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Ghislain Deleplace

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When *General Theory* met French politics: the historical context of a translation

Ghislain Deleplace, Université Paris 8 – LED

1. Introduction

Part of the works of Richard Arena (Arena et Maricic, 1988; Arena and Schmidt, 1999; Arena, 2000) has been devoted to the reactions of French economists to the publication of *General Theory*. In fact the French translation of this book, completed in 1939 but only published in 1942, did not originate from an academic interest (although according to Keynes the book was “chiefly addressed to [his] fellow economists”; Keynes 1936: xxi) but a political one: the translator, Jean de Largentaye, implemented it when, as a high-ranking public officer, he was confronted to issues related to the ruling monetary situation or a prospective plan of economic recovery. Using the private correspondence between Keynes and Largentaye and other sources of the same period, my contribution aims at clarifying the historical context in which the French translation of *General Theory* was prepared and published. As such it is complementing a study of the theoretical stakes of the translation that I recently published elsewhere (Deleplace 2021).¹

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the timing of the publication and Section 3 the personal links between John Maynard Keynes and Jean de Largentaye. Section 4 deals with the political context of the preparation of the translation. Section 5 provides some concluding remarks.

2. The timing of the publication

Keynes’s *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* was published in English in February 1936. The French translation by Jean de Largentaye for Payot publishing house started in April 1938 and was completed by June 1939; its publication was planned for 15 September of that year. The outbreak of the war stopped the process and the book finally came out in the autumn of 1942, under the literally-translated title *Théorie Générale de l’Emploi, de l’Intérêt et de la Monnaie* (Keynes 1942). By the end of the year the 2000 copies were sold out.

A second French edition of *General Theory* was published in 1969, with a new Translator’s Note by the same translator. This new note criticised the bank money considered by Keynes and argued in favour of a commodity standard. There were little changes in the translation itself.

¹ The paper is a revised version of my communication to the History of Economics Society Annual Conference, Vancouver, 20-22 June 2013. I thank Peter Jones, Patricia McGuire and Peter Monteith for granting me access to the *Keynes Papers* at King’s College, Cambridge (UK), and Jonathan Smith to the *Sraffa Papers* at Trinity College, Cambridge (UK). I also thank Jean de Largentaye’s children, Bertrand, Hélène, and Armand, for having provided official and private papers linked to their father’s activity in relation to the translation of *General Theory*, for their recollection of events and personal notations, and also for very stimulating discussions about the political context of the translation. They should not however be held as responsible for the narrative, the interpretation, or the analysis contained in the paper.

2.1. A routine process and a personal initiative

The publication of the French translation of *General Theory* resulted from the convergence between an offer by the French house Payot to publish it, and a personal initiative by Jean de Largentaye to help doing justice to Keynes's ideas in France. The first aspect was part of a routine process, considering that Keynes was famous in France since the publication of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* in French in 1920. The second aspect was more connected with the particular position held by the translator.

The first mention of the publication process is an indirect one, in the answer by Keynes to the first letter of Largentaye to him. Keynes mentioned that he had been approached by Payot for a French edition and added: "The obstacle, I think, lies in the length of the book. Messrs Payot would feel happier in producing an abridged version for French circulation, and that is not so easily accomplished" (JMK, 07/02/38; 51).² A series of letters between Keynes and the English publisher Macmillan concerned the terms of the contract; Keynes appeared anxious of securing the future of the French edition in case of a new English one: "My main point is to protect the position in the event of my preparing a new edition, though that is not in fact very likely" (JMK to Macmillan, 26/02/38; 56). A memorandum of agreement was signed on 1 March 1938 (57).

Largentaye had discovered *General Theory* in May 1937, when a friend told him that the book might help him writing a note ordered by the Minister of Finance he was working for (see below, Section 4)). On 31 January 1938, he took the initiative of writing to Keynes, concluding: "I should consider it an honour if you would place on me the responsibility of translating your work into French." (JdL, 31/01/38; 49) This was the first item of a correspondence composed of 21 letters from Largentaye to Keynes (17 are extant; 4 are mentioned in Keynes's letters but not extant) and 18 letters from Keynes to Largentaye (all extant). In addition, two letters of Keynes to Piero Sraffa and two by Sraffa to Keynes dealt with the translation.

