

# Democratic Thresholds. Freedom, Trade and Politics in Fichte's *Closed Commercial State*, through its critics

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**Abstract:** This article examines Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* (1800) through the lens of its critical reviews, showing how these functioned less as neutral scholarly judgments than as polemical interventions within a political battlefield. Indeed, the work—redefining property as a right to productive activity and proposing economic closure as the basis for distributive justice—sparked intense debate between 1800 and 1803. In conclusion, it is shown that these many divergent voices illustrate how the *Closed Commercial State* became a conceptual battlefield where competing visions of democracy and political economy at the dawn of modernity were negotiated and contested.

**Keywords:** Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Closed Commercial State, Reviews, Trade, Politics.

## 1. Introduction. Writing at the threshold

The title of this contribution invokes the notion of the “threshold”, and indeed, the discourse we intend to pursue engages with several, interrelated, threshold moments. The most immediate is, of course, the temporal threshold constituted by the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Indeed, the work that will be taken into consideration, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Closed Commercial State*, was published in January 1800, and the debate to which we shall refer extends into the early years of the new century, concluding around the beginning of 1803.

The second threshold is historical and political: it corresponds to the period of the French Revolutionary War of the Second Coalition.<sup>1</sup> These events constitute a decisive rupture in European history and, together with the debate opened by Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), serve as the immediate historical backdrop for the polemical exchanges between Fichte and his critics.

The third threshold is historical-conceptual, located within the evolving discourse on modern politics and democracy, and concerns the internal ten-

<sup>1</sup> For a historical account of the French Revolutionary Wars, see the following studies: Schroeder 1994; Fremont-Barnes 2001; Esdaile 2001; Schneid 2007; Rapport 2013.

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup\_referee\_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Silvestre Gristina, *Democratic Thresholds. Freedom, Trade and Politics in Fichte's Closed Commercial State, through its critics*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0999-1.14, in Pasquale Terracciano, Francesco Valerio Tommasi (edited by), *Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799)*. Volume 2, pp. 247-275, 2026, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0999-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0999-1

sions and transformations that mark its theoretical development at the turn of the century.

Likewise, Fichte can be understood as a threshold thinker who embodies a moment of political and conceptual crisis within modernity. Over two decades of political experimentation and his critical stance toward democracy—alongside his attempts to correct its perceived distortions—reflect his sustained effort to reconceptualize politics amid a profound historical juncture. In this light, *The Closed Commercial State* emerges as a particularly compelling case. It became a focal point for debate among competing political positions during a critical period in European history.<sup>2</sup> This debate brings into relief the core tensions that, as Claudio Cesa argues, define Fichte's political thought: the relationship between freedom and order, between government and politics (On this respect, see Cesa 1968).

In the framework of these connected and interwoven thresholds, this contribution ideally represents the second part of an investigation concerning the critical reviews of Fichte's most politically "scandalous" works and is situated within the broader framework of research on the *political* and *polemical* nature of philosophical reviews.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, far from being neutral or purely academic exercises, Fichte's case shows how reviews functioned as politically charged texts that intervened directly in public discourse, understood as a material and conceptual *Kampfplatz*. As such, they should be interpreted not only as instruments of critique and development within the "Republic of Letters", but also as polemical devices embedded in ideological and political struggles. This perspective legitimizes the study of reviews as sources for a material and alternative histories of philosophy,<sup>4</sup> where epistemological positions are closely intertwined with political commitments.<sup>5</sup>

In this direction, while the first part of this investigation focused on Friedrich von Gentz's review of Fichte's *Beitrag* and, consequently, on the theoretical-political tensions originated from the event of the French Revolution; the present contribution addresses the controversy surrounding the issue of democracy and the related themes of state organization, justice, and freedom.

Indeed, this paper aims to demonstrate that *The Closed Commercial State* can be interpreted as an attempt to work within the limitations inherent in the modern concepts of sovereignty and democracy, through the construction of

<sup>2</sup> For a study on the reception of Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* in the socio-economic thought of his time, see, Stahl 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For the first part of the present study, please see Gristina (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the attempt to rethink the canon of the history of philosophy and to think of alternative histories of philosophy, let me refer to the work of my Marie Curie project THiMe, which started in September 2025. For information about the project: <<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101152894>> ; Porject DOI: 10.3030/101152894> or <<https://www.unipd.it/en/msca-thime-gristina>> (accessed May 12, 2026).

<sup>5</sup> On this point, please allow me to refer again to my previous article and, specifically, to the section 2.2, entitled *Method: Polemic Reviews for a Politics of Reviewing* (see Gristina forthcoming).

an original theoretical model that redefines several foundational concepts of the modern state, such as “property” and “subjective freedom”. It is a work born out of the political crisis unleashed by the French Revolution and, as such, an attempt to come to terms with those conceptual transitions that are typical of threshold moments

In an attempt to disentangle the complexity of this epochal entanglement, the present contribution will be divided into three sections and will culminate in an extended conclusion.

The first section addresses the aporia of democracy in Fichte’s thought from the perspective of conceptual history, drawing particularly on the Paduan tradition as elaborated by Giuseppe Duso<sup>6</sup> and Gaetano Rametta.<sup>7</sup>

This conceptual groundwork sets the stage for the second section, in which I situate *The Closed Commercial State* within Fichte’s theory of the State and show the theoretical-political relevance of its approach to the problem of Political Economy.

The third and most extended part of the contribution will examine ten reviews published on the *Commercial State*, with particular attention to those of a polemical nature. This aspect is especially relevant for highlighting the political dimension of many of these reviews, often aimed at neutralizing a theoretical position perceived as carrying potentially dangerous political implications.<sup>8</sup>

In the conclusion, I will examine what is arguably the most significant review—Christoph Friedrich Nicolai’s. Indeed, Nicolai’s intervention makes it possible to reconstruct the conceptual tensions underlying Fichte’s whole political project, linking the Fichte-Gentz debate on the Revolution to the broader problematic opened by the *Closed Commercial State*. Specifically, Nicolai brings these tensions to light by highlighting an apparent contradiction between the claims advanced in the *Beitrag* and the theoretical framework of the *Closed Commercial State*.

In this way, his review functions as a hinge that enables a circular connection between my two contributions on the philosophical and polemical reception of Fichte’s political works from the perspective of their philosophical reviews. In this respect, even though the two articles can be read independently, share both methodological and thematic continuity.

<sup>6</sup> For a general outline of this position, see Duso 1999; 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For a general overview of this interpretation, see Rametta 1999; 2004; 2006; 2017. For further insights into Fichte’s late political thought, along this line of inquiry, see Gambaro 2020, 249–322; 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Such is the case of Gentz’s review of Fichte, which I discussed in the aforementioned contribution: Gentz attempts to discredit Fichte’s *Beitrag* on a speculative level by highlighting certain theoretical limits or contradictions. However, his true aim is merely to neutralize a theoretical and political position that, from his perspective, is problematic because it is too radical. On this specific respect, see the section 3, entitled *Gentz’s Review of Fichte’s Beitrag: Epistemology and Politics* (see Gristina, forthcoming).

## 2. The problem of Democracy in Fichte's *Naturrecht*

In the *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (1796), Fichte critiques democracy and objects to its fundamental principle: the direct exercise of power by the people. Indeed, the democratic principle carries the risk of illegitimate and unauthorized rule by the majority. According to Fichte, the central problem of democracy lies in the tendency for the prevailing force to triumph in situations of dissenting opinion. This predominance, however, is merely factual and lacks normative legitimacy, thereby risking the emergence of despotic forms of power. In Fichte's perspective, the critique of democracy implies the detection of the lack of a representative principle that establishes a political form and authorizes the legitimate use of coercion. In this respect, Fichte adheres to the Hobbesian logic of modern political science and its contractualist and jusnaturalist model, evoking the function of the social contract, through which political authority is instituted.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the *Naturrecht* we find a critique of direct democracy and a suggestion of a shift towards a representative-type democratic model.

