's Introduction

Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) was a philosophe and one of the founders in the 1790s of the classical liberal republican group known as the Idéologues (which included Cabanis, Condorcet, Constant, Daunou, Say, Madame de Staël), a politician under several regimes spanning the Revolution and the Restoration, and an influential author. While a member of the Senate, he opposed Napoleon, and also spoke out against the subsequent constitutional monarchy, and in support of American-style laissez-faire republicanism. He coined the term “ideology” while he was at the Institut National.

Tracy's book was important in the development of French liberal thought during the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic period along with the work of the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, the political philosopher Benjamin Constant, and the lawyers Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer. Thomas Jefferson was very impressed with Tracy's writings and had two of them translated in English, this volume on political economy and his book on Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* (1811). Thus they, along with Say's *Treatise on Political Economy*, had a considerable impact on the teaching economics in 19th century America.

In this chapter Tracy develops the argument that human beings are naturally social creatures and that voluntary and mutually beneficial exchanges, or what we would call the free market, is the glue which holds society together. He also is one of the first theorists to argue in favour of a subjective theory of value which was to become an essential part of the Austrian school's theory of economics which emerged in the 1870s. Other important ideas he presents here are that human beings are by nature cooperative, that the transmission of knowledge is vital for progress, that the division of labour vastly expands the productive power of individuals, and that both parties benefit from voluntary exchanges.

“It is equally true that an exchange is a transaction in which the two contracting parties both gain. Whenever I make an exchange freely, and without constraint, it is because I desire the thing I receive more than that I give; and, on the contrary, he with whom I bargain desires what I offer more than that which he renders me. When I give my labour for wages it is because I esteem the wages more than what I should have been able to produce by labouring for myself; and he who pays me prizes more the services I render him than what he gives me in return.”

“Of Society” (1817)¹

The introduction which has been just read is consecrated entirely to an examination of the generation of some very general ideas; the casting of a first glance on the nature of that mode of our sensibility which we call the will, or the faculty of willing; and to the indication of some of its immediate and universal consequences.

“Man cannot exist thus (in isolation); this is proved by the fact, for we have never seen in any corner of the world an animal in the human form, however brutish he might be, which has no kind of relation with any other animal of his own species: that is not less demonstrated by reasoning.”

We have therein seen summarily; first, what are inanimate or insensible beings, such as many appear to us, which may well exist for the sensible beings, which they affect, but which do not exist for themselves, since they do not perceive it; second, what would be the nature of beings feeling, but *feeling every thing with indifference*, so that from their sensibility no choice, no preference, no desire, in a word no will would result; third, what are those beings *sentient and willing*, such as all the animals with which we are acquainted, and especially as ourselves, but insulated; fourth, and in fine, what beings, feeling and willing in our way, become when they are in contact and *in relation with other animals of their species* similar to themselves, and with whom they can fully correspond.

These preliminaries were necessary, that the reader might readily follow the series of ideas, and clearly perceive the connexion, of this second section of the elements of ideology with that which precedes it. But it would be inconvenient, in a treatise on the will, to say more of beings not endowed with this intellectual

faculty; and it would not be less superfluous, having the human species principally in view, to occupy ourselves longer with beings that should be sentient and willing, but living insulated.

Man cannot exist thus; this is proved by the fact, for we have never seen in any corner of the world an animal in the human form, however brutish he might be, which has no kind of relation with any other animal of his own species: that is not less demonstrated by reasoning. For such an individual, strictly speaking, may exist although very miserably, yet certainly he could not reproduce himself. That the species may be perpetuated, it is indispensable that the two sexes should unite; it is even necessary that the infant, produced by their union, should receive for a long time the cares of his parents, or at least those of his mother. Now we are so formed that we have all, more or less, a natural and innate inclination to sympathy; that is to say we all experience pleasure from sharing our impressions, our affections, our sentiments, and those of our fellow creatures. Perhaps this inclination exists amongst all animated beings; perhaps even it is in us from the origin a considerable part of that which so powerfully attracts the two sexes towards each other. What is certain, is that it afterwards augments it prodigiously. It is then impossible that approximations, which our organization renders inevitable, should not develop in us this natural disposition to sympathy, fortify it by exercise, and establish amongst us social and moral relations. Moreover, we are also so organized, that we form judgments of that which we experience, of that which we feel, of that which we see, in a word of all which affects us; we distinguish the parts, circumstances, causes and consequences thereof; and this is to judge of it. It is then impossible that we should not soon be aware of the utility we may derive from the succour of our fellow beings, from their assistance in our wants, from the concurrence of their will, and of their force with ours, a new reason why approximations, fortuitous at first, should become durable and permanent between us; this also is what takes place always, and every where. It is this also which always, and every where, produces the admirable and wise invention of a language more or less perfect, but always as appears, more circumstantial,

