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‘Sismondi Contra Rousseau: The Social Contract and Political Economy after the French Revolution’

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The author

Since 2009, Thomas Hopkins has been a research fellow attached to the Research Project Europe 1815-1914: Between Restoration and Revolution, National Constitutions and Global Law, an Alternative View on the European Century 1815-1914 (EReRe) at the University of Helsinki. In 2011 he received his PhD from the University of Cambridge for a thesis entitled, ‘Say and Sismondi on the political economy of post-revolutionary Europe, c. 1800-1842’. He has a number of articles on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political and economic thought in preparation, as well as a monograph on the intellectual history of ‘Industrialism’ in early nineteenth-century France.

The paper

In this paper, Hopkins considers the work of the Genevan historian and political economist, Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, (1773-1842). Often cited as a key figure in shaping the early nineteenth-century debate on the ‘social question’, and as an influence on later socialist thinkers such as Marx, Sismondi was a critic of classical political economy as it been developed by writers such as Jean-Baptiste Say and David Ricardo, as well as being a noted historian of the Italian city-republics of the middle ages. Sismondi has often been read, notably by Marx, as committed to an attack on modern commerce in the name of the restoration of the medieval guild system and patriarchal relations in agriculture. Recently, Roberto Romani has suggested he is best understood as developing a model of quasi-autarchic political and economic communities that would take their cue from Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Hopkins takes issue with this claim, considering both Sismondi critique of Rousseau in unpublished works of political theory, and Sismondi’s avowed commitment to an open model of international trade.