However, while Fichte engages in a direct critique that admits the possibility of a Hobbesian solution—namely, a power-authorizing contract—he simultaneously transcends the logic of modern political theory by foregrounding the foundational problem of legitimation. Indeed, Fichte acknowledges that individuals become depoliticized when their share of power is transferred to the state formed by the contract. Thus, we see

the production of the private and depoliticized dimension of the individual and 'bourgeois' individual, 'deprived' of the capacity for political action and bound to an irresistible relationship of command and obedience based on the 'fiction' that he himself willed and established it with others (Rametta 2004, 187).

The problem then arises of how to enforce and maintain a democratic instance within a representative system—that is, how to prevent the complete extinction of the community's political nature in opposition to constituted power. At this point, Fichte envisions the ephorate: a body elected based on trust and virtue to control and potentially interdict the constituted power. While this body diverges from Hobbes' model, it does not solve the problem of representation; rather, it reveals its critical and aporetic nature.

What Fichte envisions, then, is a representative democracy supplemented by a guarantor institution: the ephorate.<sup>10</sup> However, the need to conceptualize ephorates indicates Fichte's acute awareness of the aporetic character of the *Naturrecht* and—at the same time—the internal paradox inherent in the modern device of power authorization. Indeed, on the one side,

<sup>9</sup> On the adherence of Fichte's *Naturrecht* to the model of legitimation of political power inaugurated by Hobbes and characteristic of modern political science, see Rametta 2012, 127–58.

<sup>10</sup> On the conceptual function of the Ephorate in Fichte's *Naturrecht*, see Rampazzo Bazzan 2006.

in accordance with the tradition of modern political thought, all legitimate forms of power are *democratic* because they derive their legitimacy solely from the unified will of ‘the people’ as the total body politic (Rametta 2004, 193);

but on the other, once the state is constituted through the social covenant, any act of resistance to its authority becomes conceptually illegitimate—a rational *impasse* or internal short-circuit in the sovereign will.

In this respect, Fichte’s *Naturrecht* discloses the aporetic and intrinsically conflictual nature of political power, a tension that the institution of the ephorate ultimately cannot resolve. This is because, since the Ephorate is also a representative body, it would produce a case of recourse to infinity. In this problematic horizon we must read the *Closed Commercial State* and, consequently, to interpret the criticisms and objections that Fichte’s critics expressed through their reviews.

### 3. The Closed Commercial State: a Brief Outline

As its subtitle suggests, *The Closed Commercial State* is presented as a “A philosophical sketch offered as an appendix to the Doctrine of Right and as a test of a politics to be delivered in the future”.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the work engages on the one hand, with internal theoretical debates concerning the foundations and stability of the state, while on the other, it addresses broader questions of international peace<sup>12</sup> and international trade. In this, Fichte understands the connection between the Modern State and war, and he addresses it through a critique of the anarchy of trade at the international level.

From a general viewpoint, the *Closed Commercial State* is a complex work, which had many interpretations in history, in totalitarian, nationalist, socialist<sup>13</sup> terms.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Isaac Nakhimovsky’s interpretation is particularly insightful, as he writes:

The political theory of *The Closed Commercial State* is neither socialist nor totalitarian in any straightforward sense. Fichte certainly shared his radical critique of the existing European order with Gracchus Babeuf and many other contemporaries. yet Fichte added a significant twist to their vision of a communal regime based on the natural social concord that would emerge after the corrupt edifice of European power politics had been torn down. Fichte’s aim was to show that the jurisprudential foundation of [the edifice of European power]—the

<sup>11</sup> An English edition of *Der geschlossene Handelsstaat* was published in 2012, with a translation and introductory essay by Anthony Curtis Adler (see Fichte 2012; Adler 2012a; 2012b).

<sup>12</sup> On the theme of peace in the *Closed Commercial State*, see Acosta 2019.

<sup>13</sup> For a classic piece of scholarship on Fichte’s *Closed Commercial State* and socialism, see Léon 1914.

<sup>14</sup> For classic and recent scholarly works, offering both an introduction and a deeper exploration of Fichte’s *Closed Commercial State*, see Verwey 1981; Lauth and Gliwitzky 1988; Nakhimovsky 2011; Adler 2012b; Rametta 2012; Hoffmann 2018; 2025; Arrese Igor 2018; Sabbatini 2020; Sabbatini and Spalletti 2020; Neuhann 2024; Heisenberg 2025.

theory of the state as an artificial political union of individuals—would remain unfinished until all citizens' right to work was established on the same basis as property rights. Fichte was indeed a socialist in the original, eighteenth-century sense of that term: he aspired to a fuller notion of community than the one that had been articulated by Hobbes's doctrine of natural law and eventually came to dominate the discipline of political economy (Nakhimovsky 2011, 157).

Thus, following Nakhimovsky, Hobbes and his aporias continue to constitute the effective horizon within which Fichte's thought operates. In his preliminary remarks on the title of *The Closed Commercial State*, indeed Fichte presupposes *Naturrecht's* model, asserting that just as the closed legal state is defined as a multitude of individuals subjected to common laws and unified under a sovereign authority, so must the sphere of economic exchange be similarly bounded: the state must restrict economic interaction to its own internal domain, thereby becoming a *closed commercial state*.

The project thus entails an intensification of the economic dimensions already discussed in the *Naturrecht*, yielding a work that simultaneously engages in political theory and offers a critique of political economy. Given its contractual foundation, the state is conceived as inherently democratic in both its origin and normative orientation. Yet, the nature of the mechanisms proposed to ensure economic closure, and the internal redistribution of resources reveals what has been termed a "democratic threshold", i.e., a critical point at which the tension between liberty and order becomes most pronounced. And it is precisely in addressing political economy as a domain for the internal and external stabilization of the state, that Fichte begins to actively reconfigure central categories of modern political thought, most notably those of property and freedom.

I will now briefly outline the most pertinent aspects of Fichte's argument in order to elucidate how he redefines the aforementioned concepts and to identify the elements likely to have provoked the strongest reactions among his most hostile and critical reviewers.

As a starting point, Fichte recognizes that, even after the formal establishment of the state, a form of atomism continues to manifest within civil society. While legal order ensures formal equality, the economic sphere remains governed by a quasi-natural state, perpetuating material inequalities. Expanding the Hobbesian insight, Fichte claims that unregulated individual freedom generates conflict even within an already constituted state. Here Fichte identifies unrestrained economic activity as a source of possible social disintegration. His proposed remedy begins with a reconceptualization of property, based on two assumptions: 1) the state consists of a community of free individuals who share a common sphere of action; and 2) property has to be understood not as exclusive dominion over objects, but as a right to exercise specific forms of free activity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On Fichte's theory of property see the following studies: Hahn 1994; Perrinjaquet 1997; James 2010; 2011; 2023; Wood 2016; Sabbatini 2018; Nomer 2019; Nance 2019; Blumenfeld 2023.

On this basis, the state is obligated to prevent *collisions* among citizens in the exercise of their respective activities by rationally distributing *spheres of action*. Consequently, it must regulate inter-class relations—among producers, artisans, and traders—and ensure that everyone receives what is owed to them by virtue of their status as citizens. Indeed, since the aim of all activity is the sustenance of life, the state’s responsibility becomes the rational distribution of the totality of possible activities into discrete spheres of action, each allocated to individual citizens.

These measures have been interpreted as constituting the foundation of a form of distributive justice.<sup>16</sup> They articulate the principles of what may be described as a proto-socialist democratic model—one grounded in fundamental rights such as the right to life, to work, and to general well-being, the latter of which includes the valorization of leisure<sup>17</sup> as an essential component of human flourishing. According to Isaac Nakhimovsky, Fichte’s model represents an early and significant instance of a critique of political economy.<sup>18</sup> This is a noteworthy observation. Indeed, although Fichte’s approach is not even remotely comparable to a preview of Marx’s critique of political economy—and would, in fact, have likely fallen under the critical purview of Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program*—it nonetheless constitutes a polemical intervention against dominant economic doctrines of his time. As will be explored in the final section, Fichte directs pointed, although veiled, criticism toward the Smithian school of classical political economy, drawing criticism from his followers.

