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## Jan Maria Novotny and His Collection of Books on Economics

Michael Markowski  
*Syracuse University*

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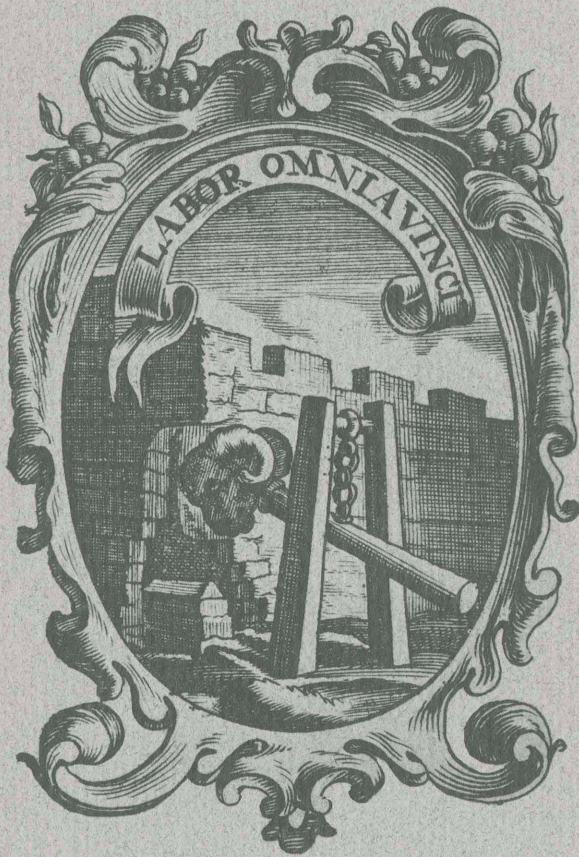
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# Jan Maria Novotný and His Collection of Books on Economics