In his letter dated 7 February 1938, Keynes invited Largentaye to get in touch with Payot. On 14 March a letter from Payot to Largentaye entrusted him with the translation; the manuscript was to be delivered by 15 May, and the book was scheduled for a publication in June. On 4 April Largentaye announced the news to Keynes, adding: "I set to work immediately and seeing the extreme urgency of the translation I will try to finish it as soon as possible." (JdL, 04/04/38; 59) On 9 April Keynes manifested his interest for that prospect and underlined the usefulness of a table of equivalents between the two languages for the

² The correspondence between Keynes and Largentaye is kept in the *Keynes Papers* at King's College, Cambridge (UK), under the reference King's/PP/JMK/GTE 3. This file contains the carbon copies of the letters sent by Keynes and the originals of the letters received by him. The originals of Keynes's letters were deposited by the Largentaye family at King's, and they are kept in file GTE 3A. In the present paper, unless otherwise stated, any reference to this crossed correspondence will be given as follows: author of the letter (JdL or JMK), date, numbering in GTE 3 file (I mentioned only the first number of the document; if it contains more than one page, each one is numbered successively in the King's Archives' classification). When there is no corresponding carbon copy of the original letter by Keynes, the reference given is 3A followed by the number in that file. When a letter by Keynes is *not* addressed to Largentaye, the addressee is mentioned after JMK. Since the present paper was written, the 35 extant letters between Largentaye and Keynes dealing with the translation and three later ones have been published (Largentaye and Keynes [1938-1946] 2021) by Largentaye's daughter.

technical terms, as had been done in the German edition.³ On 8 May Largentaye sent a first draft of chapter 11 (“The Marginal Efficiency of Capital”) and a “list of words which seem the most proper to translate your set of technical terms.” (JdL, 08/05/38; 62)

On 10 May Keynes sent both documents to Piero Sraffa, asking his advice (79). The hand-written answer was addressed to Keynes on 12 May (80), accompanied with a “glossary” made after Étienne Mantoux’s review of *GT*⁴ and intended to help the translator. On 1st June, Sraffa returned to Keynes his previous letter with corrections in pencil (attenuating the critique); the next day, Keynes had this version typed and communicated (with the glossary) to Largentaye (88). On 26 October, the latter sent Keynes a draft of chapter 17 (“The Essential Properties of Interest and Money”) and “a new list of technical terms” (92); he informed him that he had “completed the first project of translation of the 21 first chapters.” Again, Keynes asked Sraffa’s advice, which came on 12 December (101). The annotated documents were then sent to Largentaye on 22 December (107).

2.2. The interruption by the war

On 4 January 1939 Largentaye asked Keynes a preface to the French volume (111); he then hoped that the translation would be completed by the end of February and the book published in April. When later in the month he met Sraffa in Paris to discuss the matter,⁵ he was not so optimistic. The publication was already six months behind schedule, and Largentaye told Sraffa that the book would come out before the end of the year. Sraffa replied: “You don’t mean it! By then there will be a war.” That made Largentaye suddenly realise how closely war was at hand.⁶

Keynes’s preface in English came on 21 February (112). But the prospects of the war interrupted the translation process: for the second time (the first had been mentioned in his letter of 26 October 1938), Largentaye was mobilised in April 1939, as he explained in a letter dated 30 April (132). On 26 May he sent Keynes a draft translation of his preface and a draft of his own Translator’s Note, which had been asked by Payot (135). Keynes approved both texts with minor corrections on 22 June (136). As was mentioned in a later letter from Largentaye (dated 12 May 1940), the translation had then come to an end in June, and consequently Payot provided a first proof for correction in July. The publication was scheduled for 15 September 1939 (139).

