

## **GUSTAVE DE MOLINARI AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERTY: “FIN DE SIÈCLE, FIN DE LA LIBERTÉ”?**

(This is the draft of a paper written in April 2001).

### **A. The Last of the "Old School" of Classical Liberalism**

When Gustave de Molinari's book *The Society of Tomorrow: A Forecast of its Political and Economic Organisation* was published in an English translation in 1904 Molinari was 85 and only had another 8 years to live. His long life had very neatly coincided with the rise, flourishing and then decline of the classical liberal reform movement in Western European society during the course of the “long nineteenth century”. He was one of the last members of the “old school” of classical liberalism, a school of thought which believed in natural rights, laissez-faire economic policy, absolute free trade, and ultra-minimal government, and which strenuously opposed war and empire. Even the liberals who arranged for the translation and publication of his book found his adherence to the “old school” of liberalism a little puzzling and perhaps even embarrassing, as some of the remarks by Hodgson Pratt in the introduction make clear. It seems that Molinari's brand of laissez-faire liberalism had little to say to the “workers” of the great industrial cities in 1904, whereas the “New Liberals” like J.A. Hobson had more appropriate theories to solve the “social problem. So why, then, publish Molinari's book in English? Perhaps it was his anti-imperialism which attracted the publishers to the book. The Hobsonite new liberals thus might have found Molinari's views useful in their fight against British imperialism. But the reason is not entirely clear.

The original French edition of the book had appeared in 1899 under the title *Esquisse de l'organisation politique et économique de la Société future*, or “a sketch of the political and economic organisation of future society”. The English title gives the perhaps false impression that Molinari was making a prediction about the form society would take in the near future (“tomorrow”). The French title is less specific as it refers to a more general “future society” and, given the growing pessimism about the 20<sup>th</sup> century which Molinari was expressing in several articles he published at the turn of the century, it is clear that Molinari did not believe a free society would emerge until at least 50-100 years

in the future. The “society of the future” he had in mind was probably not 20<sup>th</sup> century society but more likely 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

The French edition of the book had been published by the firm Guillaumin which had been publishing classical liberal books (many indeed by Molinari himself) for over 50 years. Like many of his books it was a loosely rewritten version of articles he had written for newspapers and journals such as the *Journal des Economistes*. Like the classical liberal movement itself, Molinari was in his twilight years when the book appeared and it reflected the concerns he had during the last 20 years of his life to fight what he regarded as a resurgence of militarism, protectionism, imperialism, statism and socialism. The books which he put together from his journalistic writings at the turn of the century, like *Grandeur et decadence de la guerre* (1898), *Esquisse de l'organisation politique et économique de la Société future* (1899), *Les Problèmes du XXe siècle* (1901), therefore reflect the more contemporary concerns of the political battles which were taking place in western European societies: conflicts between the European colonial powers (especially the newly expanding German Empire and the more established British Empire), the tariff wars between the Great Powers, the rise of labor and socialist parties, and the changes taking place within the traditional “liberal” parties as they struggled to come to terms with the demands of the new electorate and the intellectual challenge of socialism. Molinari, as one of the last members of the “old school” of classical liberalism, took up his literary sword one more time to re-fight battles which he might have hoped had been won decades before.

Molinari was not the only surviving member of the “old school” at the turn of the century. There were others, but most died in the first decade of the new century. Only a very small handful made it into the second decade. They were all gone by the end of the First World War. The “old school” of 19<sup>th</sup> century classical liberalism was a group of individuals who were born in the 1820s and 1830s (although there were a few “younger” members of the school who were born as late as the 1840s), who became politically active in the late 1840s and 1850s, and who died in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the onset of the First World War. The core of the “old school” of classical liberalism includes the following (in order of date of birth): Gustave de Molinari (1819-1912), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Lord Acton (1834-1902), Eugen Richter (1838-

1906), Auberon Herbert (1838-1906), William Graham Sumner (1840-1910), Thomas Mackay (1849-1912).

The core members of the "old school" (most notably Gustave de Molinari in France and Herbert Spencer in Britain and their followers) were journalists, writers, academics, and sometimes even politicians. They were passionate defenders of individual liberty and the free market (usually on the grounds of "natural rights"); advocates of uncompromising laissez-faire economic policies and free trade; opponents of slavery, war, imperialism, socialism, and more generally what Molinari called "statism" (especially the dynastic and class-based systems of political privilege which had survived the French Revolution). In the early years of their usually long lives (Molinari lived to be 93, Spencer 83) they helped create the intellectual climate which brought about some promising classical liberal reforms in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (such as economic deregulation, free trade and constitutional government), but they lived long enough to see the rise of political parties and movements which began to seriously challenge and then undo the classical liberal agenda. By the 1870s and 1880s members of the "old school" began to warn about the dangers to individual liberty of the revival of protectionism and militarism and imperialism, the rise of socialism and the new democratically elected mass political parties, and the growing power of the "interventionist state". Those "old school" classical liberals who lived long enough to see the coming of the new 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote at some length on the achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the problems their societies faced at the turn of the century, and their prognoses for the future.

