

A Missed Opportunity: The Edition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Paul Pierre Lemercier de la Rivière, Les lumières au chevet de la Pologne. Les projets de Rousseau, Mably et Lemercier de la Rivière à la veille du premier partage (1772), avec les observations de Wielhorski et d'autres contributeurs de la Confédération de Bar. Présentation, analyse et transcription par Thérance Carvalho et Bernard Herencia, Slatkine 2024

Abstract

The article offers an analysis and assessment of the critical edition of the advice for Poland prepared by three well-known philosophers of the Enlightenment (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, and Paul Pierre Lemercier de la Rivière), as well as of the manuscripts preserved in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw that were prepared for these philosophers by Michał Wielhorski, together with the record of the discussion between Mably and the Bar Confederates. The author of the article emphasizes that the texts included in the reviewed volume under review are of great value for research on the political thought of the Enlightenment and bringing them together in a single publication was a highly valuable scholarly initiative. However, in her view, the editors failed to meet this challenge. Their undertaking is burdened by very serious gaps and errors, both in terms of their knowledge of the relevant literature – including the fundamental studies of Jerzy Michalski – and in their editorial work on the source texts themselves. The author presents in detail the technical and substantive mistakes made by the editors and ultimately concludes that they disqualify the work as a reliable scholarly resource.

Keywords: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Paul Pierre Lemercier de la Rivière, Michał Wielhorski, Enlightenment, Bar Confederation, Poland, history of political thought, critical edition

The project undertaken by editors Thérance Carvalho and Bernard Herencia in this volume is undoubtedly a commendable scholarly initiative. Their aim, on the one hand, was to bring together in a single edition the proposals for reforming Poland's political system put forward by three eminent Enlightenment philosophers – thereby presenting contrasting perspectives on a shared problem and highlighting the intellectual exchange that, to some extent, existed between them, since they were at least partially familiar with one another's writings. On the other hand, the goal was to present certain formative texts that, for at least two of the thinkers (Gabriel Bonnot de Mably and Jean-Jacques Rousseau), not only shaped their understanding of Poland but also served as the starting point for extended reflections – whether in direct dialogue

with Polish informants (as in Mably's case) or in response to their accounts (as with Rousseau). In Rousseau's case, the importance of such dynamics has been clearly illustrated in the latest edition of his "Considérations," which places his reflections alongside the dossier compiled for him by Michał Wielhorski.¹ The editors of the volume under review, however, set themselves an even more ambitious task: to publish not only the three philosophers' treatises but also a complete set of Polish source materials preserved in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw. These documents in fact make up the bulk of the volume (pp. 73–381),² alongside Rousseau's "Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne" (pp. 383–457) and Mercier de la Rivière's "L'intérêt commun des Polonais" (pp. 463–523).

It should be acknowledged from the outset that the task the editors undertook was far from straightforward. For the source texts collected in a volume such as this to be fully accessible and useful to readers, they require both a substantial introduction – one that outlines not only the ideological foundations of the authors' thinking but also the historical context of the country they described, and in some cases were writing within – and a carefully constructed critical apparatus, offering annotations that clarify the references, allusions, and background information embedded in the texts. Successfully executing such a task demands rigorous preparation on several fronts. First, a solid command of the current state of research on the main philosophical writings included. Second, a clear understanding of the historical circumstances that gave rise to these texts – without which many of their assertions risk being misunderstood or overlooked. Third, a broad knowledge of both Polish history and 18th-century European affairs, essential for situating the material in its proper context. Finally – and perhaps most importantly – a thorough grasp of the history of the source materials themselves, as well as familiarity with the existing scholarship that has addressed them. Unfortunately, the editors have managed to meet these demanding requirements only to a very limited extent.

The introduction to the edition (pp. 9–49) is, from the outset, a major disappointment. It opens with a brief overview of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (pp. 9–16), which is strikingly superficial – recycling well-worn clichés that have been circulating

¹ Rousseau, "Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne" [2021].