Meanwhile, Largentaye had been again mobilised on 20 August. The outbreak of the war on 3 September stopped the publication process. In November Payot provided a second proof, but invoked a lack of work force and paper to delay the publication. In his letter dated

³ On the publication of the German edition, see Hagemann (2014).

⁴ See Mantoux (1937). Curiously enough, in his introductory letter of 31 January 1938, Largentaye had mentioned this “recent critical analysis” as an illustration of “the fact that your work [*GT*] should be so little known and so ill understood in France.” On the contrary, Sraffa’s opinion was that “it is much better than most of the reviews of the *GT*.” (Sraffa to JMK, 12/05/38; 80)

⁵ This was the last time Sraffa was involved in the French translation of *General Theory* (for the details of his contribution, see Deleplace 2021). In 1938 he had declined to handle the Italian translation, contrary to what he had done for some of Keynes’s earlier works. However, he acted as a go-between in the practical aspects of this publication; see Marcuzzo (2018).

⁶ According to a recollection by Largentaye, told by one of his sons.

12 May 1940, Largentaye rather believed that Payot “considers the time not favourable to the launching of a book of that nature” (139). With that Keynes agreed:

“If it were to be published now, one cannot but feel that it would fall completely flat and that no-one would have in present circumstances sufficient interest or concentration of mind to pay any attention to it.” (JMK, 19/05/40; 141)

Answering to a letter from Largentaye dated 27 December 1940 but not extant, Keynes expressed mixed feelings about a proximate improving of the general conditions:

“When the Germans collapse, they will probably do so with their usual thoroughness. When, therefore, they see that there can be only one answer in the end, they may be willing to accept it with surprising quickness. I should doubt, however, whether one can expect them to see with quite sufficient clearness this calendar year. But next, surely? So, let us hope that the translation will appear with the imprint of 1943.” (JMK, 08/01/41; 143)

2.3. Further delays

In a letter dated 17 May 1941, the printing department of Payot informed Largentaye that the book was being printed in the “free zone” (the southern part of France not yet occupied by the German army) and that the publication would occur the next month. But on 26 May, a new letter from Payot raised an additional condition: the reception of “the preface by M. Pietri which you [Largentaye] had promised us, otherwise a preface by an important personality of Vichy, which would be indispensable for the launching of the book.” François Pietri had been minister several times in the 1930s, including minister of finance during five days in 1934. He had been minister of communications in the Laval government of the Vichy regime (the *de facto* French State under German occupation) and in 1941 was ambassador in Spain, a position he would retain until 27 November 1944.⁷ Largentaye was then financial attaché to the French Embassy in Madrid and Lisbon, and it is probably in that quality that a preface by Pietri might have been discussed.

This additional condition for the publication of the book was all the more surprising since the printing had already been completed. As Largentaye explained to Keynes on 28 June 1941, Payot had been requested to hand out the lead plates to the Germans (in search of raw materials) and, before doing so, it had printed 2000 copies of the volume. But as Largentaye wrote:

“He [Payot] hesitates to launch the book at present. He says that he fears the German authorities could seize the copies. In fact that risk does not seem to be so high, since I know that the book was translated into German” (JdL, 28/06/41; 144).

Maybe Payot’s request about a preface by a Vichy high-ranking official was a way to guard against that supposed risk. But Largentaye expressed his reluctance towards this kind of preface, which “could only lower the value of the book. He [Payot] has already the original preface and an unpublished preface by you [Keynes]. It is not necessary to publish a third one.” (*ibid*) Keynes agreed: “I see no need for an additional preface and should most certainly wish to see such a contribution before publication, which, in present conditions, might

⁷ As such, he would be condemned to five years of “national indignity” after the war.

obviously lead to difficulty” (JMK, 13/07/41; 145). But he still doubted that it was the proper time for publication: “All the same, it might be wiser to postpone publication to the day when men again have the time and inclination to study such matters.” (*ibid*)