Concerning the future of liberty at the turn of the century, both Molinari and Spencer successfully predicted two related things: firstly, that anti-liberal policies being introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries would inevitably lead to a long period of economic crisis and political oppression brought about by war, imperialism, socialist revolution and government intervention in the economy; and secondly, that once this dark period of "statism" had run its course, the benefits of individual liberty and the free market would be rediscovered and the classical liberal reforms they had advocated in their lifetimes would be introduced once again. Were Molinari and Spencer alive today to see our *fin de siècle* they would feel vindicated, I'm sure, by the collapse of communism in 1989-90 and the speed with which all political and economic systems have embraced

market reforms such as privatisation, free trade and cuts to income taxes in the 1980s and 1990s. Their successful predictions need to be seen against the unsuccessful predictions of socialists of all kinds made in the same period. Whether democratic socialist or revolutionary (Marxist) socialist, the predictions of inevitable socialist revolution bringing about peace, prosperity and freedom for the mass of people have been proven to be hopelessly wrong by the extraordinary events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **B. The Radical Liberalism of Gustave de Molinari**

Molinari made a name for himself among French political economists in 1849 with the publication of an article called “The Production of Security” for the *Journal des Economistes* and a book *Les Soirées de la rue Saint-Lazare; entretiens sur les lois économiques et défense de la propriété* in which he advocated the private, competitive provision of all “public goods” including police and defence services. In brief, he argued that the law of competition should be applied to governments as well as to individuals and firms in the market and that “public goods” like police and national defence could be offered by firms (in this case insurance companies of some kind) which would offer consumers the best possible service at the lowest possible price. Furthermore, once the public monopoly of the public goods had been removed the incentive of governments to wage war and oppress their own and foreign citizens would end and a new era of peace and prosperity would begin.

Molinari continued to espouse these very radical views in many books written over several decades but he was largely alone in his endeavour to push liberal anti-statism to its very limits. Even his classical liberal colleagues in the Society for Political Economy and the other writers for *the Journal des Economistes* would not go this far in their espousal of laissez-faire and individualism. Molinari remained isolated from his fellow liberals on this question of the lower limits to legitimate state power. Even so, Molinari continued to espouse these ideas as late as 1893 [Molinari, *Précis d'économie politique et de morale* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1893), pp. 206-208]. It was not until 1899 that he withdrew from his position of fully competitive insurance companies and adopted a more moderate, semi-monopolistic view. In the French edition of *Society of Tomorrow*, Molinari still believed that the right of secession from a state was important in reducing the threat of

war and revolution. Disaffected groups could form their own communities or even their own states, and inter-state problems could be solved by courts and tribunals applying the same principles of law that were used to settle disagreements between individuals [Molinari, *Esquisse de l'organisation politique et économique de la société*. 1899), pp. 76-77]. Molinari continued to describe the functions and duties of the "producers of security" as he had in his first essay on this question, but a qualification had now been introduced which had not been present in his earlier works. This qualification concerned the consumers of security. Originally, Molinari had believed that each individual had the right to exercise his natural right to defend his own life and property from attack. Since the market had allowed the division of labor to operate, it was likely that individuals would decide not to exercise this right but delegate it to a company which would specialize in this business. At no time, Molinari argued in 1884, did this delegation of rights mean that the individual had given up any of his rights, as some "social contract" theorists claimed. Comparing the production of bread to that of security, Molinari had argued thus:

I no longer exercise my right to produce bread, but I continue to possess it. In fact, that right is more extensive than before. To the right, which I continue to exercise, of making bread for my own consumption, is joined the right to make it for others, to open a bakery or participate in its establishment through my labor or my capital. My right as a consumer is equally extended, since I can obtain my bread from two producers in place of one, from the baker and from myself. If I buy it from the baker, it is because his bread is better and less costly than the bread I would make myself. [Molinari, *L'Évolution politique*, p. 404]

In the *Esquisse*, Molinari retreated somewhat from this position by suggesting that the nation rather than individual would contract with the competing security companies. These "judicial companies" would remain "completely independent and competitive," [Molinari, *Esquisse*, p. 85. Molinari quotes Adam Smith again on the English court system .] but it would now be the nation or "collective" which would

contract preferably, through an agent or some other means, with the firm or company which offered the most advantageous conditions and the surest guarantees of the delivery of this naturally collective article of consumption. [Molinari, *Esquisse*, p. 84]

Individuals would still be completely free to engage in production or to trade all goods which were "naturally individual," i.e., those goods and services which could be purchased or contracted for individually. Molinari had made a distinction between public goods, such as security, and other goods before, but had never argued that individuals were incapable of paying for these public goods by contracting for them individually. In "La production de la sécurité" and *Les Soirées de la rue Saint-Lazare*, he had argued that within a given geographical area individuals would be free to contract for security services with any number of competing companies. Like churches or bakeries, there could be many businesses providing the same or similar services within the same city or province, limited only by the size of the market and the efficiency and profitability of each enterprise. In the *Esquisse* these "competing governments" had given way to communes or provinces which had a monopoly in the provision of security within their geographic borders. Individuals would not make their own arrangements for security but would appoint delegates or "mandataires" to act on their behalf. [Molinari, *Esquisse*, p.97.] Once the contract had been concluded, whether for a short or long period, the mandate of the people's representatives would end and then only a small committee of consumers or their representatives would be necessary to oversee the fulfillment of the contract until its expiration. In some cases even this "rump" would not be necessary if the press and other consumer groups were active. [Molinari, *Esquisse*, p.98-99] So, even though individuals or groups retained their right to secede from the larger administrative units, they would, in turn, set up monopolistic defense services within their borders. These states would not be very different from existing state monopolies, Molinari believed, because they would retain the most important characteristic of a state--the monopoly of the use of force in a given geographical area. In a society as Molinari described it in the *Esquisse*, states would be more numerous and their services would be cheaper and more efficient because of the competition of "sub-contractors" [Molinari, *Esquisse*, p. 84] but the state would still remain a monolithic entity from which the only escape would be to persuade a town or commune to secede. Molinari seemed to have forgotten his earlier insights into the nature of the state monopoly and how it arose. If minorities were unable to convince enough people to join them in seceding from the larger state or if the monopoly states grew too powerful and prevented them from

exercising this right, the benefits of what little competition remained in the provision of security would be lost. With each area monopolized by a single defense agency, it would be easy for this company to establish itself as a permanent monopoly and prevent the consumers from taking their business elsewhere. Molinari had argued in "La production de la sécurité" that one of the major benefits of competing defense agencies within the same city or commune was that none would be able to become a monopoly and exclude others from offering their services to the community. Molinari seemed also to have forgotten his arguments directed against government by representation. Only by exercising their rights directly could individuals ensure that their interests were protected. This included the right of each individual to determine for himself how his property should be protected and how much he was willing to spend to secure it. If the costs of paying a company were too high, then the individual had the right to decide to do without security or provide it himself. This right was now denied citizens of the commune or city who would be forced to pay for public goods by rents or taxes rather than by paying separate insurance premiums to the company of their choice.

