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► To cite this version:

Victor Bianchini, Nicolas Rieucan. An Unpublished Letter from James Mill to Jean-Baptiste Say. History of Political Economy, 2014, 46 (2), pp.333 - 338. 10.1215/00182702-2647531 . hal-01615078

HAL Id: hal-01615078

<https://hal.science/hal-01615078>

Submitted on 11 Oct 2017

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An Unpublished Letter from James Mill to Jean-Baptiste Say

Victor Bianchini* & Nicolas Rieucou**

Forty years ago, on the occasion of the publication of two unpublished letters from J. Mill to J.-B. Say, A. Heertje underlined that “although Say was a friend and correspondent of James Mill, letters from Mill to Say seldom turn up”¹. Dated the 25th of February 1817 and the 28th of May 1825, the letters published by A. Heertje were purchased from a Parisian bookshop and, outside the private collections of autographs, to our knowledge, no correspondence between J. Mill and J.-B. Say had been hitherto reported. Thanks to the development of electronic catalogues, it is now possible to find other traces of the epistolary relationship between J. Mill and J.-B. Say. For example, the online catalogue of manuscripts maintained by the Bibliothèque nationale de France turns up two additional letters².

In the future, one can assume that the progressive enrichment of electronic research tools³ will permit to multiply these types of discovery. Still catalogued in paper format, important manuscript databases rest effectively unsearchable in electronic format. Thus is the case for the collection of professor L. Darmstaedter⁴, kept in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin where one can find the letter from J. Mill to J.-B. Say dated June 6, 1821 that we hereinafter publish⁵.

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¹ A. Heertje [1971, p. 415].

² One, unpublished, dates from March 20, 1815 (n. a. fr. 26252, f. 264). The other, from May 26, 1821 (n. a. fr. 26252, f. 262-263), is published in A. Heertje & E. Schoorl [1972, p. 10-11]. Of course, at the time of publication, they did not have access to the online catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

³ About these instruments, see N. Rieucou [2009, p. 19-20].

⁴ One will find in the *Deutsche biographische Enzyklopädie* [vol. 2 (2005), p. 499-500] a notice devoted to this German chemist and great collector of autographs born in Mannheim in 1846, died in Berlin in 1927.

⁵ This letter is conserved under the shelf mark 2 g 1804 (1). The exact date of its acquisition by L. Darmstaedter is unknown. No catalog sale can be found in the folder containing this letter. The only indication that we dispose of concerning its date of acquisition took place, at the latest, at the end of 1907, the year L. Darmstaedter bequeathed his collection and published the inventory — see L. Darmstaedter

This specificity could merit, by itself, such a publication; the examination of the letter's content more justifies it. Far from being anecdotal, this letter enlightens us in several ways with regards to the dissemination of the works of J. Mill and J.-B. Say, and J. S. Mill's stay in the home of J.-B. Say in France. After having situated the letter within the body of epistolary relations between the two men, this paper will then proceed to present these two aspects.

In the correspondence of J. Mill, except by omission on our part⁶, the name J.-B. Say appeared for the first time in a letter addressed to Ricardo, dated the 14th of November 1814⁷. J. Mill, who profited of J.-B. Say's arrival in Great Britain⁸, solicited F. Place⁹ in order to both meet the author of *Traité d'économie politique* and put him in contact with D. Ricardo and J. Bentham. J. Mill had thus not yet corresponded with J.-B. Say before this date: If he had, he would not have resort to a third person to meet him. This meeting took place, as attested by J. Mill's letter addressed to J.-B. Say the 20th of

[1909]. The L. Darmstaedter collection includes several thousand autographs coming particularly from the history of sciences. Other than the J. Mill letter, this collection also contains other unpublished letters from economists. These include, for example, three letters from Turgot [2 | 1761 (2)], two letters from Ricardo [2 g 1820 (2)], three letters from Sismondi [2 g 1836 (3)] and six letters from J.-B. Say [2 g 1815 (2)]. The letters from Ricardo, J.-B. Say and Sismondi will respectively be published, in a few years, by C. Depoortère from the Université Paris 8, the team TRIANGLE from the Université Lyon II in the *Œuvres complètes* of J.-B. Say and the Walras-Pareto Centre of Lausanne within the *Œuvres économiques complètes* of Sismondi.