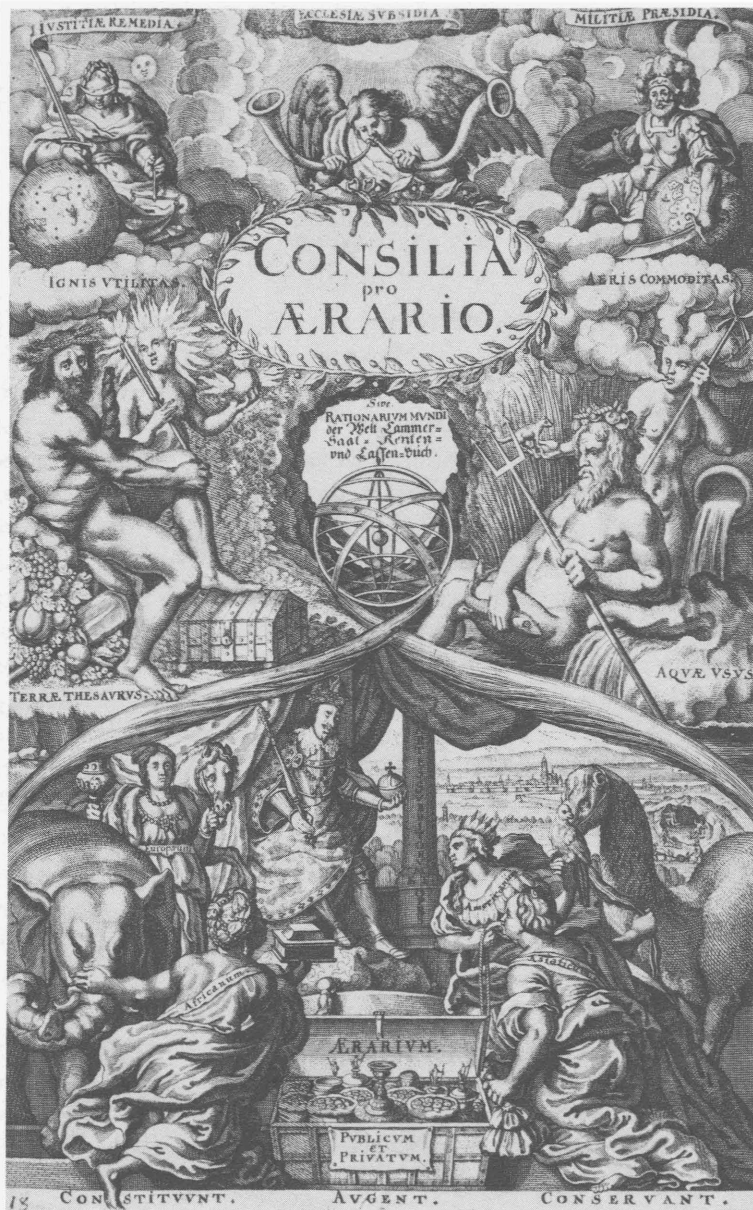
BY MICHAEL MARKOWSKI

In 1961 Syracuse University had the good fortune to acquire the select portion of Professor Jan Novotný's personal library.<sup>1</sup> The Novotný Collection, as it has come to be known, centers on public finance and taxation but contains early and important works in many fields: political science, literature, geography, history, religion, economics, and law. The books are in the process of being catalogued in the George Arents Research Library, where the entire collection may be accessed through Novotný's bibliography: *A Library of Public Finance and Economics* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1953), 383 pages.

Jan Novotný lectured in fiscal science and law at Charles University, Prague, until 1939, when Adolf Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia. The Nazis dismissed Novotný from the University because of his political views. After the confusion and shootings that followed the takeover, the S.S. closed all Czech universities and transported thousands of students to concentration camps, often for no other reason than because they were Jewish. When World War II ended in 1945, Novotný resumed his position at Charles University and held it for three more years until, in 1948, Communists took over Czechoslovakia and he was dismissed again. Just then, McGill University in Montreal made Novotný the timely offer of a position to teach economics. He accepted it and left Czechoslovakia forever.

Taking as much of his enormous collection of books as weight restrictions allowed, he arrived safely in Canada with 6000 of the most valuable books from his library. Some of these books had come to him by inheritance, but the rest he bought between the two world

1. I would like to thank the staff of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, whose consistently kind and expert assistance has introduced me to the details of an important research library. I also would like to thank Professor James M. Powell for his help in many areas.



From Maximilian Faust von Aschaffenburg, *Consilia pro aerario civili, ecclesiastici et militari, publico atque privato* (Frankfurt: Schleich, 1641). This engraving shows the various parts of the world paying into a common treasury.

wars, when many rare books came onto the market. Although he often traced former owners to return what he could, he nevertheless amassed one of the largest private collections of its kind in Europe.

The disposition of the 10,000 volumes—the so-called ‘Prague Remainder’ that Novotný was forced to leave for safe-keeping at the State Library in Prague—is not known. When asked recently what might have happened to these books, the State Library at Prague kindly and frankly responded:<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, it is difficult today to state up what happened with Novotný’s collection, whether or how it was catalogued and added to the holdings of this library. It is necessary to realize that our library received in that time and generally after the World War II until the beginning of 50s hundreds of thousands of volumes from different public and private sources and collections. All these books were checked up against the holdings of this library and the missing titles and volumes were catalogued and added to the library collections. It is highly probable that this was done with Novotný’s books, too, and that the part of them were included in our holdings and have been being used by our readers.

Although Jan Novotný described himself as a bibliophile, he had a motive beyond collecting attractive, rare, and interesting books. He wanted his library to be the basis of a research institute on public finance. At such an institute, students would work on individual projects “under the personal guidance of the Director. Every week [there would] be a common discussion [along the lines of] the seminar system familiar on the American continent. All students were to be fully supported by fellowships.”<sup>3</sup> This institute was to have a complete library containing historical and current works on economics defined in a broad sense—which explains the breadth of Novotný’s library. It was to have also a well-stocked archive of tax records, government statistics, and other primary documents; a select bio-

2. The letter was written by Jarmila Krivanova, Director of the Acquisitions and Processing Division of the State Library of the Czech Socialist Republic and dated 30 June 1987. I have quoted Mr. Krivanova’s letter exactly.