The reason for Molinari's departure from his earlier, more radical position was his increasing emphasis on the spurious distinction between those goods and services which could be satisfied individually and those which were by nature of benefit to the entire community. In "La production de la sécurité" this distinction had been made, but it was argued that the market could provide so-called public goods because the same economic laws were at work. No monopolies were considered necessary, and the monopoly of security was considered both dangerous and inefficient. By 1899 Molinari abandoned his earlier view of monopolies and accepted the need for certain geographic monopolies for the provision of such public goods as street lighting, roads, drainage and security but not, surprisingly, for money or the postal service. [Molinari, *Économie de l'histoire: Théorie de l'évolution*, p. 218.] He made a distinction between industries which could be provided competitively and natural monopolies, and, although he admitted that these monopolies were harmful to consumers, his only concession to his earlier views on competition was to allow indirect competition. [Molinari, *Économie de l'histoire: Théorie de l'évolution*, p. 250.] Molinari now argued in *Économie de l'histoire* that the state itself would contract with companies for the provision of security. Through their "mandataires"

consumers would not even have direct control of the price or the terms of the contract, and the state itself would ensure that the contract was fulfilled. Thus Molinari fell into the trap of thinking that it was possible to simulate competition, in order to have its benefits, without having it in fact. The result was that Molinari had abandoned his theoretical distrust of all government monopoly and had capitulated to the position of his early opponents in the *Société d'Économie politique* debate of 1849. Gone were the competing defense agencies and the state monopolies. Gone was the emphasis on the absolute right of each individual consumer to freely choose the company which would protect his or her own person and property from harm. Thus, Molinari had returned to the "night watchman" state of the classical liberals while still believing that "competition" within the government would stop the abuses of this monopoly. In *The Society of the Future* (1899) he still defended the free market in all its forms, with the only concession to his critics the admission that the private protection companies he had advocated 50 years previously might not be viable. Nevertheless, the old defender of laissez-faire still maintained that privatised, local geographic monopolies might still be preferable to nation-wide, state-run monopolies. Fortunately perhaps, he died just before the First World War broke out thus sparing himself from seeing just how destructive such national monopolies of coercion could be.

### **C. Gustave de Molinari on the Future of Liberty**

#### **i. Did the “Fin de siècle” mean the “fin de la liberté”?**

In the twenty or so years before his death (1893-1912) Molinari published numerous works attacking the resurgence of protectionism, imperialism, militarism and socialism which he believed would hamper economic development, severely restrict individual liberty and ultimately would lead to war. The turn of the century provided him with the opportunity to summarise his views and to offer his prognosis of the future of liberty in a series of articles in the *Journal des Économistes* which, in typical form, he expanded into book form. The key works in his campaign to warn the world of the dangers of militarism, protectionism, and statism (socialism) were the following (in order of appearance) and they are a remarkable achievement for a man who was in his 80s (his last work, the aptly titled *Ultima Verba*, was published when he was 92):



- *Comment se resoudra la question sociale?* (1896).
- *Grandeur et decadence de la guerre* (1898).
- *Esquisse de l'organisation politique et économique de la Société future* (1899).
- "1899", *Journal des Économistes*, Janvier 1900, pp. 5-11.
- "La Décadence de l'Angleterre", *Journal des Économistes*, Mai 1900, pp. 179-83.
- "Le XIXe siècle", *Journal des Économistes*, Janvier 1901, pp. 5-19.
- *Les Problèmes du XXe siècle* (1901).
- "Le XXe siècle", *Journal des Économistes*, Janvier 1902, pp. 5-14.
- *Questions économiques a l'ordre du jour* (1906).
- *Théorie de l'évolution: Économie de l'histoire* (1908).
- *Ultima Verba: Mon dernier ouvrage* (1911).

With a writer who was as prolific as Molinari, there is inevitably some repetition and overlapping so I will focus my discussion on the essays which were published in the *Journal des Économistes* in January 1901 and 1902 and which we designed to summarise his thoughts on the past, present and future state of individual liberty at the turn of the century, and his last book, *Ultima Verba* (1911) where he returned one last time to these issues before he died. Nevertheless, the wealth of historical detail and the numerous contemporary examples which Molinari drew upon to make his case (often the latest published economic statistics) mean that his longer works do repay the time taken to read them.

### **i. The Achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Molinari had been a prolific writer throughout his long life, but his output seemed to accelerate towards the end of the century. His growing concern that the two issues which had motivated him throughout his life - free trade and peace - were being undermined by growing militarism, protectionism and statism drove him to write 7 books on these issues alone between 1896 and 1911. [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. I]. In this paper I will focus on the 2 essays he wrote for the *Journal des Economistes* at the century in which he summarised his thoughts. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, January 1901; Molinari,

"XXe Siècle", January 1902] and his last book, appropriately entitled *Ultima Verba: Mon dernier ouvrage* (1911), which appeared the year before he died and in which he revisited the two essays published at the turn of the century.

For Molinari the distinguishing feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which made it different from all previous centuries in human history, had been the "prodigious" increase in productive power made possible by economic liberty and the industrial revolution. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", 1902, p.5; and Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 5.]. Wealth in the United States had doubled in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it had increased at twice the rate of population increase in Western Europe in the same period. The introduction of steam power had vastly increased the productivity of human labour, whilst the quality of labour had changed as a result of factory production, city life, and international trade. The "ties of solidarity" among people [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 8] had multiplied as opportunities for trade and cooperative economic activity had developed. Molinari believed that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the system of isolated and hostile states which had emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been replaced by nations linked together by international trade and mutual economic dependence. War and economic antagonism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been replaced, for a brief period at least, by peace and prosperity.