⁶ The publication of the complete works of J. Mill has not yet seen the light of day. In addition to the previously cited references — *supra* p. 1, this correspondence has appeared until now in a very patchy manner, notably in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo* (vol. 6-9), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* (vol. 10 & 12) and in the bibliography of J. Mill performed by A. Bain [1882].

⁷ *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, Vol. VI, p. 156-159.

⁸ Indeed, J.-B. Say was attributed a mission to visit Great Britain by the French government from September to December 1814 in order to study the economic state of the country and bring back useful information. Upon returning from this trip, he published *De l'Angleterre et des Anglais* [1815]. J.-B. Say's trip to Great Britain was made possible by the signature of the first Treaty of peace of Paris the 30th of May 1814 following the defeat of Napoléon 1st. This was not the first time that J.-B. Say travelled to Great Britain. He made the journey, notably, at the age of 19 and stayed for two years, with his brother Horace, to round off his commercial education and observe the industrial development of the country. On this subject, see E. Teilhac [1927, p. 7].

⁹ F. Place [1771-1854] was a British social reformer. The author of *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population* [1822] was an important political ally of J. Mill [A. Bain 1882, p. 77] and corresponded regularly with J.-B. Say. From 1825, the correspondence between F. Place and J.-B. Say indicated that he was given the task of translating, from French to English, three of J.-B. Say's critical texts of the Ricardian school [J.P. Potier (2009), pp. 559-560].

March 1815¹⁰. The fact that J. Mill communicated to him, in post-scriptum¹¹, his postal address in London seems to indicate that this letter marked the beginning of their epistolary relationship. This relationship spanned at least a dozen years. Indeed, the latest letter known to this day is dated the 28th of May 1825¹². The letter published in this article was written four years before and directly follows another letter¹³ addressed to J.-B. Say the 26th of May 1821.

A substantial part of the letter that is reviewed here is devoted to the dissemination of the work of J.-B. Say. This man placed much emphasis on the importance of the international reception of his writings. Numerous translations of his *Traité d'économie politique*, in which he made important collaborative efforts, bear testament to his concern¹⁴. Despite the efforts of J.-B. Say, his *Traité* was poorly received in Great Britain¹⁵. In this country, only one translation — C. R. Prinsep's fourth edition¹⁶ dating from 1821 — saw the light of day. In April 1821, C. R. Prinsep sent his translation to J.-B. Say¹⁷. Nevertheless, J.-B. Say subsequently informed him that he was not satisfied with this translation for two reasons: on the one hand, it did not incorporate the “*Discours préliminaire*” and the “*Epitomé*” of his *Traité*¹⁸ and, on the other hand, J.-B. Say was not convinced by the translator's critical and explanatory notes, because they were close to Ricardian ideas on the subject of value¹⁹. J.-B. Say, who desired to make known his critical opinion of this translation, endeavored to publish a response to C. R. Prinsep. J.-P. Potier [2009, p. 156] recently remarked that J.-B. Say had solicited J. Mill to publish his response to the translator in Great Britain. The

¹⁰ J. Mill to J.-B. Say, Bibliothèque nationale de France, n. a. fr. 26252, f. 264 r.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² In A. Heertje [1971, p. 417-418].

¹³ J. Mill to J.-B. Say [1821, p. 10-11], published in A. Heertje & E. Schoorl [1972, p. 10-11].

¹⁴ On this point, see J. P. Potier [2009].

¹⁵ However, the critical reception of the *Traité* was positive in the United States. On this question see *ibid.*, p. 132

¹⁶ Originally trained as a lawyer before becoming an economist, C. R. Prinsep [1798-1864] published, in 1816, *A Letter of the Earl of Liverpool, on the Cause of the Present Distress of the Country, and the Efficacy of Reducing the Standard of our Silver Currency*, and, in 1818, *An Essay on Money*. For more information on C. R. Prinsep, see D. Ashbury [2004] and J. P. Potier [2009, p. 152].