3. Novotný, *A Library*, 354.

bibliography; a full bibliography of all works connected to the subject of economics. In addition, there was to be a Museum of Documents and Stamps. Novotný's dream was never completely realized. In some form, however, Syracuse University is recognizing its essence. The Novotný Collection supplements other holdings of the George Arnts Research Library nicely, to provide a good scholarly foundation for the interests of the faculty and students of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

Jan Novotný did not believe in education for its own sake. He held the view that a good education would result in an improved morality in state finance. He wrote:<sup>4</sup>

The Western World has spent billions on technical advancement. It should spend a small fraction of this amount also on the advancement of those moral and social forces, which should use these great technical inventions for a better and happier human life.

How would a research institute in public finance bring about "a better and happier human life"? Novotný believed that his conception of education would "lead to a substantial lowering of the burden of taxation . . . [and would produce] a more equitable and less burdensome spread of the whole tax load".<sup>5</sup> In short, Novotný held that moral and ethical leaders would collect and spend taxes wisely and equitably, thus reducing the amount of taxes needed. A goal of this nature has been sought in recent presidential elections and tax reform legislation in the United States, as well as in currently debated tax reform in England.

Novotný understood that a climate of improved morality could not always be a direct, predictable result of any particular kind of education. He was more than aware of the extensive education of Nazis like Goebbels, having personally experienced its results. However, Novotný would have argued that a well-rounded, general education will usually develop a person's ethics and moral commitment more than a purely technical education will. In other words, we should be wary of those responsible for taxing us if they have immersed them-

4. Novotný, *A Library*, 354.

5. *Ibid.*



From Johann George Leib, *Erste Probe: wie ein Regent Land und Leute verbessern . . . und sich dadurch in Macht und Ansehen setzen könne* (Leipzig and Frankfurt: F. Lanckischens Erben, 1708). This frontispiece pictures what the book addresses: how to improve economic activity, whether on the farm or in the early manufacturing centers of the city.



selves only in the minutiae of tax structures and current practices but have not studied what Novotný argued was the center of economic activity: humanity. The study of finance must begin and progress with the study of the humanities.

The study of the liberal arts enables a student to see important and creative links between concepts and current practices. It broadens involvement and background knowledge and stimulates insights. Jan Novotný prescribed just what our current education in finance and administration often neglects to emphasize: a thorough historical study of the state, its financing, and the people involved. The taxman must know his Aristotle and Augustine as well as financial law and accounting. He must know other languages and cultures, especially how others have handled and reacted to financial problems and solutions. In a large sense, those dealing in the state's finance must be aware of the whole context of the lives of those who, throughout the world and over the centuries, have been connected with finance and who have thought and written about the subject. Of course, every individual has, to some extent, been exposed to this background, which Novotný argued must be formally studied as an integral part of the student's program. His concern for a better balance between liberal and technical education has anticipated the thrust of the recent Carnegie Foundation report on higher education, which strongly recommended a greater emphasis on general education.<sup>6</sup> It is in this study of finance in a general and historical context that this collection can make the greatest contribution.

The Novotný Collection can be described as a broad research library of public finance covering the last five hundred years. It contains some 2000 books in Czech and Slovak and some 4000 books in other languages, although this count is deceiving since a single book sometimes contains many separate titles bound within it.<sup>7</sup> The collection is strongest in Central European areas, comprising a multitude of tax records, statistics, government documents, and more general works on economics and government from the declining Holy

6. Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 73–115.

7. For one example: in the Novotný bibliography, item 1:1176 contains over 200 separate tax records, but only one title is counted.

Roman Empire, from Bohemia, Austria, Hungary and the controversial Hapsburg Empire. It includes a sizable group of materials in Czech and Slovak, as well as most of the landmarks of economic literature of the West, from Jean Bodin and Adam Smith to Edwin Seligman and John Maynard Keynes. It is virtually complete in some areas, such as in the principal representatives of Cameralism. However, Novotný's collection is spotty in English works on economics. It is also deficient in Italian works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it does contain some notable items, such as a very rare set of fifty volumes of Pietro Custodi's *Scrittori classici italiani de economia politica*. In its strong areas, Novotný's library compares well with the widely known Kress Library of Business and Economics at Harvard University and the Seligman Collection at Columbia, and surpasses all the libraries on the North American continent in the pre-war materials for Central Europe.