The key period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for Molinari had been the two or three decades of the 1840s to the 1860s when Britain took the momentous step towards free trade, with the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846. This liberalisation of trade enabled Britain to leap ahead of the other European nations in economic development and wealth creation, thus placing strong competitive pressure on them to do likewise. The Cobden-Chevalier free trade treaty between France and Britain was a key part of the "internationalisation of progress" [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 10]. For a brief period in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it seemed possible to liberals like Molinari that peace and free trade would "rule the world". [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. i].

But unfortunately, like someone who has just won a huge amount of money in a lottery, Europeans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were not able to use this new-found wealth wisely. [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. viii]. Traditional ruling elites from the landed aristocracy and the military remained politically powerful and resisted the process of economic liberalisation which brought in its train international peace and

solidarity between peoples. The political agenda of the old ruling elites in the second half of the century had been to forge new coalitions with the two new classes which were emerging from industrialisation - wealthy industrialists and the urban working class. The traditional military elites forged an alliance with the new industrialists and the new democratic political parties to channel industrial technology and tax money into expanding and updating the army and navy, thus creating a new wave of militarism and imperialism from the 1870s onwards. With the notable exception of Britain which retained free trade, in Europe and America landed and industrial elites forged an alliance to reintroduce tariffs which retarded economic development, inflamed international rivalry, and placed a large burden on ordinary consumers and taxpayers, thus hampering their rise out of poverty. The result was a return to economic protectionism and ultimately tariff wars between the major powers.

In addition to the rise of militarism, imperialism, and protectionism in the second half of the century, there was also the growth of what Molinari called "étatisme" (or "fonctionnairisme" [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. xvii].) or even in some circumstances "the leprosy of Statism" [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 6]. In his view, the state is a mechanism which enables a small group of people (perhaps 10% of the population) to gain economic and political benefits for themselves at the expense of ordinary taxpayers and citizens. In pre-democratic and early industrial societies, the state was the tool of the traditional landed, military and commercial elites. With the extension of the franchise to most working males in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there arose a new, more numerous group who wished to use the state to gain benefits for themselves at the expense of others. Labor and socialist parties emerged to service the political needs of the newly enfranchised working class. Traditional conservative parties and even the more recently formed liberal parties adopted parts of the socialist political and economic agenda in order to appeal to the new electorate. The result, in Molinari's view, was a major unraveling of liberal reform and a defeat for the "party of cheap government" or the "party of the least government". [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 14]. The state expanded rapidly in size at all levels (local, departmental, and provincial) in order to provide jobs for the new political constituencies, thus creating a powerful mechanism for patronage and vote-buying at election time. Entire sectors of the economy had been

nationalised or "municipalised" (such as gas, water, electricity, post office, railways) for the same purpose. The result was statism, fonctionnaireisme, or "socialism", which increased the number of people dependent upon the state for income, raised taxation for the ordinary taxpayer, and caused economic losses due to the higher cost and greater inefficiency of state-supplied services.

Molinari was very concerned about the direction European society was heading at the turn of the century. Although technology and industrialisation and international trade had vastly increased wealth (and seemed ready to continue doing so in the new century), the combined effect of protectionism, militarism, imperialism, and statism (especially in its new guise of socialism) would result in economic breakdown, wars unprecedented in their destructiveness, political tyranny and socialist revolution. Molinari remained hopeful that the principles of peace and free trade would be rediscovered sometime in the future, but not until after civilisation as he knew it had been destroyed.

I will discuss the specific concerns Molinari had about the rise of militarism and imperialism, protectionism, statism and socialism at the turn of the century, before turning to his bleak vision of the future of individual liberty in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **ii. Militarism and Imperialism**

The promise of the mid-century liberal reforms, that free trade and economic liberalisation would usher in a period of unprecedented peace and wealth creation, had only been partly realised. Perhaps the vested interests which benefited from war and empire were just too strong to be quickly overcome. Perhaps the classical liberals had not worked hard enough in persuading the broader public of the benefits of the reforms they were introducing. Whatever the case, Molinari concluded that, in spite of the revolutions, political unifications and constitutions which were intended to free ordinary people from the exploitation of whatever ruling "caste" was in power, the fundamental nature of the state had remained the same. Only the outward form of the state had been changed - constitutional monarchist in some cases, republican in others, traditional autocratic monarchist in a handful of cases. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 12]. As Molinari

noted with some force and with some obvious regret for the wasted opportunities of the past and the dangers facing contemporary European societies:

Mais, en dépit des révolutions, des unifications et des constitutions politiques qui ont eu pour objet d'affranchir les nations de l'exploitation d'une caste nationale ou étrangère, la forme de leurs gouvernements seule a changé, le fond est demeuré le même. Les intérêts particuliers n'ont pas cessé de se coaliser pour faire la loi à l'intérêt général. Et dans toute l'Europe les intérêts engagés dans la conservation de l'état de guerre, intérêts militaires et politiques, sont demeurés prépondérants. Les armées et les fonctions publiques qui étaient sous l'ancien régime l'unique débouché de la classes gouvernante, n'ont pas cessé d'être considérées comme supérieures aux autres emplois de l'activité humaine. Elles attirent encore de préférences les rejetons de l'ancienne classe dominante avec les parvenus de la nouvelle, et constituent un puissant faisceau d'intérêts, aussi biens dans la plupart des républiques que dans les monarchies. Or, la guerre étant aujourd'hui comme l'était jadis une source de profits et d'honneurs pour les militaires professionnels, il est naturel qu'ils poussent. "Connaissez-vous bien mon armée, disait napoléon? C'est un chancre qui me dévorerait, si je ne lui donnais de la pâture!" [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 13].