¹⁷ See C. R. Prinsep à J.-B. Say [16 April 1821], Bibliothèque nationale de France, n. a. fr. 26252, f. 331-333.

¹⁸ J.-B. Say à C. R. Prinsep [May 1821], p. 140-141.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142-145.

letter reviewed here constitutes material proof of his intentions. Indeed, after J. Mill affirmed that J.-B. Say's response seemed "admirable; the matter most important, & the manner at once pointed & delicate", he said he had no doubt "about the propriety of publishing it" in one of his "more respectable journals"²⁰ and that he "shall endeavor to make some of them notice it as soon as published". However, this letter was only ever published after the death of J.-B. Say in 1833 by his own son-in-law, Charles Comte [1782 – 1837] in *Mélanges et correspondances d'économie politique*. It is difficult to know the reason or reasons for which J. Mill did not publish the letter through his channels. But one can imagine that J. Mill sang the praises of Say's letter, that he further proposed to publish it, out of simple courtesy towards someone that had hospitably welcomed his son in his home in Paris. Moreover, even if J. Mill and J.-B. Say shared certain ideas, notably on the hegemony of Napoléon²¹ or the colonization of India by Great Britain²², the former did not have the best opinion of the economic ideas of the latter. Indeed, even though J. Mill had, in 1805, welcomed with praise the first edition of J.-B. Say's treatise [1803], pointing out in particular the law according to which supply cannot exceed demand²³ and the triptych order of subject matter's exposition²⁴ – laws of production, distribution, and the consumption of wealth; even though one can find this law in his *Commerce Defended* [1808, pp. 37-38] and this order of exposition – with several modifications – in his *Elements of Political Economy* [1821]²⁵, it doesn't any less stand that he did not seem, from 1818, to be convinced by the ideas of J.-B. Say on the

²⁰ J. Mill was thinking perhaps of one of the reviews in which he had already written, among which figure notably *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Westminster Review* and *The London Review*. The integrality of these reviews was indexed by D. Winch [1966, p. 328-331].

²¹ J. Mill and J.-B. Say had, in fact, both vehemently criticized this hegemony. On J. Mill's engagement against the supremacy of Napoléon, see R. Yasukawa [1991]. As for J.-B. Say, see J. Wolff [2005].

²² J.-B. Say [1824, p. 9] was inspired, on this issue, by Mill's *History of British India* [1817] that he even described as "excellent[e]"

²³ J. Mill [1805, p. 419-421]. See also D. Winch [1966, p. 29].

²⁴ J. Mill [1805, p. 415-416].

²⁵ For as much as we know, E Halévy [1901-1904, vol. II, p. 147] is the first to have brought attention to this latter similarity. Nonetheless, the question of value and exchanges constitutes a chapter to itself in the *Elements*, while it appears, in the *Traité*, on the one hand, in book I on the production of wealth and, on the other hand, in book II on the distribution of wealth.

question of value and distribution. On this point, J. Mill was a convinced Ricardian²⁶. His work shows his proximity with D. Ricardo – and, hence, his distance with J.-B. Say – when, for example, he underlined, in his *Elements of Political Economy*, the mechanism of differential rent²⁷, the inverse relation between salary and profit²⁸, or the manner in which value is determined²⁹. But even more palpably, J. Mill's Ricardianism makes itself known in his correspondence, directly contrary to J.-B. Say's ideas³⁰. If a "duty" of courtesy thus seems to motivate J. Mill when he claimed to appreciate J.-B. Say's letter to C. R. Prinsep and proposed to publish it, it appears that he was himself disposed to sending his own writing projects to J.-B. Say. The letter that we publish here reveals, in fact, that J. Mill sent him two texts, "Government" and "Jurisprudence"³¹, destined for the same publication³² and presented as an "outline of the business legislation". The first of these texts was judged favorably by J.-B. Say: "The praise you bestowed upon the article Government³³, has emboldened me to beg your acceptance of another article (Jurisprudence) which I have prepared for the same publication". Further, J. Mill informed him that he will soon publish what he called a "school book of political

²⁶ For a recent opinion on the divergences between Ricardo and J.-B. Say on the question of value and distribution, see C. Gehrke & H. D. Kurz [2001].