Whatever the reason, one more year elapsed. Then Largentaye informed Keynes that

“M. Payot refuses to launch it [the book] as long as he does not get a written authorisation by the German censorship. Since the knowledge of your ideas remains in France as necessary as ever, I had this authorisation be asked from the German censorship office.” (JdL, 29/06/42; 148)

Keynes answered: “If Monsieur Payot is not able to manage it [the publication], I shall be very far from surprised.” (JMK, 10/07/42; 150)

Finally, in the autumn of 1942, Largentaye announced in English from Lisbon the good news to Keynes:

“When last in Paris, I was surprised to see that the French translation of la “Théorie Générale” had been published. It is M. Payot who secured the necessary authorisation from the German authorities. The edition of 2000 issues seems to be already out of print. It is extremely difficult to find any copy at the booksellers. Herewith please find one.” (JdL, 04/12/42; 151)

Keynes acknowledged reception of the book three months later – which gives an idea of the length of the communications at the time, even through diplomatic channels (in that case Hugh Ellis-Rees, British representative in Madrid). In his answer, Keynes made a sadly ironical remark on occupied France:

“It is indeed remarkable that the edition should have been so promptly sold out, – though I suppose there are a good many people in France to-day who have nothing better to do than to think about the future rather than the present.” (JMK, 03/03/43; 155)

One may wonder why it took more than three years between the completion of the translation and the publication of the book. Surely the war did not help. But, during the eight-month period between the declaration of war and the German invasion, the activity in France was nearly normal, and, as seen above, Largentaye was not convinced by Payot’s arguments in favour of a further delay. After May 1940, during the German occupation, the successive conditions raised by Payot – a preface by a Vichy high-ranking official, the authorization by the German censorship – were easily accommodated. One gets the impression that the publishing house was trapped into a contradiction between its wish to publish a book already translated in other countries and manoeuvres to delay that publication as much as possible.

An explanation of that contradiction may be found in what Largentaye later told repeatedly his children: the “Comité des Forges” – the steel-industry lobby which had the power in the French Business Association – pressed Payot not to publish what it considered as “a subversive and communist writing” (in Largentaye’s own words). No material proof of such a pressure has been found, but the fact that Largentaye had been associated with the preparation of an economic recovery plan of a government led by the Socialist Party in 1938 (see below in Section 4) was probably an aggravating circumstance. When Keynes wrote: “I agree with you that there are not likely to be political risks in issuing the book at the present time” (JMK, 13/07/41; 145), the issue was the behaviour of German authorities; but another

obstacle may have been more efficient to delay the publication process: the attitude of French business circles.

It may thus be useful to look at the political context of the translation. But before doing so, a few remarks can be made on the personal links between the author and the translator.

3. Personal links

In his first letter to Keynes, Jean de Largentaye (15 November 1903 – 26 February 1970) felt it necessary to introduce himself as follows:

“I am an engineer; I graduated from the French Polytechnical School in 1923. Having been forced to change my occupation by reason of the economic crisis, I passed the competitive examination for the position of Inspector General of the Financial Department in 1931. Since that time I have held several government posts, and at the present time am attached to the Treasury Department. I take the liberty of mentioning these references solely in order to assure you of my correct apprehension of your ideas and of the true translation and clear expression of the same in French.” (JdL, 31/01/38; 49)⁸

Keynes did not really grasp the nature of this profile. In the letter to Piero Sraffa where he asked his advice about the first drafts of the translation, he wrote, murdering Largentaye’s name:

“For the purpose of the translation a Monsieur de Layendaye has offered himself and apparently been approved. I am not quite sure whether he is an engineer or has some job in the French Treasury.” (JMK to Sraffa, 10/05/38; 79)