Given the honours and profits which modern states provide for their senior military leaders and the industrialists who build the new weapons of war (what Molinari calls "destructive industry" [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 12]; and given the preponderant political power these groups have over what he calls "productive industry" (made up of industrial leaders, capitalists, and workers in industries serving the mass consumer market), war will persist for the foreseeable future.

At the time of writing (1901-1902) it seemed that the European powers had realised it was too costly to fight each other and had so directed their militarism outwards to the less developed parts of the world. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Great Powers had expanded their empires through wars of conquest in Africa, Asia, and most recently in China, and were busy bringing European "civilisation" to the "barbarians" by exploiting and pillaging and massacring the native peoples. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 14]. These actions had been justified under the pretext of opening up foreign markets for the benefit of national industry and commerce, but the actual profits of war and empire had gone into the hands of narrow "caste" of privileged military and business interests. For the nation as a whole, the costs of wars of conquest, governing the colonies, and

protecting special zones of influence, were considerable and acted as a break on domestic economic development. Molinari observed with some bitterness that:

Les gouvernements européens se sont partagé l'Afrique et ils mettent aujourd'hui la Chine au pillage, sous prétexte d'ouvrir de nouveaux débouchés à l'industrie et de faire participer les nègres, sans oublier les Chinois, aux bienfaits de notre civilisation. Mais il suffit d'additionner et de comparer les frais de conquête et de conservations des colonies, des protectorats et des zones d'influence avec les profits qu'en tirent l'industrie et le commerce, pour être édifié sur la valeur de ce prétexte. La conquête, l'assujettissement, l'exploitation fiscale et protectionniste n'ont pas la vertu d'étendre les débouchés de l'industrie et du commerce. Ils contribuent plutôt à les resserrer en augmentant les charges que les budgets de la guerre, de la marine et des colonies font peser sur toutes les branches de la production. Quant à la civilisation, est-ce bien par le massacre et le pillage qu'on peut en faire apprécier les bienfaits aux "Barbares"? [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 14]

The "recrudescence of militarism" had begun with the victory of Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and had continued with the bloody expansion of European empire in the 1880s and 1890s. [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. iii]. But from mid-century onwards, the major European powers had been involved in war after war starting with the war in Italy, the Crimean War, the Austro-Prussian War, the Sepoy Revolt, the Franco-Prussian War, the Russo-Turkish war, the Italian-Abyssinian War, the Turko-Greek war, the Spanish American War, the Boer War, and the Russo-Japanese War. With no end in sight to the current naval arms race of the 1890s and 1900s Molinari was extremely pessimistic about the short and medium term prospects for peace. The failure of the great powers to heed the warnings made by pacifists and the Russian Tsar in 1899 was, in his view, a serious mistake which the Great Powers would one day rue. [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. iii]. In one of the last books he wrote, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), he had given up any hope that it would be in the material interests of the military and political elites who ran the major European states to abandon the arms race and imperial rivalry and adopt a policy of what Richard Cobden had termed in the 1840s "peace, retrenchment and reform". It would be up to the "friends of peace" [Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), p. 242] to win over enough support from voters to put pressure on the military states from below, and up to the industrial and business interests who benefited from international trade (what he called the "intérêts pacifiques")

to pressure the state from above, to take steps to make war less and less attractive as a way of solving disputes. Molinari's pet scheme was for the European nations to form a "league of neutrals" which would create an international body of law to resolve disputes between nations and which could, in extreme cases, impose sanctions on an aggressive state or even join forces to defend a member state from invasion. [Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), pp. 244-45]. The details of the scheme are spelled out in a series of short articles reprinted in the appendix to a book he published just before the turn of the century, *Grandeur et decadence de la guerre* (1898), Appendix P, pp. 258-301.

### **iii. Protectionism**

Something similar was the case with protectionism. After a promising start towards free trade in the 1840s and 1850s, the major European states and the USA had returned to using protectionist tariffs to raise money and to "protect" or favour selected domestic industries. The aim of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutions had been to remove the heavy taxes and feudal dues which had been imposed by the Old Regime. They had been reduced or removed for only a short period before they reappeared in a new guise, that of indirect taxes, state monopolies and customs duties - or what Molinari called "the old feudal dues transformed and modernised". [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle", 1901, p. 17]. The tariff cuts brought about by the Anglo-French Trade Treaty of 1786, the Abolition of the Corn Laws in Britain in 1846, and the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty of 1860 should have opened up a "new era of liberty and peace" [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle", 1901, p. 16] but the success of the free traders was short lived. The "militarist and protectionist interests" soon regained the upper hand in state economic policy after the victory in the American Civil War of the protectionist North and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The considerable cost of the latter war was the excuse the protectionists needed to raise tariffs for "fiscal" reasons. Once back on the books, it wasn't long before the state was dominated by a coalition of military, industrial and agricultural interests who wanted to raise tariffs for their own personal benefit. Germany, Italy and France all adopted tariffs in the 1870s and periodic "tariff wars" became part of the rivalry between European states in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### iv. Statism and Socialism

Molinari had very little which was good to say about the state. One of the achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been to show how private initiative and the market could increasingly replace the state as the provider of so-called "public goods" - even going so far in some of his writings to suggest that police and defence could be provided privately and cooperatively via the free market. Such was his dislike of the state and its "spirit of monopoly" that he labeled "statism" as a kind of "leprosy" which ate away the wealth created by private economic activity:

De même, tandis que le développement de l'esprit d'entreprise et d'association permettait d'abandonner désormais à l'initiative libre des individus les travaux et les services d'intérêt public, on a vu l'Etat impiéter chaque jour davantage sur le domaine de l'activité privée, et remplacer l'émulation féconde des industries de concurrence par l'onéreuse routine de ses monopoles. Moins l'intervention de l'Etat est devenue utile, plus s'est étendue **la lèpre de l'Etatisme!** Enfin, tandis que la multiplication et le perfectionnement merveilleux des moyens de transport, à l'usage des agents et des matériaux de la production, égalisaient partout les conditions d'existence de l'industrie, et, en mettant en communication constante les marchés de consommation auparavant isolés, enlevaient sa raison d'être originaire au régime de la protection, l'esprit de monopole des classes gouvernementales et légiférantes exhaussait et multipliait les barrières du protectionnisme. [emphasis added, Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 6].