² These include: "Conférences sur les affaires de Pologne entre M. Wielhorski et monsieur l'abbé de Mably tenues à Paris en 1770" (pp. 73–87); "Observations sur les conférences" (pp. 88–94); "Tableau du gouvernement de Pologne" by Wielhorski, with appendices (pp. 95–152); "Observations de M. l'abbé de Mably sur la réforme des lois de la Pologne" (pp. 153–232); the discussion of the "Observations" by Wielhorski, Bohusz, Mniszechowa, and anonymous authors (pp. 226–331); followed by the "Secondes, Troisièmes et Quatrièmes Observations de monsieur l'abbé de Mably" (pp. 332–378); and the brief concluding correspondence between Wielhorski and Mably (pp. 378–381).

since Voltaire's time, while failing to engage with the most recent scholarship on the subject (such as Richard Butterwick's seminal synthesis).³ This issue, in fact, reflects a broader problem: the secondary literature cited throughout the introduction appears arbitrarily selected, giving the impression that one of the main criteria for inclusion was the language in which publications were written. Moreover, even though fundamental French-language monographs, such as Jean Fabre's,⁴ do appear in a footnote (n. 6 on p. 12), they do not seem to have informed the actual analysis. This is a significant oversight, particularly because several texts in the volume directly reference the history, institutions, and legal framework of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – and as such, without appropriate contextual explanation (absent also in the footnotes), they will be more difficult for many readers to understand. The historical events that preceded and in many ways motivated the writing of these texts are given less than a page of attention in the introduction (pp. 13–14). Yet without an understanding of the intricate political developments in Poland between 1767 and 1772, it will be impossible to grasp the significance of these texts or engage in any in-depth analysis.

Fabre, for instance, clearly recognized the importance of historical context when, in the introduction to his exemplary edition of Rousseau's writings on Poland, he included an extensive section detailing the formation of the Confederation of Bar and its development up to the First Partition of 1772 – supplemented by annotations.⁵ Likewise, the editors of the 2021 edition of "Considérations" provided substantial historical commentary to frame the text. The volume under review here, by contrast, offers no such contextual guidance – neither in the introduction, nor in the annotated notes. Indeed, such explanations seem all the more necessary here, given that numerous references to individuals and events appear in the manuscripts from the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw that are included in the edition (and which will be discussed in more detail below).

The introduction also offers very little information about the mission and activities of Michał Wielhorski in Paris – the key figure who inspired the three philosophers' engagement with Polish affairs. Even if the editors chose not to repeat or agree with the well-established findings of Fabre and, above all, Michalski in this respect, those earlier publications should at least have been acknowledged – provided, of course, that the editors were aware of them.

³ Butterwick, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*.

⁴ Fabre, *Stanislas-Auguste Poniatowski*.

⁵ Rousseau, "Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne" [1964], CCXXVII–CCXXXII.

This failure to engage with key scholarly publications continues in the sections of the introduction that are devoted to the three philosophers' proposals for reforming Poland–Lithuania. References to prior studies are sparse and seemingly random – almost entirely overlooking, for instance, the crucial contributions of Bronisław Baczek⁶ and Fabre,⁷ which are fundamental for understanding “*Considérations*,” as well as a substantial body of important scholarship published in English. The editors also appear unaware of Marek Blaszkę's book, over a third of which is devoted to a detailed analysis of “*L'intérêt commun des Polonais*” by Mercier de la Rivière.⁸ These are only a few examples among many. As a result, these sections of the introduction read more like cursory summaries of the treatises than substantive scholarly engagement with their content.

After a perfunctory discussion of the three philosophers, the authors turn to what is arguably a key section of the introduction, entitled “*Sources et documentation*” – discussing the body of information available to Rousseau and Mably as they began drafting their proposals for Poland (as nothing is known about the sources used by Mercier de la Rivière). This topic is also briefly touched upon earlier in the section on Mably (p. 19). Yet on this point, too, we encounter shortcomings that are, to put it mildly, quite surprising. The question of the philosophers' sources has been the focus of sustained scholarly attention for many years. Nonetheless, among the many publications on the subject, the editors appear to rely only on Fabre's preface to his edition of “*Considérations*” – and even that they seem to have read rather superficially, without fully engaging with its findings. They cite Michalski's book on Rousseau,⁹ once, but do not meaningfully draw on it, and they show no familiarity with other significant works in the field.

This apparent unawareness with relevant scholarship leads to two major consequences. First, there are notable inaccuracies and omissions in the detailed analysis of the texts, particularly regarding the sources from which the authors derived their knowledge of Poland. Some of these errors are relatively minor – for instance, overlooking the fact that Rousseau had access not merely to Pfeffel's treatise, but to a specific copy annotated by Wielhorski.¹⁰ Similarly, contrary to the editors' suggestion (p. 27), Mably likely did not consult this text – at

⁶ Baczek, “*Rousseau et l'imagination sociale*,” 25–60; Baczek, “*Un «voyage imaginaire» de Rousseau*,” 65–100.

⁷ Fabre, “*Réalité et utopie*,” 159–88.