During several years, no personal notation appeared in the exchange of letters, except when Largentaye expressed his concern about Keynes’s health. However, his letter announcing in 1942 the publication of the translation and Keynes’s one acknowledging it gave the opportunity of a personal – albeit discrete – tone: to Largentaye writing “I still occupy my post in Madrid and Lisbon, but I think that this situation will not last long and that I shall not be able to go back to France” (JdL, 04/12/42; 151), Keynes replied: “I am not surprised to read what you say about the likelihood of your return to France. I hope that circumstances may arise in which we shall be able to make some personal contact.” (JMK, 03/03/43; 155)

Circumstances indeed turned in an unexpected way in a few months. No further letter by Largentaye to Keynes is extant, but two more letters by the latter to the former are. The first, dated 1 July 1943, was short:

“Your letter of June 21st has reached me quickly, and I have sent on your change of address to the Assistant Secretary. I am, of course, delighted to learn of your change of position. I hope this may mean that no long time will now elapse before we see you in London.” (JMK, 01/07/43; 156)

The “change of address” came along with a “change of position” fitted to “delight” Keynes: Largentaye was then no longer financial attaché of the Vichy regime in Spain and

⁸ The “École Polytechnique” was and still is the most prestigious of French Higher-Education schools for engineers. The Inspection des Finances was and still is the most prestigious department at the French Ministry of Finance.

Portugal but head of department at the “Commissariat aux Finances” (the equivalent of a ministry) at the French provisional government in liberated Algiers.⁹

In that position, the translation of *General Theory* would have far-reaching consequences for Largentaye’s later professional and private life. The Commissariat aux Finances was informed by the US representatives about the White and Keynes plans for the forthcoming Bretton-Woods conference. When, in the spring of 1944, the French delegation was designated, a close friend of Largentaye, Guillaume Guindey, who was in charge of foreign finance and had thus been assigned to that task, gave way to him. The delegation was headed by Pierre Mendès-France, whom Largentaye had known when Mendès was Under-Secretary of Finance in the second Blum government (see below). Although Professor Pierre Mossé was number 2 in the French delegation, it seems that Largentaye played an important role in it, as testified by the fact that one year later he authored the official report on Bretton Woods for the French Minister of Finance.¹⁰

In Bretton Woods, Largentaye met Keynes for the first time. He was also a member of the French delegation at the Savannah conference in March 1946 where the IMF and the IBRD were inaugurated,¹¹ and he would be later appointed as permanent French Executive Director of the IMF, a position that he held from 1946 to 1964. At the Savannah conference, Maynard and Lydia invited for dinner Largentaye and his recently-married wife, who later recalled Keynes as having “a tremendous charm” and the couple he formed with Lydia as a “very relaxed and cheerful” one.¹²

Two months before that dinner, in the last letter he wrote to Largentaye (he would die just after Savannah, on 21 April), Keynes had congratulated his translator for the wedding and added: “I am very happy that I, most indirectly and obliquely, should have been the occasion of bringing the two of you together!” (JMK, 05/01/1946) Back in Madrid where he had resumed his position of financial attaché, Largentaye had borrowed in April 1945 from the British Institute a copy of Keynes’s *Treatise on Money*, probably in connection with his writing of the report on Bretton Woods. Bringing back the book out of time, he had been fined by the librarian – his future wife.¹³

⁹ According to a testimony delivered by Gaston Cusin to Largentaye’s children in 1988 (see below), Largentaye when in Madrid had been involved as attaché financier for Vichy into secret financial transfers aimed at helping members of the French Resistance clandestinely taking refuge in Spain.

¹⁰ See de Largentaye (1945). This report is undated but, according to his children, Largentaye recalled that it had been completed between the two atomic bombs being dropped on Japan, that is, between 6 and 9 August 1945.