<sup>16</sup> On this point, please consider the following studies: Fleischacker 2004, 160–61; Wood 2004; Nomer 2005 (works cited in Nakhimovsky 2011, 5–6). In addition, consider the following words by Nakhimovsky: “*The Closed Commercial State* was a development of the moral critique of commercial society and power politics that had animated Fichte’s early political thought. When August Wilhelm von Rehberg dismissed the ‘naïve’ principle that only those who worked could claim a right to eat, Fichte retorted in 1793 that surely it was more naïve to conclude that only those who did not work could claim that right. Such views were not exclusive to revolutionaries like Robespierre or Babeuf, [but] they were indicative of a much broader spectrum of eighteenth-century thought. Fichte’s more expansive conception of distributive justice reflects this broad dissatisfaction with the moral opacity of seventeenth-century natural-rights theories, which—so it seemed to many, including Rousseau—readily served to justify absolute sovereignty and the tremendous inequality brought about by the modern division of labor. However, [...] Fichte embedded his expansive conception of distributive justice in a rights theory that gave absolute priority to the independence of the individual” (Nakhimovsky 2011, 126).

<sup>17</sup> On leisure time in relation to the problem of distributive justice, see James 2012.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, please consider the following passage by Nakhimovsky: “Fichte again took a big step beyond Sieyès and Kant in suggesting that this kind of constitutionalism could restrain an administration with a vastly greater responsibility: it would have to control the monetary system and regulate the entire economy in order to realize a significantly more expansive conception of justice. In making this kind of proposal, as contemporaries realized, *The Closed Commercial State* extended Fichte’s rights theory into a critique of political economy” (Nakhimovsky 2011, 12).

In any case, from these measures to ensure social peace and material equality among citizens, Fichte deduces the need for the closure of the State. Within this system, indeed, the progressive economic closure of the state is essential to maintaining the internal equilibrium of social functions. In fact, the introduction of external flows of trade would disrupt the carefully calibrated distribution of activity within the state, undermining the rational organization of its economic life. It can therefore be argued that it is Fichte's theory of property that requires the closure of the state as a guarantee.

This economic closure, according to Fichte, constitutes the central task of politics, understood as the science concerned with the governance of the empirical state. The aim of politics, then, is to progressively align the existing state with the rational ideal of a state governed according to reason. As a domain autonomous from law, the exercise of politics must involve the decision to sever the state from foreign trade, and to implement concrete measures directed toward commercial autarchy.<sup>19</sup>

In practical terms, this regulatory role involves a range of institutional measures: guaranteeing the right to work—as we have seen—, establishing a national currency and a monetary system,<sup>20</sup> and closing the state to foreign trade. These policies are directed toward the creation of a social order in which all individuals may attain the highest degree of human fulfillment with the least amount of labor and within the shortest working time.

As several of its critics have noted, the model of economic autarchy envisioned in *The Closed Commercial State* which aspires toward a condition of homeostatic equilibrium, necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of the concept of freedom. In contrast to the more flexible, class-based distributive framework articulated in the *Naturrecht*, the *Closed Commercial State* introduces a markedly more rigid and prescriptive socio-economic order. Moreover, the principle of state closure entails the establishment of an elaborate system of internal and external controls, including a complex passport regime that severely restricts the free movement of individuals across national boundaries, an exception being granted solely to intellectuals.

In addition, in order to implement economic closure, the state would necessarily have to expand to or retract within what Fichte designates as its *natural boundaries*. According to the philosophy of history underpinning Fichte's model, the principal cause of war among nations is the unregulated pursuit of free trade. Consequently, the establishment of economically self-sufficient states confined within their natural borders is envisioned as a prerequisite for the realization of genuine and lasting peace. Importantly, this model of closure is not intended to impede the moral or intellectual progress of humanity. Rather—as just anticipated—such progress would be sustained through the transnational

<sup>19</sup> On this respect, allow me to refer to Gristina 2025a, 829.

<sup>20</sup> On Fichte's theory of money, see Nance 2024.

circulation of intellectuals, who facilitate the exchange of ideas and scientific advancements independently of economic exchange.

Thus, what emerges from Fichte's model is a conception of freedom that is distinctly non-liberal—a point that constituted a major stumbling block for many of his contemporaries. This form of freedom exposes the internal tensions within what is conventionally understood as democratic theory become particularly salient. In fact, on the one hand, Fichte envisions a comprehensive welfare system, which guarantees material equality and freedom, alongside a principle of inclusion for those who seek to become members of the state. Yet, on the other hand, individual freedom is subject to significant constraints, both in terms of the internal socio-economic organization of the state and in relation to external interaction, particularly the regulation of communication and exchange with other states. This dialectic exposes the friction between collective order and individual freedom, offering a glimpse of a form of social freedom, founded on radical and constant equality.

#### 4. The Part about the Critics

Let us now turn to the part about the critics. In this section we shall examine the reviews published in the three years following the publication of the *Closed Commercial State*,<sup>21</sup> which reveal how Fichte's theories of property and—above all—of freedom disrupted the traditional political framework upheld by his conservative interlocutors. According to Erich Fuchs' detailed reconstruction, eleven such reviews were produced, spanning a spectrum of responses: some were overtly negative, others cautiously positive or neutral.<sup>22</sup> Many contain extensive descriptive summaries of the work's content, while several alternate between appreciative observations and expressions of astonishment at certain aspects of the text. Moreover, the reviews were all published anonymously, except for one—Adam Heinrich Müller's—and it is to Fuchs's credit that he reconstructed the authorship of Møller, Rehberg, and Nicolai in the other three reviews whose authors are known

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the structure and tone of the negative reviews, in which the political-polemical character of the critiques becomes most pronounced. These can be broadly categorized into three main ideological currents. Indeed, Fichte's proposals are challenged by thinkers from liberal-conservative and reactionary camps, as well as by an older generation of Enlightenment progressives such as Nicolai—though by this point, Nicolai's position had already begun to shift toward a more conservative orientation.

<sup>21</sup> On the history of the early reception of the *Closed Commercial State*, see Lauth and Gliwitzky 1988, 14–36.

<sup>22</sup> All the eleven reviews that will be analyzed are collected in the third volume of *J. G. Fichte in zeitgenössischen Rezensionen* (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 175–290).

On one side, critics such as Malthe Christian Møller—publishing on Gentz’s journal—and August Wilhelm Rehberg directly or indirectly revive earlier polemics with Fichte’s *Beitrag*, deploying Burkean arguments against the rationalist foundation of politics and warning against grounding political structures “just upon a theory”. On the other, figures such as Adam Müller—whom Carl Schmitt later classifies as a representative of “political romanticism”—extend these critiques in a more explicitly reactionary direction, while still overlapping with liberal-conservative concerns. Meanwhile, Nicolai articulates a critique like the liberal position, though in some respects more refined and theoretically nuanced.