An additional feature of these books is their fine condition. Novotný continually searched out booksellers and auctions, often replacing his poorer copies with better ones. His luck at finding bargains was phenomenal. Once, browsing in New York City, he came across a perfect copy of the rare *Della pubblica felicità* of Ludovico Muratori—for \$1.50! The results of such serendipity speak for themselves: many interesting and beautiful bindings; presentation copies of Malthus, Jeremy Bentham, and many others; Georg Obrecht's secretly printed *Politisch Bedencken und Discurs von Verbesserung Land und Leut* (Strassburg, 1606), cf. Novotný, *Library*, 23 and 358; the only known copy of Archisander Relemire's seventeenth-century work of comparative economics, *Hypochondrische Reise, oder die neu-erfundene Wirthschafft* (no place or date). Besides these just mentioned, there are many rare items and many important first editions and signed imperial decrees. For example, there is Maximilian Faust von Aschaffenburg's *Consilia pro aerario civili, ecclesiastici et militari, publico atque privato* (Frankfurt, 1641). Faust von Aschaffenburg attempted to discuss the treasury in an exhaustive manner and from all sorts of points of view—a truly cross-disciplinary work covering aspects of a historical, legal, fiscal, military, intellectual, ecclesiastical, political, sociological, linguistic, public, private, and, of course, economic nature. His treatment creates questions of a comparative nature too, since he cited examples from many parts of the world and from various times. The book is truly a treasure.



From Julius Frontinus, *Die vier Bücher Sexti Julii Frontini* (Mainz: Ivo Schöffer, 1532). In this work on military art and science, the engraving emphasizes the classroom rather than the battlefield.

To continue this list would be to name each item in the collection as the published bibliography mentioned earlier does. In general, this bibliography arranges the books into three sections. The first section contains books with a publication date before 1850. This is a strong section, partly because it begins very early. For example, there are a number of interesting manuscripts and incunabula, such as Jean Gerson's *Opera* of 1488 and Thomas Aquinas' *Opuscula* of 1490. Novotný's aim in including these sorts of books was to account for the early period when economic thought was slowly emerging from other disciplines. There are many Latin works on law and political science and many German and Czech works, partly archival material, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

The second section of the bibliography contains titles from 1850 onward but excludes Czech and Slovak works. This is the weakest

section. Nothing has been added since 1961, and not very much in the post-war period. There is the spottiness already mentioned. The last section of the bibliography contains only works in Czech and Slovak—the strongest area of Novotný’s library, as said before. This section lists the post-1850 works in these languages. Especially useful are the enormous amounts of government documents, records, and other primary sources—archival material that is a necessity for serious research. Besides this historical strength, the third section contains interesting works like those of Eduard Beneš, who was the president of Czechoslovakia both before and after the revolution of 1948. Various lesser Czech officials are also represented here. The works of some of these officials, as Novotný pointed out, show their authors’ changing colors. One sees, for example, a dedicated Czech before 1938 becoming pro-German until 1945, then a Czech patriot again until 1948, and finally Marxist.<sup>8</sup> Novotný meant to cause a little embarrassment when he noted such instances.

One of the conveniences of a collection like this for the researcher is that needed materials are usually at hand. While borrowing through the interlibrary loan system is efficient, it is more satisfying and convenient to have immediate access to all necessary materials when researching a subject. The Novotný Collection, with all the other related materials at Syracuse University, approaches this ideal.

Jan Maria Novotný, through his commitment to education, tried to ensure a “better and happier human life” for everyone. He wanted to bring this about through a sweeping study of public finance, administration, and taxation, a study which would address the subject from many aspects—historical, philosophical, moral as well as technical. Novotný concluded his short *Elementary Economics* with a statement that will appropriately conclude this article:<sup>9</sup>

Such is the author’s creed in economic theory: a belief in God, existence of certain rules of ethical conduct for Man, the free will of Man, and Man’s freedom of decision within a free, democratic environment.

8. Novotný, *A Library*, 352.

9. Novotný, *Elementary Economics*, 161.