¹¹ In his biography of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky reports the recollection by Barreau, a member of the British delegation: “At the inaugural meeting of governors on Saturday 9 March, Vinson made a long and turgid speech full of emotional and fundamentally insincere expressions of hope. He was followed very much in the same strain by the Chinese, Czechoslovakian, French and the Mexicans.” (R. Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 3: Fighting for Britain, 1937-1946*, London, Macmillan, 2000: 465) Vinson was then the US Treasury Secretary – he felt being the target of Keynes’s image of the “malicious fairy” bending on the cradle of the IMF and the IBRD, and he growled: “I don’t mind being called malicious, but I do mind being called a fairy.” (*ibid*) The head of the French delegation was again Mendès-France.

¹² “He [Keynes] was a man with a tremendous charm, a sense of humour breaking through almost every word he pronounced, and very penetrating eyes you could not forget, very keen, mischievous...[...] She [Lydia] said: ‘John is the first violin, I am the second’.” Broadcast interview of Ines de Largentaye, France-Culture channel, “Les chemins de la connaissance”, 4-6 January 1995 (my translation). I thank Hélène de Largentaye for having supplied me with the transcript of that interview.

¹³ Largentaye’s letter dated 29 November 1945, announcing his wedding and answered by Keynes on 05 January 1946, is not extant. The anecdote was told to me by Largentaye’s children.

Now it is time to turn to the political context of the translation.

4. The political context

4.1. A note on “monetary asphyxia”

The starting point of the translation of *General Theory*, as far as its translator was concerned, is a 13-page note which has been traced by his children in his papers. It is dated 27 May 1937 and signed by Jacques Rueff, Director of the “Mouvement Général des Fonds”, the most active department of the French Ministry of Finance, in charge of the management of state finance, foreign operations, and economic intervention.¹⁴ Rueff did not write the typescript note – bearing remarks and questions in his hand – which, as usual, had been prepared by a younger “Inspecteur des Finances”.

The aim of the note was summed-up in the introduction:¹⁵ on 7 May 1937, a Member of Parliament, M. Bergery, had described the French monetary situation as follows: “This is an incontrovertible fact: we are living a time of monetary asphyxia, in other words of money shortage.” (Largentaye [1937] 2021: 249) The Minister had asked that an evaluation of this statement be made, through a comparison of the state of the balance sheet of the Bank of France in 1913, 1929, 1935, and 1937. The author of the note – Largentaye – did more than that: after having provided the requested statistics, he elaborated on the necessary distinction between monetary asphyxia and money shortage: “As a matter of fact, the two terms do not have an absolutely identical meaning and the two orders of phenomena to which they apply should require separate studies.” (*ibid*) But drawing that conclusion was not an easy task: Largentaye later told his children that at first glance he had felt embarrassed by the enquiry, until a friend, Stéphane Leven, advised him to look at a recently-published book, *General Theory*. He described his reaction when discovering the book as one of being “enlightened”.¹⁶ Thus the question arises of the influence of that reading on the note.

The structure of the note illustrates its aim. First its descriptive part showed that “in 1937 the [monetary] circulation represents a gold weight slightly below that of 1913. By contrast its purchasing power in terms of consumption goods is notably higher.” (*ibid*: 252) The study of the aggregate money supply concluded that

“for the time being neither the liquidity rule nor the increase in the discount rate stand in the way of an increase in the advances made to commerce and industry and consequently to the volume of fiduciary money. The supply of that money is not limited and since part of the circulation may develop itself freely according to the needs of the country in instrument of exchange, one has no good reasons to say that this country suffers from a money shortage. As a matter of fact it is not the supply of but the demand for money which appears to be insufficient.” (*ibid*: 254)

Some statistics were then provided to substantiate this insufficiency and led to the question:

¹⁴ It has become the “Direction du Trésor” since 1940.

¹⁵ Since the present subsection was written, the note has been published (Largentaye [1937] 2021). In what follows, the pagination of the excerpts translated by me is that of this publication in French.

¹⁶ “As soon as I read it for the first time, this work [*General Theory*] enlightened me considerably on the subject [of inflation], and now that I have read it again and thought it over ripely, your general theory appears to me in all its pristine clarity and appositeness.” (JdL, 31/01/38; 49)

“Since it is in the demand for money and not in the supply of it which the obstacle to an increase in the monetary circulation rests, can it be deduced that there exists no symptom of monetary asphyxia? Such a conclusion would seem to be too absolute.” (*ibid*: 255).