²⁷ J. Mill [1821, p. 29-40].

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72-86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87-90.

³⁰ See notably *J. Mill to Ricardo* [24 December 1818, p. 297] and *J. Mill to Ricardo* [14 January 1819, p. 10].

³¹ As he had already announced in his letter dated the 26th of May 1821, see *J. Mill to J.-B. Say*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, n. a. fr. 26252, f. 262. One can also make reference to A. Heertje & E. Schoorl [1972, p. 10-11].

³² "Jurisprudence" and "Government" were finally published several years later, in 1824, in *The Supplement to the 4th, 5th, and 6th Editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Edinburg, 6 volumes. As D. Winch [1966, p. 328] remarked, these "supplements" appeared already in "half-volumes" between 1815 and 1824 and they were also separately published at the beginning of the 1820s.

³³ The praise of the article "Government" does not seem anecdotal. As we have indicated — see *supra*, p. 4, n. 22, J.-B. Say [1840, vol. I, p. 50] cited and took inspiration, several years later, from a passage from the *History of British India* that echoes in some ways one of the ideas of Mill's "Government" article [1820a, p. 39].

economy”, the *Elements of Political Economy* [1821]³⁴, written from his eldest son’s — J. S. Mill — school notes, taken during their walks³⁵.

The last aspect evoked in the letter concerns J. S. Mill’s stay in France³⁶. This trip constituted an important step in his education program³⁷, which had been rigorously and carefully planned out by his father. J. S. Mill began his trip to France the 20th of May 1820, several days before his fourteenth birthday. He stayed in France for more than a year³⁸, since he returned to London in July of 1821³⁹. J. S. Mill was housed principally at the Bentham residence — S. Bentham⁴⁰, the brother of J. Bentham and his wife M. S. Bentham⁴¹ — in the south of France, first in Toulouse, then in Montpellier. At the outset of his journey and on his return trip, he benefited from the hospitality of J.-B. Say in Paris⁴². The letter we publish here was written after J. S. Mill’s second passage through Paris at the residence of J.-B. Say⁴³ from the 23rd of April to the 19th of May 1821, when J. S. Mill was staying with a friend of his father’s, Joseph Lowe⁴⁴, in Caen. In this letter, J. Mill thanked J.-B. Say — and his family⁴⁵ — for their hospitality towards his son and expressed his gratitude and desire “to make an adequate return”. He guessed that J.-B. Say noticed, in his son, “the defect of which the Benthams have also complained, a

³⁴ The personal library of J.-B. Say having been largely dispersed — on this point, see J.-P. Potier and A. Tiran [2009, p. 159], we do not know whether the *Elements* figured in his collection. But, to the extent that J. Mill was accustomed, in this period of his life, to sending his works to J.-B. Say, one can presume that he sent him a copy of his textbook as soon as published.

³⁵ J. S. Mill [1873, p. 142].

³⁶ On this trip, see J. S. Mill [1873, p. 152-154] and J. S. Mill [1820-1821, p. 3-45].

³⁷ On this program, see J. S. Mill [1873, p. 132-164].

³⁸ During his trip, J. S. Mill was obliged to keep his father informed by mail regarding the entirety of his intellectual activities. On this point, see J. S. Mill [1820-1821, p. 7].

³⁹ J. S. Mill [1873, p. 154].

⁴⁰ S. Bentham [1757-1831] was an engineer and naval architect. He was also a Brigadier-General in the Russian army. For more information, see M. S. Bentham [1862]. In his autobiography, J. S. Mill [1873, p. 736] wrote that he already knew S. Bentham before his trip to France. He had met him for the first time in 1813 during an excursion in which he had participated with J. Bentham and J. Mill to Oxford, Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth and Portsmouth.