In autocratic states like Russia, with most of the population excluded from having any say in how they were governed, it was not surprising that the most powerful members of the bureaucracy, the landed nobility and the owners of large industry would join together to exploit the taxes and tariffs imposed by the state on the mass of the people. What was surprising was that this same process took place in the so-called "constitutional states" like France, where a growing percentage of the population could participate in elections. In both types of states the same class structure emerged - a class of "budget eaters" ("cette classe budgétivore" [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 8]) living off the productive activity of the mass of taxpayers and consumers.

The state which had emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century also had a nasty habit of trying to use its increased power to suppress the minorities in the territories it had conquered. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, conquerors like Louis XIV were happy to allow their subject



peoples, like the Alsatians, to keep their customs and their language so long as they paid their taxes promptly. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the conquering state wanted to control every aspect of life. Using the newly unified Germany as an example of what the future might hold, Molinari objected to the state's desire to see local languages such as Danish and Polish suppressed and replaced by a compulsory use of the conqueror's own German language, which he angrily described as "cette prohibition aussi inepte qu'odieuse par l'abus le plus insolent et le plus brutal de la force" [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 8].

The newest manifestation of statism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was socialism. Like any form of statism, Molinari opposed it because it violated private property rights, individual liberty and the natural laws of economic activity. In its parliamentary or social democratic form, socialism, Molinari predicted, would end up like any statist regime - a small group of people would control the mechanisms of power and operate them for the benefit of a few at the expense of the majority. One of the innovations socialism promised was to open up government jobs and state owned industries to a broader group of people who had been excluded from office-holding in earlier regimes. The consequence of this democratisation of the state would be a huge increase in taxes to pay for the new "bureaucratic class" which lived off the state [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. xi] and a crippling of economic productivity as entire sectors of the economy were nationalised or heavily regulated by the economic "planners". [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. xvii]. In Molinari's view, an even more dangerous type of socialism was revolutionary socialism which came to power by overthrowing the old ruling class in a violent and bloody revolution. However the socialists came to power, the final result was a new form of class rule and the spread of "fonctionnairisme":

L'avènement du socialisme a sensiblement augmenté le nombre des lois car les socialistes ignorent en quoi consiste les lois naturelles; ils sont convaincus que celles qu'ils fabriquent sont supérieurement faites et ils en exigent l'application rigoureuse. Dans ce but leurs ministres multiplient les fonctionnaires. Mais à peu près toutes les lois inspirées par le socialisme sont faites pour une certaine classes d'homme à laquelle elles semblent profiter bien qu'elles leur soient nuisibles. Car tout ce qui change la destination de la fortune de l'ensemble des contribuables est loin d'être toujours favorable à la richesse publique. En faisant passer les ressources des classes favorisées de la fortune en des

mains moins capables ou plus dispendieuses et en augmentant les dépenses militaires, le protectionnisme et **le fonctionnairisme**, la richesse diminuera et les dettes s'accroîtront jusqu'à ce que le pays ne puisse plus en supporter le fardeau. [emphasis added, Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," pp. xvi-xvii].

Further thoughts on the "impossibility" of socialism can be found in the essay "Impossibilités du socialisme: Nuisances de l'Etatisme et du syndicalisme," in Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), pp.49-74.

#### **v. The Prognosis for Individual Liberty**

Molinari was pessimistic about the future for many reasons. Perhaps in the very long term ( a century or longer) he was optimistic that people would come to realise that free trade and peace were the only way to ensure steady wealth creation for all classes in society and so they would eventually eschew war, protectionism and socialism. In the meantime, he was very pessimistic about the short to medium term (the next 50 to 100 years) because the forces he could see at work at the turn of the century were very powerful and would have to work their way through society before their harmful effects would be seen by all. If the first couple of years of the new century were anything to go by, he predicted that the new century would be much like the old. All states would continue to follow " a policy of waste and privilege" with increasing state debt, increasing levels of tariff protection, higher taxes, and greater risks of war. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 7]. The class of "budget eaters" who would come to dominate every European state would continue to expand the power of the state and increase the taxes and privileges from which they profited. Molinari expressed regret that this ruling class could act in such a manner with apparent impunity and there seemed to be no end in sight to their rapacity:

Dans les pays dits constitutionnels où les gouvernées sont en nombre plus ou moins considérable pourvus du droit électoral, la grande majorité use de ce droit pour en tirer un profit quelconque ou s'abstient d' en user. A la condition de favoriser les intérêts les plus influents, le gouvernement peut impunément sacrifier ou négliger les autres. Or les intérêts les plus infuents sont précisément ceux de la classe dans laquelle se recrutent les hauts fonctionnaires civils et militaires qui demandent leur moyens d'existence au budget de l'état, les propriétaires fonciers et les industriels qui se partagent le budget de la protection. Comment donc cette classe budgétivore ne pousserait-elle pas à

l'augmentation continue des dépenses dont elle profite, et n'emploierait-elle pas à les multiplier la puissance de l'Etat dont elle dispose?  
[Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 8].