¹ Antoine Louis Claude, Comte Destutt de Tracy, *A Treatise on Political Economy: to which is Prefixed a Supplement to a Preceding Work on the Understanding or Elements of Ideology; with an Analytical Table, and an Introduction on the Faculty of the Will* (Georgetown: Joseph Milligan, 1817). Of Our Actions. Chap. 1 "Of Society" <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/121>>.

and more capable of detailed explanations, than that of any other animal. It is then the social state, which is our natural state, and that with which we ought alone to occupy ourselves.

I will not however in this place consider society under a moral relation. I will not examine how it develops, multiplies, and complicates, all our passions and affections; nor what are the numerous duties it imposes on us, nor whence arises for us the fundamental obligation of respecting the conventions on which it rests, and without which it could not subsist. These are researches which will be the object of the second part of this treatise. In this I shall consider the social state only under its economical relation, that is to say relatively to our most direct wants, and to the means we have of satisfying them. It is that which may lead us surely to estimate the value and utility of all our actions, to judge of their merits by their consequences, and consequently of the merit of those sentiments which determine us to one action rather than another.

Now what is society viewed under this aspect? I do not fear to announce it. Society is purely and solely a continual series of exchanges. It is never any thing else, in any epoch of its duration, from its commencement the most unformed, to its greatest perfection. And this is the greatest eulogy we can give to it, for exchange is an admirable transaction, in which the two contracting parties always both gain; consequently society is an uninterrupted succession of advantages, unceasingly renewed for all its members. This demands an explanation.

First, society is nothing but a succession of exchanges. In effect, let us begin with the first conventions on which it is founded. Every man, before entering into the state of society, has as we have seen all rights and no duty, not even that of not hurting others; and others the same in respect to him. It is evident they could not live together, if by a convention formal or tacit they did not promise each other, reciprocally, surety. Well! this convention is a real exchange; every one renounces a certain manner of employing his force, and receives in return the same sacrifice on the part of all the others. Security once established by this mean, men have a multitude of mutual relations which all arrange themselves under one of the three following classes: they consist either in rendering a service to receive a salary, or in bartering some article of merchandize against another, or in executing some

work in common. In the two first cases the exchange is manifest. In the third it is not less real; for when several men unite, to labour in common, each makes a sacrifice to the others of what he could have done during the same time for his own particular utility; and he receives, for an equivalent, his part of the common utility resulting from the common labour. He exchanges one manner of occupying himself against another, which becomes more advantageous to him than the other would have been. It is true then that society consists only in a continual succession of exchanges.

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I do not pretend to say that men never render gratuitous services. Far from me be the idea of denying benevolence, or of banishing it from their hearts; but I say it is not on this that all the progress of society repose, and even that the happy consequences of this amiable virtue are much more important under a moral relation,[1] of which we are not at this time speaking, than under the economical relation which now occupies us. I add that if we urge the sense of the word exchange, and if we wish, as we ought, to take it in all the extent of its signification, we may say with justice that a benefit is still an exchange, in which one sacrifices a portion of one's property, or of one's time, to procure a moral pleasure, very lively and very sweet, that of obliging, or to exempt oneself from a pain very afflicting, the sight of suffering; exactly as we employ a

sum of money to procure an artificial fire work, which diverts, or to free ourselves from something which incommodes us.