⁴¹ M. S. Bentham [1765-1858] was the first daughter of George Fordyce [1736-1802], doctor and scientist — he was the author of *Traité de la digestion des aliments* [1791]. Her interest for science, intellectual curiosity as well as her sense of pedagogy were recognized several times throughout her life. On the influence, in particular, of M. S. Bentham on J. S. Mill, see C. Pease-Watkin [2006].

⁴² J. S. Mill. [1873, p. 154].

⁴³ J. S. Mill [1820-1821, p. 7-8].

⁴⁴ In his biography of J. Mill, A. Bain [1882, p. 80] mentioned that Joseph Lowe was a Scottish statistician.

⁴⁵ J.-B. Say, his spouse since 1793, Julie Gournel de Loche, and their five children.

backwardness to mix in conversation”, which was, after all, nothing other than the timidity of a child that was precociously experiencing an intense and isolating intellectual education: “I doubt not a considerable remainder of the awkward manners which are the effect of the seclusion in which he had lived”. J. Mill ended his letter attributing this timidity, literarily, to “vestiges of hardiness” (*vestigia ruris*) that should diminish with time, he hoped. This condescending point of view of a father for his son was maintained once J. S. Mill returned to Great Britain⁴⁶. Yet, the manner in which J. S. Mill related his time in France leads us to believe that the trip allowed him not only to develop his literary talent in the composition of a *Traité De Logique*⁴⁷ in a language he had begun to learn less than a year earlier, but also to open his spirit to the world⁴⁸ and become conscious of the intellectual limits of his family entourage⁴⁹.

We do not know what was in J.-B. Say’s response to J. Mill’s letter. The only information we dispose is that it was addressed less than three months later, the 6th of September 1821, by a certain “Clement”⁵⁰. If this delay suggests that the epistolary relationship between J.-B. Say and J. Mill was not necessarily intense, the few letters found to this day – five sum-total – characterizing a relationship that nonetheless lasted more than 10 years⁵¹, leaves one to imagine the presence of numerous gaps in this correspondence⁵². No major publishing enterprise has yet been undertaken of the correspondence between J.-B. Say and J. Mill: let’s hope that that consecrated to J.-B.

⁴⁶ See, *J. Mill to D. Ricardo* [23 August 1821, p. 43] et *J. S. Mill* [1820-1821, p. 11].

⁴⁷ One may refer to this *Traité* in *J. S. Mill* [1820-1821, p. 11].

⁴⁸ *J. S. Mill* [1873, p. 153].

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵⁰ At the head of the letter from J. Mill, J.-B. Say wrote “Repondu par Clement le 6 septembre 1821” — see *infra* p. 9. It is difficult to identify for sure this mysterious “Clement”. It might perhaps be Ambroise Clément [1805-1886], despite his young age in 1821. Future town clerk of Saint-Etienne, and correspondent of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques, this disciple of J.-B. Say edited, in 1854, in the *Dictionnaire de l’économie politique* the entry on his former mentor. The other hypothesis is that the “Clement” in question is Clement Cornell Biddle [1784-1855], the American editor of the 4th edition of the *Traité d’économie politique*, from 1821.

⁵¹ Let’s remember that the first and last traces of this correspondence date respectively from 20 March 1815 and 28 May 1825.

⁵² Moreover, the existence of certain unfound letters to this day is detectable from allusions made to them in other letters. See, for example, *J. B. Say to J. Bentham* [8 July 1820, p. 14].

Say, that will appear in several years within his complete works, will permit to fill in some of these gaps.