⁸ Blaszkę, *Obraz i naprawa Rzeczypospolitej*, 128–82. The editors of the volume under review would seem to be familiar only with Blaszkę's five-page article on Mably and Mercier.

⁹ Michalski, *Rousseau i sarmacki republikanizm*; Michalski, *Rousseau and Polish Republicanism* (English edition).

¹⁰ Rousseau, “*Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*” [1964], 1737.

least not during the initial stages of his work.¹¹ Other mistakes are more serious, such as the assertion that Rousseau's remark, "Il y a sans contredit d'excellentes vues économiques dans les papiers qui m'ont été communiqués," refers to the treatises of Boudeau, who receives substantial attention in the introduction (pp. 27–29). Yet Michalski convincingly argued that Rousseau was, in fact, referring to Wielhorski's texts¹² – which, incidentally, are also included in this very edition. The claim that "Considérations" was finally completed in April 1772 (p. 21) also appears to be a typographical error, especially in light of the chronology established by Władysław Konopczyński¹³ and Fabre.

A more serious error – one that directly impacts the very structure of the edition – is the inclusion of two seemingly arbitrarily chosen Confederation of Bar manifestos (pp. 55–72), accompanied by the suggestion that these were the very documents provided to the philosophers (pp. 26–27). However, prior research, including evidence cited in Fabre's edition,¹⁴ confirms that the material supplied by Wielhorski was in fact a different text: the *Manifeste de la République confédérée*,¹⁵ a substantial publication (141 + 295 pages) that includes not only the *Manifeste* itself but also 45 related confederate texts. Mably even refers to this collection explicitly in his "Observations" (p. 255) – a connection that, to their credit, the editors do correctly identify in footnote 312. Understandably, such a voluminous work may have been impractical to reproduce in full in this edition. But in that case, the editors should either have omitted it altogether – particularly since it is readily available online¹⁶ – or, at the very least, explained their rationale for selecting these two specific manifestos in lieu of the whole collection.

Nevertheless, the editors' lack of familiarity with relevant scholarship has even more troubling implications, raising serious questions about the academic rigor of the edition. Not only do they emphasize that the Wielhorski dossier included in their volume – held in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, within the Anna Branicka collection (now catalogued as signatures 8 and 9) – had never been published before (p. 19), but they also

¹¹ Michalski, *Sarmacki republikanizm w oczach Francuza*, 81.

¹² Michalski, *Rousseau and Polish Republicanism*, 19, 24, 83, and passim.

¹³ Konopczyński, "Jan Jakób Rousseau," 1–28.

¹⁴ Rousseau, "Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne" [1964], 1738.

¹⁵ *Manifeste de la République confédérée de Pologne*.

¹⁶ Accessible through the Polona Digital Library, a digital collection of the National Library of Poland (BN XVIII.2.2224), at <https://polona.pl/item-view/a029bcbc-3262-4a51-a3e4-966e462bea2a?page=23> (accessed: 30.11.2025), and through the Gallica Digital Library, hosted by the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (shelf mark M-6394), at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9651209c.texteImage> (accessed: 30.11.2025).

strongly imply that it was their own discovery. This is conveyed indirectly, for instance, through their reference to “les procès-verbaux **retrouvés** aux Archives centrales des documents historiques” (p. 19, emphasis mine). They go so far as to claim credit for identifying (“nous avons identifié”) the authors of several key texts – Michał Wielhorski, Maria Amalia Mniszech, and Ignacy Bohusz (introduction, p. 19; p. 49; p. 248, footnote 298; p. 310, footnote 457; p. 315, footnote 467). This claim is further reinforced by their assertion that the edition contains “plusieurs observations, remarques et notes sur les travaux de Mably conservées aux Archives centrales des documents historiques de Varsovie et **jusque-là méconnues**” (p. 48, emphasis mine).

It is true that the Wielhorski dossier had not previously been published – but it is available online,¹⁷ a fact the editors fail to mention. Moreover, “unpublished” does not mean “unknown.” On the contrary, this is an exceptionally well-documented collection. It is worth recalling some of the relevant scholarship. In 1977, Jerzy Michalski published a book based on this dossier, analyzing the exchange between Rousseau and Wielhorski, including a detailed examination of the “Tableau” as well as references to other documents held in the Central Archives.¹⁸ This remains the only work the editors mention – almost in passing – but they appear unfamiliar with its contents, despite the fact that an excellent English translation is freely accessible online. In 1974, Michalski also published an article identifying Maria Amalia Mniszech as the author of “Remarques sur les Observations de M. l’Abbé de Mably” and offering a meticulous analysis of the text.¹⁹ In 1985, another article appeared examining the exchange between Bohusz and Mably.²⁰ Most significantly, in 1995, an extensive monograph was published, analyzing Mably’s “Observations,” his preparatory “Conferences,” Wielhorski’s “Tableau,” and Mably’s subsequent second, third, and fourth “Observations.”²¹ This 324-page study contains detailed findings on the authorship and chronology of the various documents – more precise than those presented in the edition under review – as well as a thorough account of the circumstances of their creation. Most importantly, it offers a chapter-by-chapter analysis, richly supported by quotations, which reconstructs the entire intellectual exchange between Mably and Wielhorski. The editors’ failure to engage with these works is,