“It is equally true that an exchange is a transaction in which the two contracting parties both gain. Whenever I make an exchange freely, and without constraint, it is because I desire the thing I receive more than that I give; and, on the contrary, he with whom I bargain desires what I offer more than that which he renders me.”

It is equally true that an exchange is a transaction in which the two contracting parties both gain. Whenever I make an exchange freely, and without constraint, it is because I desire the thing I receive more than that I give; and, on the contrary, he with whom I bargain desires what I offer more than that which he renders me. When I give my labour for wages it is because I esteem the wages more than what I should have been able to produce by labouring for myself; and he who pays me prizes more the services I render him than what he gives me in return. When I give a measure of wheat for a measure of wine, it is because I have a superabundance of food and nothing to drink, and he with whom I treat is in the contrary case. When several of us agree to execute any labour whatsoever in common, whether to defend ourselves against an enemy, to destroy noxious animals, to preserve ourselves from the ravages of the sea, of an inundation, of a contagion, or even to make a bridge or a road, it is because each of us prefers the particular utility which will result to him from it, to what he would have been able to do for himself during the same time. We are all satisfied in all these species of exchanges, every one finds his advantage in the arrangement proposed.

In truth it is possible that, in an exchange, one of the contractors, or even both, may have been wrong to desire the bargain which they conclude.—It is possible they may give a thing, which they will soon regret, for a

thing which they will soon cease to value. It is possible, also, that one of the two may not have obtained for that which he sacrifices as much as he might have asked, so that he will suffer a relative loss while the other makes an exaggerated gain. But these are particular cases which do not belong to the nature of the transaction. And it is not less true that it is the essence of free exchange to be advantageous to both parties; and that the true utility of society is to render possible amongst us a multitude of similar arrangements.

It is 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. It is not improper to direct our attention for some time to this picture, which does not sufficiently strike us because we are too much accustomed to it.

What is it in effect which a country anciently civilized offers to our contemplation? The fields are cleared and cleaned, freed from the large vegetables which originally covered them, rid of noxious plants and animals, and in every respect prepared to receive the annual cares of the cultivator. The marshes are drained. The stagnant waters which occupied it have ceased to fill the air with pestilential vapours. Issues have been opened for them, or their extent has been circumscribed; and the lands which they infected have become abundant pastures, or useful reservoirs. The asperities of the mountains have been levelled; their bases have been appropriated to the wants of culture; their parts least accessible, even to the regions of eternal snow, have been destined to the nourishment of numerous flocks. The forests which have been permitted to remain have not continued impenetrable: The wild beasts which retired to them have been pursued and almost destroyed; the wood which they produce has been withdrawn and preserved, the cutting them has even been subjected to periods the most favourable for their reproduction; and the care bestowed on them almost every where is equivalent to a species of culture, and has even been sometimes extended to a most diligent culture. The running waters which traverse all these lands have, likewise, not remained in their primitive state: The great rivers, have been cleared of all the obstacles which obstructed their course; they have been confined by dikes and quays,

when this has been necessary; and their banks have been disposed in such a manner as to form commodious ports in convenient situations.—The course of streams less considerable has been restrained for working mills and other machines, or diverted to irrigate declivities which needed it, and to render them productive. On the whole surface of the land habitations have been constructed from distance to distance, in favourable positions, for the use of those who cultivate the ground and attend to its produce. These habitations have been surrounded with enclosures and plantations, that render them more agreeable and more useful. Roads have been made to go to them and to take away the produce of the earth. In points where several different interests have concentrated, and where other men have become sufficiently necessary to the service of the cultivators, to be able to subsist on the wages of their labour, habitations have been multiplied and made contiguous, and have formed villages and small towns. On the banks of large rivers, and on the shores of the sea, in points in which the interests of several of these towns have coincided, large cities have been built; which have themselves in time given birth to a still greater one, which has become their capital and their common centre, because it has been found the most favourably situated to unite all the others, and to be provisioned and defended by them. Finally, all these towns communicate with each other, with the neighbouring seas, and with foreign countries, by means of bridges, causeways, canals, in which the whole of human industry is displayed. Such are the objects which strike us at the first aspect of a country where men have exercised all their power, and have appropriated it to themselves for a long time.