Across these divergent ideological positions, four central lines of criticism emerge, appearing, albeit with variations—in nearly all the reviews:

- 1) *The abstractness of speculative politics*: Critics argue that Fichte’s reliance on purely theoretical constructs risks imposing abstract principles on the complexity of empirical political life, potentially leading to catastrophic authoritarian outcomes.
- 2) *The problem of individual freedom*: Several reviewers contend that the *Closed Commercial State* entails an unacceptable limitation of personal liberty. Rehberg, for instance, describes the model as “a vast penitentiary,” while Nicolai condemns it as a form of “tyrannical despotism.”
- 3) *The conception of property and the theory of money*: Fichte’s redefinition of property as exclusive access to spheres of activity—rather than possession of material goods—was widely rejected by critics. At the same time, Fichte’s proposals regarding a state-controlled monetary system were often ridiculed as utopian or fantastical.
- 4) *The theory of natural boundaries*: Fichte’s invocation of “natural boundaries” as a basis for determining the territorial limits of the state, which many deemed fictitious or arbitrary.<sup>23</sup>

At a deeper level, these criticisms reflect political positions intent on discrediting Fichte’s intervention for various ideological reasons. Indeed, *The Closed Commercial State* articulates a vision that runs counter to the dominant Burkean-Smithian<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The credit for having reorganized the critique into four general profiles goes to Sabbatini, whose approach makes the analysis clearer and more focused, see Sabbatini 2020, 39–41.

<sup>24</sup> The convergence between Burke and Smith in political economy, though shaped by different intellectual trajectories, reveals a shared commitment to liberal principles. Both opposed mercantilist constraints and emphasized the importance of free trade and voluntary economic relations. Burke, while arriving at these positions independently, recognized the significance of *The Wealth of Nations* and endorsed key aspects of Smith’s analysis—particularly the critique of protectionism and the role of economic freedom in fostering individual development. For Burke, as for Smith, economic liberty was not solely a question of policy but was tied to broader anthropological and political considerations—namely, the cultivation of human autonomy and the conditions of social progress. This shared foundation would go on to inform several strands of later liberal thought, especially—as we have seen—in opposition to nationalist or interventionist models of economic organization.

paradigm of political and economic liberalism.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, many of the practical measures Fichte proposes—such as property redistribution, price regulation, and the elimination of entrenched class privileges—were perceived by his critics as dangerously reminiscent of Jacobin policies during the French Revolution.<sup>26</sup> This section will briefly examine the positions of Møller and Rehberg, and Müller, as well as others less relevant positions. The conclusion shifts to Nicolai’s perspective, providing an opportunity to revisit and synthesize the key themes explored throughout, particularly highlighting the tensions underpinning the development of Fichte’s political thought.

#### 4.1 Møller-(Gentz)’s Review

Danish theologian Malthe Christian Møller’s review<sup>27</sup> was published anonymously in the *Historisches Journal*, edited by Gentz, and was unsurprisingly mistaken for a contribution by Gentz himself.<sup>28</sup> The text adopts a critical stance rooted in a liberal-conservative tradition and, as Nakhimovsky demonstrates, is part of a broader debate on international trade inaugurated by Alexandre-Maurice Blanc de Lanauette comte d’Hauterive, according to which, peace could not be achieved without the suppression of free international trade and the containment of British hegemony, which he believed rested on jealousy rather than on the principle of reciprocity. Gentz, among the German intellectuals who supported the English model as articulated by Burke, responds by attacking

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the elements of economic thought in Fichte’s *Closed Commercial State* and the reasons for its contrasts with the economic theories of the time, see Spalletti 2017; Sabbatini 2018; Sabbatini 2020; Sabbatini and Spalletti 2020.

<sup>26</sup> On these aspects, please consider the following words by Arrese Igor: “Christian Gottfried Körner among others can be mentioned, who in a letter to Schiller dated 29th December 1800 wrote that *The Closed Commercial State* has tried to conduct ‘political witchcraft’ (*politische Ketzerei*), which only Robespierre would have dared to carry through in his ‘system of terror’ (*Schreckenssystem*); this would transform Fichte into a ‘philosophical Attila’. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the same sense, wrote in the back cover of his exemplar of the text that ‘Fichte would have been a much more pernicious and despicable tyrant than Caligula or Elagabalus’ (Nakhimovsky 2011, 4)” (Arrese Igor 2018, 217).

<sup>27</sup> In *Historisches Journal*. Herausgegeben von Friedrich Gentz. Jg. 2 Bd. 3 Berlin, Dezember 1800. S. 711–51 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 175–81).

<sup>28</sup> Nakhimovsky devotes a brief section to the alleged review by Gentz (see Nakhimovsky 2011, 63–659), but in my view he reiterates a mistaken attribution originating with Buhr and Dietzsch (see Buhr and Dietzsch 1984), to whom he explicitly refers. Erich Fuchs, who should be regarded as the most authoritative voice in this field, attributes the review to Møller, who in 1796 had also translated Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* in Danish (see Kant 1796 and Duichin 2017, 53). In this case, the order of the elements changes, but not the outcome: the *Historisches Journal* was edited by Gentz, and it is likely that he commissioned Møller to write a review that would revisit the debate on perpetual peace, including a political reference to Fichte’s text: in any case, it is a polemical review, written from a conservative standpoint, in which Møller’s voice merely conveys the conservative critique that Gentz himself would have expressed in much the same way.

d'Hauterive's theory, which exhibits striking affinities with Fichte's analysis of international commerce. Following Burke and Thomas Brooke Clarke, Gentz invokes Smith's claim that a free international market is compatible with a constitutional federation of Europe.<sup>29</sup>

Turning to the review itself, Møller authored a text entitled *On Perpetual Peace*, in which he examines Fichte's notion of "closed commercial state", interpreting it as an attempt—albeit implicit—to establish perpetual peace. According to Møller,

In order to prevent once and for all that the nations inhabiting a certain part of the Earth come into conflict with one another, there are three different means—under which all proposals thus far made for the promotion of eternal peace are included and must necessarily be included. The *first* is the absolute *unification* of these nations into one and the same state, thereby eliminating all conflicts that arise from the separation of their governments. The *second* is their absolute *separation*, or a constitution of states in which any interest one might have in violating the rights of another would cease to exist. The *third*, finally, is an organization of the social whole formed by these nations, by virtue of which their disputes would have to be settled by peaceful means—and could be settled in no other way (Møller 1800, 175).

Thus, according to the author, there are three conceivable paths toward achieving peace: 1) the formation of a single state uniting all nations; 2) the absolute separation of states; 3) a confederation of states, that would be Gentz's preferred solution. On this regard, Møller writes that

the second means of establishing lasting peace between states [...] would not need further discussion if a famous German philosopher had not recently explained it in detail in one of his books and seriously recommended it (Møller 1800, 176)

and he cites Fichte's work in a footnote, adding that although peace is not Fichte's explicit objective, it is nonetheless presented as a necessary consequence of his system (see Møller 1800, 176n). Møller then reconstructs Fichte's main arguments regarding the closure of trade, the creation of a national currency, the guarantee of subsistence for all, price control, police enforcement, and the establishment of natural borders.

On the latter point, the Danish thinker offers a particularly pointed critique: in another footnote, he dismisses the idea of natural borders as both "ridiculous" and "unsustainable," stating that "whoever descends, even for a moment, from the phantoms of the imagination to the nature of things will soon realize that there are no natural or necessary limits" (Møller 1800, 177) and asserting that no border is capable of halting international relations (see Møller 1800, 177–78n).

<sup>29</sup> On this debate, see Nakhimovsky 2011, 65, 84–94 and Forsyth 1980.

In principle, Møller concedes that Fichte's system, if feasible, might indeed reduce the frequency of war. However, he raises the question "whether this would be too high a price to pay for eternal peace" (Møller 1800, 178–79). For Møller, the impracticability of Fichte's project is self-evident; it is not even defensible as a "philosophical dream" (Møller 1800, 179).

Trade and exchange, he argues, have historically driven human progress. Without them, there would be no culture; humanity would be reduced to the mere preservation of physical existence, devoid of ambition, enjoyment, or the capacity for great undertakings. In such a condition, inertia and obscurity would prevail. This would also entail the loss of absolute freedom. In a footnote, Møller underscores that Fichte's proposal runs counter to the spirit of the age and to the cosmopolitan ideals espoused by many contemporary philosophers.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, he writes:

The system is a very strange phenomenon for these times. The imagination of a spoiled despot could not easily conceive of a tyranny so complete, so regular, and so profoundly organized as that preached here in the name of reason (Møller 1800, 180n).