¹⁷ AGAD, Mss. 1/338/0/2/8 and 1/338/0/2/9, accessible at <https://www.szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl/en/jednostka/-jednostka/17851136> and <https://www.szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl/en/jednostka/-jednostka/17851137> (accessed 30.11.2025).

¹⁸ Michalski, *Rousseau i sarmacki republikanizm*.

¹⁹ Michalski, “Gdyby nami rządziły kobiety,” 141–53.

²⁰ Michalski, “Idee reformatorskie,” 199–214.

²¹ Michalski, *Sarmacki republikanizm w oczach Francuza*.

my view, entirely inexplicable. I refuse to believe that the reason might simply have been that these studies were published in Polish – such an explanation would call the scholarly competence of the editors into question. To summarize: the sources housed in Anna Branicka’s archive and published in this volume have long been well known, thoroughly studied, and critically interpreted; they are an established part of the academic literature, and gaining access to them is by no means a groundbreaking discovery.

This does not change the fact that bringing all of these materials together in a single printed volume was, in itself, an important scholarly undertaking – one that nonetheless demanded a high degree of editorial rigor. That expectation, of course, applies to the volume as a whole. Rousseau’s treatise, however, has already been published numerous times with extensive scholarly commentary, and Mercier de la Rivière’s treatise likewise exists in a prior edition.²² By contrast, the texts by Mably and his Polish correspondents are being made available in print for the first time, and as such required considerably greater editorial care. From this perspective, I would concede that a certain degree of inconsistency in the editorial treatment of the various texts may be justified. In the case of Mably’s “Observations” and the related discussion, the editors included a version discovered by Konopczyński in the “Bibliothèque patrimoniale Jacques Villon” in Rouen,²³ and usefully compared it with the Warsaw version in the footnotes. In contrast, they did not apply the same approach to Rousseau’s “Considérations,” which also exists in two versions, relying instead solely on the final text from the Czartoryski Library. I would argue, however, that this decision was entirely sensible, given that the former involves previously unpublished texts, whereas “Considérations” has already been the subject of several comparative editions.²⁴

As for the rules of transcription adopted in the volume under review, I am unable to evaluate them, as the editors offer only a terse statement that “the transcription of texts has been modernized” (p. 53), without specifying what this modernization entails or how far it extends.²⁵ This level of information is insufficient to allow others to assess the philological decisions that were made. It is also regrettable that the edition does not include the original page numbers of manuscripts in square brackets – a feature that would have been a valuable tool for researchers,

²² Lemercier de La Rivière, *Pour la Pologne, la Suède, l’Espagne*.

²³ Konopczyński, *Konfederacja barska*, vol. 2, 586–95.

²⁴ As, for example, in the above-cited editions edited by Fabre and by Grześkowiak-Krwawicz and Triaire.

²⁵ In addition to detailed annotations provided (for reasons that remain unclear) on the use of upper- and lowercase letters in Rousseau’s text as compared to Fabre’s edition (note 540, p. 386).

facilitating direct comparison with the source materials, especially since, as noted earlier, most of these texts are readily accessible online.

For complex historical source texts such as those presented in this volume, the quality of the accompanying scholarly apparatus is crucial – particularly substantive footnotes that identify the figures, places, events, institutions, and references mentioned or alluded to in the text, or clarify passages that are difficult to interpret for various reasons. Such commentary is essential for guiding readers through the author’s (or authors’) line of reasoning and for situating their proposals within a meaningful historical framework. Without this kind of explanatory support, the edition loses much of its scholarly value – especially given that many of the texts refer directly to obscure aspects of Polish-Lithuanian history, and all of them, in one way or another, engage with Polish-Lithuanian realities.