If we penetrate the interior of their habitations we there find an immense number of useful animals, raised, nourished, made obsequious, by man,—multiplied by him to an inconceivable point; a prodigious quantity of necessaries of every species, commodities, furniture, utensils, instruments, clothing, articles, raw or manufactured, metals, necessary or precious; finally, whatever may sooner or later contribute to the satisfaction of our wants. We admire there above all things, a population really astonishing, all the individuals of which have the use of a perfected language, have a reason developed to a certain point, manners sufficiently softened, and an industry sufficiently intelligent, to live in such great numbers

near to one another, and amongst whom in general the poorest are succoured, the weakest defended. We remark, with still more surprise, that many of these men have attained a degree of knowledge very difficult to be acquired, that they possess an infinity of agreeable or useful arts, that they are acquainted with many of the laws of nature, of which they know to calculate the effects, and turn them to their advantage, that they have even had a glimpse of the most difficult of all sciences, since they are able to distinguish, at least in part, the true interests of the species in general, and in particular those of their society, and its members; that in consequence they have conceived laws often just, institutions tolerably wise, and created a number of establishments proper for spreading and still increasing instruction and intelligence; and finally, that not content with having thus insured interior prosperity they have explored the rest of the earth, established relations with foreign nations, and provided for their security from without.

What an immense accumulation of means of well being! What prodigious results from that part of the labours of our predecessors, which has not been immediately necessary to the support of their existence, and which has not been annihilated with them! The imagination even is astonished; and the more so the more it reflects on it, for we should consider that many of these works are little durable, that the most solid have been many times renewed in the course of ages, and that there is scarcely one which does not require continual care and maintenance for its preservation. We must observe that of these wonders that which strikes our attention is not the most astonishing; it is, as we say, the material part. But the intellectual part, if we may so express ourselves, is still more surprising. It has always been much more difficult to learn, and to discover, than to act in consequence of what we know. The first steps, especially in the career of invention, are of extreme difficulty. The labour which man has been obliged to perform on his own intellectual faculties, the immensity of the researches to which he has been forced to have recourse, that of the observations he has been obliged to collect, have cost him much more time and pains than all the works he has been able to execute in consequence of the progress of his understanding. Finally, we must remark that the efforts of men, for the amelioration of their lot, have never been nearly as well directed as they might have been, that always a great portion of the

human power has been employed in hindering the progress of the other; that this progress has been troubled and interrupted by all the great disorders of nature and of society; and that many times perhaps all has been lost and destroyed, even the knowledge acquired, even the capacity of re-commencing that which had been already done. These latter considerations might become discouraging. But we shall see elsewhere by how many reasons we ought to be assured against the fear of such misfortunes in future. We will also examine to what point the progress of the species, taken in mass, augments the happiness of individuals, a condition necessary to enable us to rejoice at it. But at this moment let it suffice to have shown the prodigious power which men acquire when united; while separated they can with difficulty sustain their miserable existence. Smith, if I am not mistaken, is the first who has remarked that man alone makes exchanges, properly speaking. See his admirable chapter, 4th of the 1st book of his treatise on the wealth of nations. I regret that in remarking this fact he has not sought its cause with more curiosity. It was not for the author of the theory of moral sentiments to regard as useless a scrutiny of the operations of our understanding. His success and his faults ought to have contributed equally to make him think the contrary. Notwithstanding this negligence his assertion is not the less true. We clearly see certain animals execute labours which concur to a common end, and which to a certain point appear to have been concerted; or fight for the possession of what they desire, or supplicate to obtain it; but nothing announces that they really make formal exchanges. The reason, I think, is that they have not a language sufficiently developed to enable them to make express conventions; and this, I think, proceeds (as I have explained in my second volume, article of interjections,—and in my first, on the subject of signs,) from their being incapable of sufficiently decomposing their ideas, to generalise, to abstract, and to express them separately in detail, and in the form of a proposition; whence it happens that those of which they are susceptible, are all particular, confused with their attributes, and manifest themselves in mass by interjections, which can explain nothing explicitly. Man, on the contrary, who has the intellectual means which are wanting to them is naturally led to avail himself of them, to make conventions with his fellow beings. They make no exchanges, and he does.