J. Mill to J.-B. Say, 6th of June 1821, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Shelf mark : 2 g 1804 (1)

[1 r] [Above the date recorded by J. Mill, in Say's handwriting, one can read "James Mill", then, below the date, still in Say's handwriting, "Repondu par Clement le 6 septembre 1821"]

[On the bottom left-hand corner of the folio (location frequently used at the time to designate the addressee of a letter), Mill wrote "M. Jean-Baptiste Say"]

London 6th June 1821

My Dear Sir

I have this morning heard of an opportunity of writing to you, by a gentleman from Scotland⁵³, who has a letter to deliver to you at any rate. & I gladly avail myself of it, to inform you that your letter to M^r Prinsep was last night delivered to me by M^r Brown⁵⁴. I lost no time in perusing it, & have the satisfaction to say that it appears to me to be admirable ; the matter most important, & the manner at once pointed & delicate. I have no doubt [1 v] about the propriety of publishing it. Accordingly I have employed a person to take a copy of it, but shall consult a friend or two who are admirers of yours⁵⁵, before I act upon my own judgement. I shall take care of the translation, I shall procure

⁵³ We have not managed to determine exactly whom they are speaking of here.

⁵⁴ It cannot be the Scottish philosopher Thomas Brown, close to the French ideologues and a major influence on the thought of J. Mill: the author of the *Inquiry into the relation of cause and effect* [1814] had been dead for years. The consultation of the *British Biographical Index* [2008, vol. 2, p. 596] allows us to propose the name of the librarian and printer, Thomas Brown (1778 ?-1869), who co-published, in 1821, the first English translation of J.-B. Say's *Traité*. As was his father Christopher, T. Brown was a partner in the *Longman Company*, a famous London printing house. On the subject of T. Brown and the *Longman Company*, see respectively F. Boase [1965, p. 439] and J.-D. Mellot & E. Queval [2004, p. 369].

⁵⁵ Among these, J. Mill was perhaps thinking about Francis Place [1771-1854], who, some years later, was given the task of translating, from French to English, several of J.-B. Say's texts. See *supra* p. 2, n. 9.

the insertion in one of our most respectable journals. It is too long for our newspapers, otherwise I should have been disposed to have it printed in some of them, by which means it would have been more speedily known. I shall endeavour to make some of them notice it, as soon as published.

The praise you bestowed upon the article Government, has emboldened me to beg your acceptance of another article (Jurisprudence) which I have prepared for the same publication. [2 r] My wish has been, in the two taken together, to give a sort of outline of the business of legislation. I have also in hand another work, which if I could hope to execute it properly would, in this country, at least, be of considerable use – I mean a School book of Political Economy⁵⁶. I aim at giving, if I am able, a clear statement of the leading doctrines in their natural order⁵⁷ & dependence.

I hope to be able to do so in the compass of an 8^{vo} volume⁵⁸, & even a small one. And if it answers my intention it will serve as an introduction to the study of the science, & will facilitate the perusal of the works which treat of it more profoundly & in detail.

I have now to return a thousand thanks for the two letters⁵⁹ which I have had the [2 v] pleasure to receive from you. – one extorted from you by my impatience to hear of my son from whom I had a letter⁶⁰ in the same day that yours arrived. For your kindness to him I know not how to thank you. I can hardly forgive myself for putting him in the way of encumbering your family for such a length of time. I can only assure you of our lasting gratitude, & our desire, if ever it is in our power, to make an adequate return. You have found in him, I perceive, the defect of which the Bentham's have also complained, a backwardness to mix in conversation, & I doubt not a considerable remainder of the

⁵⁶ Here J. Mill made reference to the *Elements of Political Economy*.

⁵⁷ This terminology is similar to that which Mill [1805, p. 415-416] had used, in the *Literary Journal*, in his article on Say's *Traité*: « The object of Say himself is to present a view of the principles of political economy as completely adapted to the wants of the learner as possible; to exhibit them in the most natural and exact order; to explain them in the most simple manner, retrenching every thing but what is necessary to convey a clear idea of the point to be stated ».

⁵⁸ An edition in-8° of the *Elements of Political Economy* was effectively published in 1821 in London, without an editor's name. An exemplary is conserved at the British Library, under the shelf mark 1027. E. 13.

⁵⁹ These two letters have not yet been found.

⁶⁰ We were not able to procure this letter for our research.

awkward manners which are the effect of the seclusion in which he had lived. These vestigia ruris will wear out I hope by degrees.

I am, my Dear Sir,

with the greatest esteem

Your most obliged & faithful

J. Mill

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