The last three pages of the note aim at defining a monetary asphyxia and suggesting that there might indeed have been one:

“The asphyxia can be due to not only an oxygen shortage but also to a disease of the respiratory system or of the nervous centres. Following a more common image, the slowing-down or the stoppage of a machine does not necessarily result from a lack of oil but can also come from an insufficient driving force. In that sense one can wonder whether a certain monetary asphyxia does not exist in France.” (*ibid*)

The tendency of prices to fall between 1930 and 1935, only recently counteracted by the “social laws” (*ibid*), that is, the laws passed by the left-wing *Front Populaire*, and the underemployment of physical capital and of the labour force, testified to this monetary asphyxia, which thus “came from the insufficiency of the needs for money. These needs should consequently be developed.” (*ibid*: 256). To do so, an expansion of the money supply was not the solution:

“To hit this target, injections of fiduciary money, even judiciously managed, would be a chancy and dangerous means. One should fear that the money so created would first be hoarded, and when the trust in its value had faded, be suddenly thrown back on the market. Then a flight from money would happen, similar to that experienced by Germany in 1922, and whose early symptoms were observed in France in July 1926. Following the images used before in case of asphyxia, oxygen inhalations or artificial respiratory devices allow overcoming acute crises but could not cure pulmonary or nervous lesions. In the same way, a better lubrication of a machine could not remedy an insufficient driving force.” (*ibid*)

The conclusion pointed to other means of restoring the “needs for money”:

“In an economic system with a capitalist form, grounded in the liberty to produce and to purchase, it is the hope to make profits which constitute the engine of economic activity. When this hope is weakening, one needs first and foremost to restore it. Some reforms of juridical, fiscal, and even monetary institutions could thus be useful.” (*ibid*)

Did the reading of *General Theory* permeate that note? The thread of the argument was the distinction between the supply of and the demand for money. Equating monetary asphyxia with money shortage, the Member of Parliament who had raised the question pointed to the supply of money – hence monetary policy – as responsible for the disease. By contrast, Largentaye underlined the role of the insufficient demand for money – hence of the behaviour of economic agents, above all capitalist firms. That distinction was not peculiar to *General Theory*: it may be found in orthodox monetary theory, for example in Alfred Marshall and Irving Fisher. Whilst the idea that the demand for real balances determined endogenously the supply of money was more at odds with the Quantity-Theory tradition, it was quite common in the French approach to money, for example in the most respected French monetary theorist at the time, Charles Rist.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is only after *General Theory* that, in discussions on the determination of the rate of interest, Keynes suggested that the part of the demand for money corresponding to “the ‘finance’ required by the current decisions to invest” was accommodated by the banking system, so that “‘finance’ and ‘commitments to finance’ are mere credit and debit book entries, which allow entrepreneurs to go ahead with assurance.” (Keynes, 1937: 208-9) This move by Keynes towards an endogenously-determined supply of money appeared in print in June

It is hard to find in the note any influence of Keynes's monetary theory, as it is developed in Chapter 13 and 15 of *General Theory*. The hoarding behaviour, in reaction to "injections of fiduciary money", was in the note linked to price expectations and not to the anticipation of variations in the rate of interest: in short, the demand for money was exclusively explained by its use as an instrument of exchange, never as a store of value leading to a speculative motive *à la* Keynes.

Why then did Largentaye later recall having been "enlightened" by *General Theory* when he struggled with the writing of the note? One may suggest that the light came from another chapter of the book, not to provide an unorthodox approach to money but to explain the forces which were active in the demand for money as instrument of exchange. This may have been Chapter 11 on the marginal efficiency of capital, with its insistence on profit expectations. The first draft of translation Largentaye sent Keynes one year later was precisely that of Chapter 11, and it is likely that this was the chapter which had so much impressed him during the writing of the note. *General Theory* did not help Largentaye answer the monetary question at the origin of the note – he did it in a way consistent with the French demand-oriented approach to money at the time – but it may have helped him understand what lied behind the demand for money as instrument of exchange.