And he then closes the footnote with a warning: "Such reckless experiments as the *Closed Commercial State*, however ingeniously conceived, must *not* be handed over to us as an appendix to legal theory or as an introduction to future politics" (Møller 1800, 180n).

Thus, for Møller, the impulse toward freedom that unites all nations must be allowed to flourish, since it is the most human of all impulses and the principal engine of progress. Anything that hinders it must be regarded as a moral evil. As he writes:

We hate war; but if it is unfortunately eternally bound up with the great community of nations, we must bear it as one bears a heavy tax, in order to enjoy the infinitely superior advantages of a civilized constitution. [...] If peace can only be achieved through the eternal separation of nations, then the decision has already been made: we will remain as we are and renounce eternal peace (Møller 1800, 181).

#### 4.2 An Anonymous Review and Rehberg's Review

If Møller's review was directly polemical, the second review in chronological order is mostly descriptive and not overtly negative. However, it raises the same issue as Møller, though in the form of a question. More importantly, it emphasizes the problem of individual freedom—a theme that will resurface in the harshest of the criticisms. The review was published anonymously in the *Neueste*

<sup>30</sup> On the problem of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan rights in Fichte, see Picardi 2022.

*Critische Nachrichten* in January 1801<sup>31</sup> and begins by acknowledging Fichte's clear intent to highlight the problems of unrestricted free trade, but immediately questions whether the analysis is one-sided:

It is clear that the authors particular intention is to demonstrate the many disadvantages of completely free trade. But shouldn't its advantages in terms of industry, enlightenment, and refinement also be taken into account and weighed against each other (Anonym 1801a, 182).

Despite the overall positive tone—where the author is described as “sharp,” and the text as “very clear and well written”—a more serious concern is raised at the end of the review. Here, the anonymous critic questions the broader implications of the proposed reforms, particularly in terms of their impact on personal and political freedoms:

The author [of the review] can only ask whether, with these arrangements, even if they were possible, the freedom of the citizen might not be too greatly restricted; whether cosmopolitanism and general benevolence might not be excessively suppressed [...] whether national pride might not be too strongly promoted and, finally, whether too much arbitrary power might not be granted to the government (Anonym 1801a, 184).

It is interesting to note that this final concern—regarding the excessive power granted to the state and the loss of citizens' individual freedom—is at the heart of the critical review by Rehberg, the so-called “German Burke”. This is another characteristically conservative review, and it is published anonymously in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* in February 1801.<sup>32</sup>

As is well known, Rehberg had previously been the polemical target of Fichte's *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die Französische Revolution*, where he was portrayed as embodying the classical conservative opposition to the French Revolution.

Adopting a position akin to that of Edmund Burke, Rehberg criticizes Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* for being derived solely from abstract rational concepts, independent of any empirical observation of the world, of human beings, or of their needs. He thus directs his critique at those he describes as “metaphysical politicians” (Rehberg 1801, 214), remarking that “in speculative sciences, it is much more useful to abstain completely from any consideration of reality” (Rehberg 1801, 215), since one possible outcome of such abstract theorizing could be the “great penitentiary, which [Fichte] defines as a *closed commercial state*” (Rehberg 1801, 216).

<sup>31</sup> In *Neueste Critische Nachrichten*. St. 3. Greifswald, 17. Januar 1801. S. 17–9 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 181–84).

<sup>32</sup> In *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*. St. 32 vom 23 Februar 1801. S. 313–19 (Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 214–18).

Moreover, Rehberg highlights Fichte's failure to consider the volatility of rulers' interests. In this sense, he writes:

Just as little consideration has been given to the natural inclinations and impulses of citizens, so too has the author considered little that rulers are human beings. For him, the sovereign of the state of reason is pure reason (Rehberg 1801, 216).

Here, Rehberg clearly underscores what he sees as the excessive idealization underlying Fichte's conception of sovereignty, in which the empirical limitations of political agents are disregarded in favor of abstract rationalism.

Furthermore, Rehberg accuses Fichte of presupposing the closure of the state, thereby undermining the coherence of his own argument. He argues that "the first step has been taken to return, through a cycle of fruitless speculations and chimerical projects, to the starting point" (Rehberg 1801, 217). Following earlier accusations of abstraction and demagogy—tendencies he claims threaten to corrupt the minds of the young generations—Rehberg further charges that Fichte possesses no real knowledge of monetary theory or political economy (see Rehberg 1801, 218) and concludes by suggesting that it would be more appropriate for such "metaphysical reformers" to consult genuine experts in these domains before venturing into such speculative territory.

#### 4.3 Müller's Review

The final explicitly conservative review is that of the economist and politician Adam Heinrich Müller,<sup>33</sup> published in the *Neue Berlinische Monatschrift* (edited by Friedrich Nicolai's ally, Johann Erich Biester—himself a known critic of Fichte) in December 1801.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned, Müller's review is the only one that

<sup>33</sup> Adam H. Müller was encouraged by his close friend Friedrich von Gentz to pursue political science and formed a deep intellectual and personal bond with him—an influence that shaped Müller's development and political path. Through Gentz, he was introduced to Klemens von Metternich and contributed to drafting state documents, solidifying his place in conservative political circles. A committed conservative, Müller opposed liberal thinkers like Montesquieu and Rousseau, advocating instead for a state based on absolute authority. Alongside figures such as Burke, Gentz, de Maistre, and von Haller, he stood as a key critic of revolutionary ideals in the post-Enlightenment era. Despite his closeness to Gentz, Müller rejected Adam Smith's materialist and individualist view of society, which he saw as narrowly English. In contrast, he emphasized the ethical and religious foundations of political economy and the state's moral duties to its citizens. Nevertheless, at this stage and in his review of Fichte, Müller appears aligned with certain liberal positions of Smithian inspiration. Müller's pro-Smithian stance in this piece is likely to be attributed to the influence of Friedrich Gentz. On this last point, see Spalletti 2017, 4. In any case, though his reactionary and religious views limited his reception during his lifetime, Müller's work remains a distinctive and significant contribution to the tradition of post-revolutionary conservatism.

<sup>34</sup> In *Neue Berlinische Monatschrift*. Herausgegeben von Biester. Bd. 6. Berlin und Stettin, Dezember 1801. S. 436–58 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 248–60).

bears the author's signature on the last page.<sup>35</sup> This is one of the most detailed and critical reviews, in which many themes from earlier reviews are revisited, often with more complex and precise arguments. In the first pages, Müller writes:

In the political literature of Germany, a writer who had previously shown himself in this field—mask, and not exactly with great brilliance—and whose practical calling had made many other literary utterances suspect, now appears with open visor, not as a philosophical author of the general state of reason, but as the politicizing founder of a “closed commercial state”, [which] despite the faithful earnestness of its founder, remains one of the most wanton games the century of enthusiasm has seen (Müller 1801, 249–50).

Thus, Müller somehow accuses Fichte of playing at being a politician or an economist and of having abandoned his logical vocation, alleging that the text wanders from one contradiction to the next. From Müller's perspective, Fichte's proposals for internal economic administration are to be considered *Träumerei* (Müller 1801, 250) and appear to be based on nothing more than “hearsay on short journeys, on German country roads; observations in his own small domestic economy” (Müller 1801, 254).