Accordingly he alone has a real society; for *commerce is the whole of society*, as labour is the whole of riches.

We can scarcely conceive at first that the great effects, which we have just described, have no other cause than the sole reciprocity of services and the multiplicity of exchanges. However this continual succession of exchanges has three very remarkable advantages.

“Man, on the contrary, who has the intellectual means which are wanting to them (animals) is naturally led to avail himself of them, to make conventions with his fellow beings. They make no exchanges, and he does. Accordingly he alone has a real society; for commerce is the whole of society, as labour is the whole of riches. We can scarcely conceive at first that the great effects, which we have just described, have no other cause than the sole reciprocity of services and the multiplicity of exchanges.”

First, the labour of several men united is more productive, than that of the same men acting separately. Is there a question of defence? Ten men will easily resist an enemy, who would have destroyed them all in attacking one after another. Is a burden to be removed? That of which the weight would have opposed an invincible resistance to the efforts of a single individual, yields immediately to those of several acting together. Is some complicated work to be executed? Several things are to be done simultaneously. One does one while another does another, and all contribute to effect what a single man could not have produced. One rows while another steers, and a third casts the net or harpoons the fish; and thus they attain a success impossible without this concurrence.

Secondly, our knowledge is our most precious acquisition, since it is this that directs the employment of our force, and renders it more fruitful, in proportion

to its greater soundness and extent.—Now no man is in a situation to see every thing, and it is much more easy to learn than to invent.—But when several men communicate together, that which one has observed is soon known to all the others, and it is sufficient amongst them that one is found who is very ingenious, in order that precious discoveries should promptly become the property of all. Intelligence then will increase much more rapidly, than in a state of insulation, without calculating that it may be preserved, and consequently accumulated from generation to generation; and still without counting, what is clearly proved by the study of our understanding, that the invention and employment of language and its signs, which would not take place without society, furnish our minds with many new means of combination and action.

Thirdly, and this still merits attention: when several men labour reciprocally for one another every one can devote himself exclusively to the occupation for which he is fittest, whether from his natural dispositions or from fortuitous circumstances; and thus he will succeed better. The hunter, the fisherman, the shepherd, the labourer, the artisan,—doing each a single thing—will become more skilful, will lose less time, and have more success. This is what is called the division of labour, which in civilised society is sometimes carried to an inconceivable point, and always with advantage.—The writers on economics have all attached an extreme importance to the division of labour; and they have made much noise with this observation, which is not ancient; they have been right. Yet this third advantage of society is far from having an interest equally eminent with the two former, the concurrence of force and the communication of knowledge. In all cases, that which is most difficult is to assign to things their true value; for this, we must know them perfectly.

Concurrence of force, increase and preservation of knowledge, and division of labour,—these are the three great benefits of society. They cause themselves to be felt from the first by men the most rude; but they augment in an incalculable ratio, in proportion as they are perfected,—and every degree of amelioration, in the social order, adds still to the possibility of increasing and better using them.—The energy of these three causes of prosperity will show itself still more evidently, when we shall have seen more in detail the manner in which our riches are formed.

Notes

[1.] In developing and exciting sympathy.

Further Information



SOURCE

Antoine Louis Claude, Comte Destutt de Tracy, *A Treatise on Political Economy: to which is Prefixed a Supplement to a Preceding Work on the Understanding or Elements of Ideology; with an Analytical Table, and an Introduction on the Faculty of the Will* (Georgetown: Joseph Milligan, 1817). Of Our Actions. Chap. 1 "Of Society" <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/121>>.

FURTHER READING

Other works by Comte Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836)

<<http://oll.libertyfund.org/people/antoine-louis-claude-comte-destutt-de-tracy>>

19th Century French Classical Liberalism <oll.libertyfund.org/groups/28>.

“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]

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Another useful sampling of the contents of the OLL website is the collection of weekly *Quotations about Liberty and Power* which are organized by themes such as Free Trade, Money and Banking, Natural Rights, and so on. See for example, Richard Cobden's "I have a dream" speech <oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/326>.

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