His explanation for what went wrong with liberal reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had very ominous overtones for the coming century. The problem lay partly in the very nature of the modern state as a mechanism for the "redistribution", or as Molinari preferred to put it the exploitation, of wealth by a small privileged group at the expense of the majority of people. As the industrial revolution and free trade increased wealth, so too did it increase the temptation for privileged groups to fight for control of the state in order to serve their own interests. Molinari's solution to this problem of the state was to limit the power of the state to an absolute minimum - "le moindre gouvernement" [Molinari, "XXe Siècle," 1902, p. 14] - namely the provision of basic defence and police services. If the state had any power above this absolute minimum then powerful interests would seek to use this state power for their own purposes. Over 50 years before, Molinari had toyed with the idea of doing away with the state entirely by "contracting out" or "privatising" even these minimal state functions of defence and police. He gradually modified this extreme view in the face of opposition from his liberal colleagues, but even in after 1900 he was still toying with the idea of turning the state into a kind of private "company" with "shares" owned by the citizens, and the "governance" of the state modeled on that of private corporations (with a board of directors who were accountable to the shareholders and to the stock market). [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," pp. xv-xvi]. Since the chance of the Great Powers of Europe privatising the state in this way was extremely unlikely at the turn of the century, Molinari came to the dismal conclusion that "the (inherent) incapacity and vices of government" (namely, militarism, statism and protectionism) were here to stay for a long time. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 17].

The other part of the problem for the failure of liberal reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Molinari's view, lay with the newly enfranchised classes, the bourgeoisie and the working class, nine tenths of whom, because of their ignorance and moral inadequacies, were incapable of supporting the weight of responsibility required by liberty. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 7; and Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 11]. In what became an increasingly bitter series of reflections in his last works, Molinari argued that liberty could only survive if individuals forswore using the power of the state to achieve

narrow, selfish, and short-term benefits at the expense of others. However, they fell easy prey to the socialists who, in violation of the "natural laws of economics", promised an apparently easy solution to the problem of poverty by means of taking from those who had and "giving" to those who had not. They did not want to hear the message of the economists like Molinari who replied that socialist measures would eventually kill the goose that laid the golden economic egg - socialist restrictions on industry and heavy taxation would hamper and eventually destroy economic growth, it would vastly expand the size and cost of government and its bureaucracy which would become an increasingly heavy burden on the very people it was set to help, and it would do nothing to teach the habits of mind and behaviour which the people needed to become independent, prosperous and free. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle", 1901, p. 17; and Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 12]. Molinari concluded quite sadly that it would require a long and "difficult apprenticeship of liberty" before a free society could function.

L'incapacité et les vices des gouvernements, le militarisme, l'étatisme, le protectionnisme ont dévoré une forte part de cette plus-value de l'industrie. L'ignorance et l'insuffisance morale des individus émancipés de l'onéreuse tutelle de la servitude, mais encore incapables de supporter tout le poids de la responsabilité attachée à la liberté, en ont détruit ou stérilisé une autre part. Il faut bien le dire. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle", 1901, p. 17].

Molinari concluded his 1901 article on the "19<sup>th</sup> Century" with the observation that scientists, technologists, industrialists, capitalists and workers would continue to push wealth creation to new heights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but at the same time their efforts would be undermined by the wealth destruction caused by militarism, statism, protectionism, and socialism. He briefly pondered the future possibility of the economic burden of the state becoming too great for the wealth creators to sustain. He predicted that at current rates of growth the total public debt of the European nations would reach the figure of 400 billion by the year 2000. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle", 1901, p. 19]. He turned away from this very depressing thought and offered the pious hope that his descendants would learn how to use the wealth created by the market better than their forebears had in the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Pendant que la science et l'industrie multiplient la richesse, le militarisme, l'étatisme et le protectionnisme, en attendant le socialisme, s'associent pour le détruire, et en épuiser la source. Les recettes que le

travail annuel des nations fournit au budget des gouvernements ne suffisent plus à leurs dépenses. C'est en grêvant le travail des générations futures qu'ils rétablissent l'équilibre. Les dettes publiques de l'Europe ont doublé dans la seconde moitié du siècle. En suivant la même progression, elles atteindront pour le moins 400 milliards en l'an 2000. Quels que soient les progrès de la production, ce fardeau ne dépassera-t-il pas les forces des producteurs? Souhaitons donc - et c'est le vœu le plus utile que nous puissions adresser à notre descendance -, que le XXe siècle n'excelle pas seulement, comme son devancier, à produire de la richesse, mais qu'il a apprenne à la mieux employer. [Molinari, "XIXe Siècle, 1901, p. 19]

He would not be so optimistic in the book published the year before his death.

Molinari concluded his article on the 20<sup>th</sup> century in 1902 with a more pessimistic analysis of the possible direction political conflict would take. He argued that the 19<sup>th</sup> century had seen a struggle between two parties for the control of the state and the right to make laws. The "conservative party" which drew its support mainly from the governing class of the old regime had been challenged by a new "liberal party" which drew its support from the bourgeoisie. The clash between the two groups had resulted in a number of revolutions and coup d'états with the liberal party being able to achieve a number of significant victories, such as free trade treaties, the protection of property and a significant deregulation of industrial activity. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 13]. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Molinari argued that a third party had emerged to challenge both groups - a "socialist party" which represented the working class. Under the threat posed by this new party, the liberal party had fractured into two groups, one of which joined the conservative party and another of which joined the socialists, leaving the liberal party mortally weakened. Molinari's prognosis for the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that the struggle to control the state would again be a two-sided affair between the conservative party and the socialist party. The liberal party would disappear and the conflict between the conservative party and socialist party in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be even more bloody and destructive than the struggle between the conservatives and the liberals had been in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Molinari predicted that a series of bloody wars, revolutions and colonial conquests would break out in the medium term, with a deleterious impact on individual liberty and on wealth creation. Only after wars and revolutions had devastated 20<sup>th</sup> century society would a new liberal party emerge.