As an economist, Müller directly tackles the issue of the practical viability of Fichte's economic theory and, although from an ideologically positioned standpoint, in the main body of the review he at least pretends to take Fichte's perspective seriously, showing the real effects that the closure of the state could provoke in terms of a general impoverishment of the population. In fact, he writes:

Mr. Fichte wants to destroy world trade at all costs [...]. Mr. Fichte says: “All possibility of world trade rests on the possession of the means of exchange valid throughout the world. Gold and silver are valid throughout the world; I abolish them, create national money, and world trade is impossible; my state is closed”. “Not too quickly! The economist replies: It is precisely in world trade that the medium of exchange is most dispensable; for where one trades in large, uniform quantities, exchange is very easy. And then, your ingenious experiment is supposed to be possible only with a rich state; its balance of trade is therefore supposed to have been little disadvantageous, perhaps even advantageous, before the closure [...]. Yet another instrument of destruction lives, unknown to yourself in your ignorance, in your commercial state: the all-ruling, all-killing principle of stagnation and poverty” (Müller 1801, 249–50).

At this point, before reaching his conclusions, Müller presents a kind of counter-history of humanity—a conservative philosophy of history in which his ideological position clearly emerges, echoing the classic Burkean-Gentzian line of argument. He maintains that both human and animal life begin with basic physical needs, but humans, endowed with greater sensitivity and adapt-

<sup>35</sup> For a study specifically devoted to Müller's review of Fichte's *Closed commercial state*, see Marquardt 1991.

ability, are destined to extend their influence across the earth. Though limited by space and time, humans transcend these constraints through society, which enables language, self-awareness, and meaningful engagement with the world.

According to Müller, as human communities spread and adapt to different environments, they develop distinct cultures and skills. Struggles with nature and with one another reveal individual capacities and social functions. Gradually, reason emerges within society, replacing violence with exchange as the foundation of peaceful coexistence. Agriculture binds humans to the land, giving rise to permanent settlements. From here, laws of property and inheritance emerge, forming the basis of the state, which secures order, facilitates the division of labor, and fosters commerce. As needs multiply, so does interdependence—even those once engaged in violence are drawn into systems of trade.

From this historical vision, Müller draws his conclusions: wealth and culture are built upon the sacrifices of earlier generations. Social inequality—between rich and poor, rulers and subjects—is not a flaw but a necessary stage in the path toward collective well-being. In time, reason leads society back toward an ideal of equality—not natural, but rational—realized slowly and lawfully, with each step grounded in the achievements of the past, ensuring stable and lasting progress for all (see Müller 1801, 257–59).

Indeed, Müller concludes and signs his review, by saying that:

Whether this goal [equality] can be attained or not, it is certain that it will only be attained by the shortest path, *so that no step forward is made without the guarantee of the previous step by law and by the nature of the thing*. In this spirit speaks the system of *Adam Smith*, the great founder of political economy, with whose memory every writing on the subject ought to conclude, and to whom one rightly asks forgiveness for every hour spent on a work of political economy [...] which gains whatever significance it has only through the unfortunate constellations of the time—only through the grandeur and impudence of the presumption with which such ignorance dares to present itself (Müller 1801, 260).

#### 4.4 Other anonymous reviews

This final section of the “part about the critics” is devoted to a brief chronological overview of the remaining anonymous reviews, which are shorter and less dense than the others. While the focus so far has been on critical and negative reviews—more relevant to understand the political tensions sparked by Fichte’s work—this last account considers mostly positive responses, except for one brief negative note.

The first<sup>36</sup> of these last reviews is a brief, but positive comment to Fichte’s work. It focuses on the *new theory of property*, which the reviewer considers gen-

<sup>36</sup> In *Eunomia. Eine Zeitschrift des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. Von einer Gesellschaft von Gelehrten*. Herausgegeben von Feßler und Rhode. Bd.1. Berlin, Januar 1801. S. 14–7 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 211–14).

uinely innovative. He or she declares his or her appreciation of Fichte's conceptual shift: property is not framed as a *right to a thing*, but rather as a *right to an activity*. This reinterpretation is seen as a valuable contribution to legal theory, casting a "beneficial light on a still obscure object of the theory of right" (Anonymous 1801b, 211). The reviewer emphasizes the clarity and practical applicability of the theory, by saying that "the clarity and comprehensibility that this theory can bring to all claims about property, as well as its universal applicability to real life, are clear evidence of its correctness" (Anonymous 1801b, 213). Overall, then, the review is very concise, affirming the merits of Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* without further elaboration.

The second review<sup>37</sup> of this group is another positive comment, that describes Fichte's work as highly relevant to the current political and intellectual climate. According to the reviewer, rather than presenting idealistic or impractical fantasies, Fichte offers concrete proposals aimed at alleviating the suffering of citizens and encouraging a deeper moral orientation. In this sense, one of the review's most striking features is its meta-critical perspective: it anticipates, and lays bare a common rhetorical tactic among ideological opponents, i.e., criticizing a political proposal on the grounds of formal inconsistency or logical weakness, while concealing the deeper, actual resistance to its concretely political aims.

The reviewer confronts this strategy head-on, insisting that any serious critique must address the *Closed Commercial State's* fundamental moral and political commitments, clearly admitting that the real issue, is not the alleged irrationality or contradiction of Fichte's arguments, but rather the opposition to the specific political outcomes he envisions. Indeed, the reviewer claims that

if one wished to attack it, the critique would have to be directed against the principles and aims for the State—[namely,] to value each person for what theirs is rightfully, to help each individual attain what is due to them as a member of humanity (Anonymous 1801c, 219).

In short, then, the reviewer suggests that this kind of political theory would be unintelligible only to a superficial "empiricist" mind, lacking depth in philosophical understanding, and—we might add—to political opponents, i. e., those who seek to protect the status quo by perpetuating and reproducing its power structures and the inequality they produce.

The third review is probably the most positive.<sup>38</sup> The *Closed Commercial State* is praised as "rich in truth," and Fichte is hailed as an "outstanding teacher." Moreover, the reviewer asserts that the book surpasses all of Fichte's previous writings in both rigor and execution, declaring:

<sup>37</sup> In *Litteratur-Zeitung*. Nr. 86/87. Erlangen, 4./5. Mai 1801. Sp. 681–96 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 219–38).

<sup>38</sup> In *Literaturzeitung von Salzburg*. St. 133/134 vom 14. August 1801. S. 193–97. Rubrik: *Philosophische Wissenschaften* (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 238–41).

I can confidently state that the author has never produced a work of such perfection, and, in general—except for Schelling’s system of transcendental idealism—hardly any other work in our literature could match it in terms of consistent and complete derivation from principles, precision of expression, and luminous presentation (Anonymous 1801d, 241).

The fourth review<sup>39</sup> is particularly interesting. After providing a detailed account of *The Closed Commercial State’s* content, the reviewer concludes that, although certain aspects of the book may raise questions and doubts about the applicability of Fichte’s ideas, the work remains valuable in its own right—if only for the depth of reflection it provokes (see Anonymous 1801e, 247–48). Its philosophical rigor and systematic structure are seen as major contributions to contemporary thought, as they compel politicians and economists to confront core issues related to war and economic inequality.

The fifth review<sup>40</sup> is an openly polemical review, but one that highlights a crucial point: it shows that *The Closed Commercial State* is ultimately an attempt to transform a condition that is already tyrannical and despotic, proposing a different, maybe more consistent and problematic, kind of tyranny. In this perspective, in the last pages of the text, the reviewer writes:

Mr. Fichte demands nothing less than a general and deeply oppressive form of slavery, entirely in the spirit of Lycurgus—whom, astonishingly, many still admire. Yet he proceeds in a more honorable way: not only more consistently than those who cry out “Crucify him!” with such loudness and frenzy, but also with the self-awareness to admit that his plan will ultimately remain *a mere academic exercise, without any real-world success*. Whether Mr. Fichte one day awakens from his philosophical dreams or not, he can at least leave this world with the great consolation that his political fantasies and follies have done no actual harm. This is a consolation many of our celebrated political writers cannot claim—those who, unlike Mr. Fichte, did not stop at the immediate consequences of their principles. Had they gone further, as he did, they might have revealed—to themselves or at least to their audience—that their ideas lead not to justice, but to screaming injustices and a tyranny that destroys all that is good and noble (Anonymous 1802, 278–79).