4.2. An economic recovery plan

According to Gaston Cusin, a prominent member of the departmental staff of Vincent Auriol, Minister of Finance in the "Front Populaire" government led by the socialist Léon Blum, Largentaye started the translation of *General Theory* in relation with the preparation of an economic recovery plan.¹⁸ After the first Blum government had resigned in June 1937, the former members of the departmental staff of Vincent Auriol used to meet every week during the winter of 1937-1938 at Cusin's home. Cusin was himself a member of the Socialist Party, and with some of his colleagues he tried to reverse the traditional focus in the Higher French Administration on public finance instead of the economy. The government now led by centre-left politician Camille Chautemps had formed a small group of experts in charge of preparing a recovery plan for the economy, based in particular on a rearmament program. This group intersected with Cusin's one, and Largentaye, who, as noted above, had proposed Keynes on 31 January 1938 to translate *General Theory*, fuelled the discussions with that translation, week after week, chapter after chapter.

In March 1938, two days after the *Anschluss*, the Chautemps government resigned, and was replaced by a second Blum government, in which Vincent Auriol was number two, in charge of the coordination of the economy. The recovery plan was ready; it was called "Blum Plan", and the men who had prepared it in all its details were now in charge of its implementation. Although he had taken no part in its preparation, Pierre Mendès-France, Under-Secretary of Finance in the Blum government, was charged to present it before the Parliament. Under the title: "Prospects of Blum Plan: An End of Illusions. Towards a Regulated Economy", the London *Times* described it as "a masterpiece of drafting":

1937, hence after the note was written. The later correspondence between Keynes and Largentaye bears no trace of that question.

¹⁸ The typescript of an interview of Gaston Cusin (1903-1993), made in 1988 by Ines and Hélène de Largentaye, was kindly communicated to me by its writers, Hélène and Armand de Largentaye.

“For the first time since the days of M. Poincaré, it is declared, an attempt is made to see the economic problem as a whole, and to solve it not by improvised expedients but by a bold plan worked out in detail. [...] Now, at last, the truth is seen; France has reached the parting of the ways; the choice lies between the maintenance of a liberal economy and the introduction of a strictly regulated one. If confidence returns French money will be repatriated and the Government will get all the money they want. If it does not return, and the Blum Plan is based on that assumption, the Government will be forced to create new money and to take steps to prevent it leaving the country. That means financial regimentation.” (*The Times*, 6 April 1938)¹⁹

For controversial political reasons, the Blum Plan was coupled with a project of capital taxation. This led to its rejection by the Senate and to the fall of the second Blum government, after three weeks in office only.

The high-ranking civil servants who had prepared the plan were much disappointed. Photographs were taken of them and the plan was forgotten in drawers. But Largentaye’s material for the translation of *General Theory* survived.

5. Concluding remarks

By contrast with the German translation of *General Theory* which came out the same year as the original, the French translation took more than six years. This exceptionally long delay for a book of that calibre can be explained by several combined elements. The backwardness of economics in France and the negative reputation there of the author of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* may explain why it took two years just to start the publication process. Pressures coming from economic lobbies alarmed by the content of the book further delayed it, and the war raised other obstacles to its completion.

This delay also offered two positive opportunities which are not frequent in the course of a translation. First, the professional activity of the translator led to the association of the preparation of the text with a crucial phase of French politics, so that the economic plan then designed for the government has been regarded by some as the first practical application of *General Theory*. Second, the duration of the correspondence between the author and the translator provided the opportunity of analytical as well as terminological exchanges between them, which improved the original text. But this is another story, which is told elsewhere (see Deleplace 2021).

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¹⁹ I thank Armand de Largentaye for having attracted my attention on that article.

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