On peut donc prévoir que la lutte pour la possession de l'Etat et la confection de les lois, qui s'est poursuivie dans le cour du XIXe siècle entre le parti conservateur et le parti libéral se poursuivra au XXe entre le parti conservateur et le parti socialiste. On peut prévoir aussi que cette lutte ne sera pas moins ardente, et selon toute apparence moins stérile que ne l'a été sa devancière, et qu'elle engendrera la même série de révolutions, de coups d'états, avec le dératif sanglant des guerres étrangères et des expéditions coloniales, qui ont constitué ce qu'on pourrait appeler le passif de la civilisation du XIXe siècle. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 13].

Molinari's pessimism for the future deepened as he thought about how the socialists would conduct their struggle against the conservative party in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the amount of wealth to be fought over had increased so dramatically during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and since the means of exercising power had been improved by technology, and since the liberal values respecting life and property which might restrain the use of violence were in serious decline, Molinari predicted that the violence which would be unleashed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's class wars between the conservative party and the socialist party would be unprecedented in human history. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 13]. Yet he still held out hope that a new anti-socialist and anti-protectionist party - what he called "le parti du moindre gouvernement" [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, p. 14] - would emerge eventually out of the economic rubble. He worried how such a new liberal party might attract supporters since it had no political or economic privileges to dispense to favoured businesses, no promotions or sinecures to offer the soldiers and the politically ambitious, no spoils of office to distribute. His only hope was that liberal principles would eventually appeal to enough people to make such of party of liberty viable, some time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Il en effet trop évident que la lutte pour la possession du gouvernement ne pourra que croître en violence et que le jour où le parti socialiste aura le pouvoir de faire la loi, il en usera avec moins de discrétion que le parti soi-disant libéral et réformateur don't il est en train de recueillir l'héritage. Il taillera dans le vif de la propriété et de la liberté individuelle. Il brisera ou faussera les ressorts du mécanisme délicat de la production des matériaux de la vie... Mais n'est-il pas permis d'espérer que l'échec inévitable des tentatives de réorganisation artificielle de la société, et le surcroit de misère et de souffrances dont elles seront suivies, feront naître une conception plus saine du rôle de la loi et détermineront la créations d'un parti anti-socialiste aussi bien qu'anti-protectionniste. Nous n'ignorons pas que la constitution d'un

parti qui n'aurait à offrir à ses officiers et à ses soldats ni "places", ni protections ou subventions, ni bureaux de tabac, pourrait, au premier abord, sembler une entreprise chimérique. On connaît le mot du président Jackson: aux vainqueurs les dépouilles! Pourquoi lutterait-on s'il n'y avait pas de dépouilles, se disent les politiciens de l'école de Jackson; mais, ne leur en déplaît, il y a encore, il y aura toujours des hommes disposés à servir gratis une bonne cause, et c'est pourquoi nous ne désespérons pas de voir se fonder, au XXe siècle, un parti qui a manqué au XIXe: le parti du moindre gouvernement. [Molinari, "XXe Siècle", January 1902, pp. 13-14].

In one of his last books, Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), described the political and economic situation of the European nations as a "crisis" which would ultimately lead to a period of "decadance" and eventually economic "ruin". [Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), p. 235]. If the state remained in the hands of the traditional ruling elites and their bourgeois allies, Molinari predicted that the current economic decline might last for centuries before it reached a point of collapse brought about by high debt, heavy taxation and excessive regulation of the economy. On the other hand, if the socialists came to power (whether through violent revolution or democratic means) Molinari predicted a much quicker decline which would take only a matter years and not centuries. [Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), p. 237]. His conclusion was almost apocalyptic in its pessimism about the coming end of civilisation if the socialists came to power:

D'où nous pouvons conclure qu'aussi longtemps que l'Etat demeurera entre les mains des classes supérieure et moyenne la décadence des nations civilisées pourra se prolonger pendant les siècles avant d'aboutir à la ruine tandis qu'il suffira de quelques années à la démocratie socialiste pour mettre fin à leur existence et à celle de la civilisation. [Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), p. 237].

Only a few years before, he had still been optimistic about the prospect for individual liberty in the new century. His latest exposition of what a fully free, industrial, laissez-faire society might look like was provided in, *Esquisse de l'organisation politique et économique de la Société future* (1899). Nine years later he was not so sure. In the final footnote on the final page of his second last book he made the following rather bleak observation:

Nous avons supposé que la crise suscitée par la persistance artificielle du régime adapté à l'état de guerre et de monopole se

terminerait par la victoire, **malheureusement encore douteuse**, de l'intérêt général, et nous avons esquissé dans un précédent ouvrage, en nous fondant sur l'application pacifique des lois naturelles de l'économie des forces et de la concurrence, *l'organisation de la société future*. [emphasis added, Molinari, *Théorie de l'évolution* (1908), p. 257].

In the last book Molinari published, the year before his death, he returned to the theme of the end of civilisation. If the socialist revolution came, or if the militarists started a new European war, then modern civilisation would be wiped out as effectively as Roman civilisation had been wiped out by the barbarians. In his view, the destruction of wealth through mismanagement, waste, and heavy taxation could be just as effective as by the violence of war. The worst situation would arise if the two destructive forces were combined - socialism and militarism. Fortunately, he died in 1912 and did not live to see the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Nazism which both fulfilled his dire predictions.

Peut-être est-ce ainsi que, selon toute apparence et malgré le développement progressif de la civilisation, se perdront les Etats les plus florissants. C'est de cette sorte qu'a péri le monde romain, bien autrement civilisé que la nuée des barbares qui l'entourait. Les vices intérieurs et les dépenses excessives écraseront la civilisation actuelle comme les Barbares l'ont écrasée dans l'antiquité. Ce sera un nouveau mode de destruction nous moins certain et aussi complet que le précédent. [Molinari, *Ultima Verba* (1911), "Préface," p. xvii].

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