Thus, the author of the review dismisses the Fichte’s project as grounded in ignorance of monetary theory and describes its content as no more than “philosophical dreams”; he or she criticizes the political vision laid out by Fichte, interpreting not as a utopia, but as a form of dystopian authoritarianism. In a

<sup>39</sup> In *Gelehrte Anzeigen*. St. 80/81. Tübingen, 5./8. Oktober 1801. S. 633–40; 643–45 (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 241–48).

<sup>40</sup> In *Revision der Literatur in den drey letzten Quinquennien des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts in Ergänzungsblättern zur Allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung dieses Zeitraums*. Jg. 2, Bd. 2, Nr. 146/147/148. Jena u. Leipzig 1802. Sp. 537–44; 545–52; 553–55. Rubrik: *Staatswissenschaften* (see Fuchs, Jacobs and Schieche 1995, 261–79).

sense, the reviewer claims that Fichte's proposed remedies to injustice are deeply tyrannical, replacing one form of domination with another, but at least—as we have read—the program is stated clearly and as an abstract proposal, unlike current rulers, who govern in tyrannical manner while ideologically concealing their true intentions.

The last<sup>41</sup> of these anonymous reviews adopts a more analytical tone than the previous one. While the reviewer remains skeptical of Fichte's proposal, he or she does not dismiss it outright. Unlike earlier critics who declared Fichte's ideas "irrational" or "impossible," this author acknowledges that they are both logically and practically possible but argues that they are nevertheless undesirable for the history of humanity (see Anonymous 1803, 290). The approach is relatively fair: the reviewer presents the content accurately and offers counterarguments without resorting to polemic. The tone is neutral to negative but avoids hostility. It reflects a willingness to engage with the work on its own terms, even while ultimately disagreeing with its conclusions.

The overall impression is that the anonymous reviews represent a wide spectrum of responses to Fichte's political theory. While some viewed it as a groundbreaking and morally driven reimagining of justice and ownership, others saw it as authoritarian or dangerously utopian. Notably, even the more critical reviews recognized the work's ambition and systematic structure, suggesting that, regardless of ideological stance, it could not be easily dismissed.

## 5. Conclusion. Nicolai's Review as Revelatory Moment. Fichte Between Freedom and Order

In approaching the conclusion, other interpreters influenced by Smithian economic principles might also be considered, such as Ludwig Hestermann, with his *The Open Commercial State*<sup>42</sup> (1802), and Caspar von Hagens, with his *Phil-*

<sup>41</sup> In *Leipziger Literaturzeitung*. St. 234/235 vom 29./30. März. 1803. Sp. 597–600; 601–60. Rubrik: *Staatswissenschaft*.

<sup>42</sup> Starting from the title, which clearly stands in opposition to *The Closed Commercial State*, in *The Open Commercial State* (see Hestermann 1802), Ludwig Hestermann presents an ideal critical response to Fichte, aiming not merely to reject his ideas but to move beyond them. While he shares Fichte's concern for protecting the right to life through property, Hestermann insists that this can only be achieved through the preservation of absolute freedom of exchange. At the heart of his argument is a commitment to epistemological clarity: for Hestermann, political economy should not remain in the realm of abstract moral theory, as it often does in Fichte, but must become a practical science grounded in observable dynamics. Drawing heavily on Adam Smith, Hestermann proposes a value theory rooted in classical economics. He critiques Fichte's reduction of all value to labor compensated by wages, noting that this approach ignores other key economic categories such as capital profit, rent, and the role of market prices. In contrast, Hestermann sees value as emerging from a more complex system, where market mechanisms—including competition—play a central role. He shares Smith's belief in a spontaneous tendency toward market equilibrium, where individual interests can, under the right conditions, align with the public good. Rather than striving for enforced equality, Hestermann accepts a degree of stratification

*osophical and Political Inquiry into the Legitimacy of Corporations and Controlled Prices*<sup>43</sup> (1804).<sup>44</sup> However, it is fitting to conclude with Nicolai, because—as anticipated—his critique allows for a return to the question of democracy and the consciously maintained aporia at the heart of the Fichte’s political thought.

Nicolai’s critical assessment of *The Closed Commercial State* appeared in 1801 in the *Neue allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*.<sup>45</sup> By this time, Nicolai had gravitated toward a position aligned with liberal-conservative critiques, particularly in the final decade of the eighteenth century.

In his review, Nicolai echoes the objections raised by Rehberg and Müller, asserting that Fichte is navigating entirely unfamiliar terrain. He accuses Fichte of a fundamental ignorance of political economy, particularly with respect to the concepts of production, consumption, and the monetary system. According to Nicolai, Fichte believed that having invented the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a “miracle of the first order” (Nicolai 1801, 185–86), could lead him to comprehend everything through its philosophical principles. Yet, Nicolai argues, in the first attempt at practical application, Fichte fundamentally fails to hit the mark. As one of the first consequences of this failure, as Møller had already observed, the *Closed Commercial State* would not promote progress but rather bring about a state of stagnation and intellectual atrophy. Indeed, Fichte’s treatise—in Nicolai’s estimation—is merely the product of a “speculative armchair philosopher” (Nicolai 1801, 189), filled with “subtle sophistry, [...] strange ideas, and [...] in-

in labor, capital, and culture as both inevitable and, to some extent, desirable. From this perspective, Fichte’s egalitarianism appears not only unrealistic but potentially unjust, as it ignores natural differences and suppresses the competitive dynamics that allow society to balance success and failure. For Hestermann, it is precisely this competition—between individuals, enterprises, and ideas—that ensures justice and efficiency in the long run.

<sup>43</sup> In his *Philosophical and Political Inquiry into the Legitimacy of Guilds and Price Controls* (see Hagens 1804), Caspar von Hagens offers a liberal critique of state intervention in economic life, with a special focus on Fichte’s *Closed Commercial State* case. He challenges the legitimacy of institutions such as guilds and systems of price regulation, arguing that they impose artificial constraints on the natural freedom of civil society. For von Hagens, such controls disrupt the organic development of the market and hinder the autonomy of individuals in choosing and exercising their professions. The book sets its tone from the outset with an epigraph drawn from Adam Smith, clearly aligning itself with a classical liberal economic model. This model envisions the market as the primary mechanism for determining the balance between trades and professions, without the need for corporatist structures or state-imposed price ceilings. Von Hagens maintains that, left to operate freely, competition naturally improves the quality of goods and services while responding more effectively to the needs of society. Rather than protecting consumers, he argues, interventions such as guild restrictions and price controls tend to entrench privilege, suppress innovation, and ultimately serve narrow interests at the expense of the public good.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed and exhaustive reconstruction of these polemic books against Fichte’s position, see Sabbatini 2020.

<sup>45</sup> In *Neue allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*. Bd. 67. St. 2. H. 8. Berlin u. Stettin 1801. S. 521–48. Rubrik: *Handlungswissenschaft*.

consistencies that border on the ridiculous” (Nicolai 1801, 1929) or, again, with “sophists’ tricks” (Nicolai 1801, 193).

Furthermore, Nicolai not only criticizes the economic plan of enclosure and the proposed expropriation of wealth but also mocks Fichte’s theory of money. On this respect, he writes with biting irony:

What is the substance of national money? [...] this can only be grasped through the intellectual intuition with which Fichte and his disciples, contemplating their pure self, produce everything outside of themselves (Nicolai 1801, 203).

This sarcasm underscores and takes up once again the now familiar theme, shared by Fichte’s critics, that the system entails a systematic denial of personal liberty.

In fact, Nicolai describes the *Closed Commercial State* as a

tyrannical despotism, [...] the government not only takes away from its subjects all the silver and gold down to the last farthing [...] but determines for each individual how much he can produce and work [...] it keeps everyone under constant tutelage and dependence in every kind of activity, whatever it may be. In short, according to this Fichtean plan, the subjects are not much better than prisoners in a closed fortress who are constantly watched, assigned work, and whose subsistence quota is measured. They can do nothing of their own initiative, must constantly let themselves be guided, commanded, criticized and controlled by others and can therefore only become boring machines which never act autonomously and can cultivate neither themselves nor others (Nicolai 1801, 205).

Nicolai, then, reinforces this analysis with a direct comparison between Fichte’s model and the operations of an inquisitorial regime, noting the system’s requirement for passports and the inability of citizens to move freely between countries. For Nicolai, the crux of the problem lies in Fichte’s disregard for empirical realities: the same critique underpins his accusations of abstraction and despotism, connecting the two issues. In a sense, the more abstract a system is, the greater will be the despotic impact of its postulates. Indeed, Nicolai writes:

Into what infantile perversions do theoretical philosophers fall when they despise all verified experience, thus becoming completely alien to the real world and yet believe that they can make the real world better through their pure imagination [...] but the tyranny of such senseless police regulations and the tyrannical nature of state government must fill with contempt every reader who knows how to appreciate human dignity (Nicolai 1801, 207).

Here, Nicolai explicitly links what he terms the “despotism of reason” with Fichte’s “political fantasy”. And, in the end, he further underscores this point by—here the most interesting insight—drawing attention to a perceived contradiction between the *Closed Commercial State* and other of Fichte’s “political daydreams”, i.e. his earlier political writings, particularly the *Beitrag*. That earlier work had scandalized conservative critics such as Gentz and Rehberg for the

opposite reason—namely, its valorization of radical liberty, leading to a potential political instability. In this sense, Nicolai highlights:

Mr. Fichte is not even consistent in his political daydreams. In his *Contribution to the correction of the judgments on the French Revolution*, with which he began his chimerical political career about eight years ago, there are a number of sentences that contradict those by which he now wants to create a *closed commercial state*; despite the fact that then he judged everything just as negatively as he does now. Back then, every person had very great rights against the state; back then, everyone was still allowed to *speak and act for themselves*. What would the government of the *closed commercial state* say if every dissatisfied citizen, deprived by the state of his natural freedom to conduct his own business and degraded to a mindless machine that in all things can only act under the control of the state, addressed him with the words of *Fichte* [the one from the *Beitrag*]: ‘So you have formed me with the sole final purpose of being useful to you, for your purposes, and not useful to me, for my purposes? You have treated me like a piece of raw material, which should have been useful to you in some way!’” (Nicolai 1801, 207–8).

For Nicolai, such a contradiction points to a “senseless violation of human rights” and a deliberate obstruction of the “most essential freedom of every citizen” (Nicolai 1801, 208). He concludes his review by returning to a common motif in these critiques: the folly of presumptuous philosophers who, detached from empirical reality, believe they can reshape the world through speculative thought alone. In a final satirical flourish, Nicolai quotes Fichte on the idea that each person should remain within the “sphere of action” assigned by nature, only to add:

Mr. Fichte’s sphere is in reality the supersensible, where he himself assures us that he is at home; but from the supersensible nothing true comes, about trade, politics and other matters of the sensible world. Let him remain in the supersensible, his true sphere, where he has room up to seventh heaven! He is simply not at home anywhere in the sensible world! He will always regard windmills as giants (Nicolai 1801, 211).

Beyond the ironic tenor of Nicolai’s final criticisms, his reference to the *Beitrag* offers a crucial insight that once again brings to light the internal tensions inherent in the modern political concepts mobilized by Fichte. In the *Beitrag*, Fichte could be described as a radical democrat; however, his theory of the free rescindability of the social contract introduces a profound difficulty concerning the stabilization of any enduring political body. The constitutionalizing of the right to resistance—reminiscent of the never-implemented French Constitution of June 1793—ultimately undermines the very foundations of the modern state (see Gristina 2024, 164–71; 2025b).

As we have seen, the *Naturrecht* represents Fichte’s attempt to provide a logical foundation for the state by stabilizing individual liberties within a representative framework. In the *Closed Commercial State*, however, the role of the state is markedly intensified, aiming to realize freedom through the radical enforcement

of socio-economic equality. If this project contradicts the premises of the *Beitrag*, it may not be due to a simple rupture or contradiction in Fichte's thought, but rather to his attempt to constrain the potentially individualistic and liberal excesses of his earlier model, confirming the dialectic between freedom and order that—according to Cesa—characterizes Fichte's thought.

However, rather than focusing on the question of whether Fichte's trajectory moves from radical democratism, to a model of representative democracy, and then on toward a negation or "death" of democracy, it is more productive to emphasize that these contradictory formulations—as emphasized by his critical reviewers—testify to Fichte's sustained engagement with the aporetic nature of democracy itself.

As we have seen, the *Closed commercial state* is attacked from various perspectives because it attempts to find a radical solution to the problem of internal stabilization within civil society and external stabilization between states, scaring models of state and politics founded on trust in liberal freedom and the invisible hand of free trade. In this sense, Fichte's political writings register the unresolved tension at the heart of democracy and popular sovereignty in general—a problem inherited from Hobbes, Rousseau,<sup>46</sup> and the broader tradition of modern political philosophy, which finds both its political realization and the theoretical intensification of its internal tensions in the experience of the French Revolution.

To conclude, the reception of Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* in his times and especially in his conservative Smithean-Burkean opponents, illustrates the complexity of this intellectual context. Among his critics, we find at least three principal tendencies: liberal-conservatives influenced by Smithian political economy, more reactionary conservative figures, and Enlightenment critics such as Nicolai. A smaller number of interpreters offered more sympathetic readings. Although many critiques of Fichte's project employed similar arguments—particularly around the themes of economic closure and individual liberty—their underlying motivations and theoretical frameworks varied considerably.

Some critics, aligned with Smith and Burke, focused on Fichte's departure from principles of free trade and personal freedom. Others, such as Müller, criticized Fichte while also distancing themselves from liberal economics, identifying in *The Closed Commercial State* both theoretical limitations and practical risks, albeit from a different perspective.

More broadly, counter-revolutionary thinkers often sought to defuse the political implications of Fichte's proposals by portraying them as overly abstract or speculative. As Cesa has observed, this text may be understood as Fichte's most explicitly Jacobin work—an intervention shaped by the crisis of the Revolutionary period and the uncertainties of the early 19th century. This viewpoint offers a better understanding of the reason why the reviews of Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* functioned not merely as scholarly assessments but

<sup>46</sup> On the reception of Rousseau in Fichte's political thought, see Rampazzo Bazzan 2017.

as political instruments: they were deployed to oppose Fichte's project both institutionally and within the broader sphere of the Republic of Letters. This eccentric and provocative text thus exposes the critical tensions of a *Kampfplatz*—a conceptual battlefield—at the threshold of modernity, where Fichte's political theory engages directly with the upheavals of his time.

Thus, the debate surrounding *The Closed Commercial State* reflects a moment of significant transition in European political thought. What emerges from it is not merely a clash of ideas, but a confrontation between competing visions of modernity. The debate coincides with emergence of the sciences of government, the development of political economy, the consolidation of state administrative practices, and early efforts to engage with what would later be called the “social question.” At stake were not only technical disagreements about trade policy or economic organization, but deeper questions about the relationship between liberty and order, individual autonomy and collective regulation.

What emerges from this episode is then an intellectual landscape marked by tensions, where philosophical discourse is closely intertwined with political commitments and historical circumstance. The critical reviews of Fichte's work—whether grounded in liberal, conservative, or Enlightenment frameworks—reveal the contested nature of political economy at the threshold of modernity. In this context, political economy itself becomes a site of struggle, as both its stabilization and its potential critique are bound up with the reconfiguration of key modern concepts and their corresponding political implications.

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