Unfortunately, the editors have not risen to this challenge. It is difficult to discern what approach, if any, they adopted in providing commentary, as they never articulate it, and the footnotes themselves are marked by striking inconsistency and disorder. On the one hand, the notes fail to clarify key concepts essential for understanding the political system and historical events of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. There is no explanation of what “constitution” meant in the context of early modern Polish law, who “les ministers” were, how local assemblies (*sejmiki*) and the parliament (*Sejm*) functioned, or what various institutional and legal-administrative references denote. One could compile a long list of such omissions, but the bigger point is that these types of explanations are almost entirely lacking in the volume – even where they are absolutely essential for making sense of the text. On the other hand, the editors provide extensive footnotes on matters that are largely peripheral to the main discussion. For instance, there are detailed annotations on the “woolsack” in England (note 548), the “decemvirs” and “lictors” of ancient Rome (notes 319, 549), a lengthy note on the Magna Carta (note 460), a substantial explanation of the election of Henry III (note 509), and a discussion of political factions in Sweden (note 527).

It would seem that the editors chose to comment on topics that were easier to explain rather than those that actually needed clarification. Here are some additional examples: they translated “pacta conventa” and “senatus consulta” into French (notes 142, 143) without explaining what these institutions were; the same applies to “ius communicativum” (note 186) and “condemnata” (note 477). Where an explanation of Magdeburg courts was needed, they instead provided a history of town charters based on Magdeburg Law (note 389). In the sentence

“les ordinats de Zamość, de Pińczów, de Ostrog” (p. 65), they explained where the town of Zamość is (note 112) but not what “ordynacje” were or who held these titles at the time, even though specific individuals were being referenced. Similarly, in the phrase “des académies... de Cracovie et de Zamość” (p. 116), they once again explained where Zamość is, instead of providing information about these academies. When mentioning the bishop of “Pereïaslav,” (Perejesław) they inform the reader about the modern country where the city is located (note 127) but do not identify the bishop in question.

Where an explanation of how the Sejm sessions were held should have been provided – clarifying that they met twice in Warsaw (in the Crown) and once in Grodno (in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) – the reader is instead told (for the second time) that Grodno is now Hrodna in Belarus (note 208). Similarly, listing the modern countries where Elbing, Memel, and Königsberg lie (notes 625–627) without mentioning the cities’ political status in 1770 makes this information entirely useless to the reader. The list of examples of this sort could go on.

Notes are given inconsistently – if not chaotically. In principle, footnotes are provided for personal and geographical names, yet in many places, they are missing. Sometimes, in the same sentence, only certain names are explained. For instance, on p. 307, there is a footnote for Upita but not for Lida, Wikomirz, Brasław, or Trock (Troki, Traïkau); on p. 284, Kyiv and Smolensk are explained, but Riga is not; on p. 288, Dubno is identified, but not Slucko (Słuck, Sluck) and Nieswicz (Nieśwież, Niaswiż), and so on. These are just a few examples. Some geographical and personal names are explained multiple times – Kamieniec Podolski (Kamianetz) (three times), Kyiv (three times), Stefan Batory (twice), Kazimierz, Prince of Saxe-Teschen (twice) – while others are not explained at all, such as the Czartoryski princes (p. 320) or figures like Węgliński and Sosnowski (p. 60). In some cases, explanations only appear upon later mentions of a given person or concept.

Even when explanations are provided, they are of little value to the reader. In the case of historical figures, they are limited to birth and death dates – sometimes, ruling dates are included for monarchs, but only inconsistently. Such minimal information does not help the reader, who often has no context for who these figures were or why they appear in the text in the first place.

A further issue is the occurrence of outright factual errors, which appear across all categories of notes, including those related to individuals, geographical names, institutions,

legal terms, and dates. So that this should not come across as a baseless accusation, here are a few examples from different areas:

Dates:

- (1) p. 533: The ratification of the partitions by the Sejm is given as 1772, but it should be 1773.

Individuals:

- (1) page 81: François Xavier Branicki is mentioned, whereas the text actually refers to Grand Hetman Jan Klemens Branicki; p. 113 (n. 65): Wacław Rzewuski is listed, whereas the text speaks of the “général de Grande Pologne” – a reference (which remains unexplained) to the “starosta generalny wielkopolski,” a position held at the time by Jerzy August Mniszech.
- (2) note 403: The text mentions Michał Hieronim Radziwiłł, but it should be Michał Kazimierz Radziwiłł.
- (3) note 531: The editors identify Andrzej Poniatowski – the king’s brother – as the representative of the Confederates in Vienna, which is unimaginable, as he was among the least likely people to be involved with the Confederation. The actual envoy was Michał Zboiński.
- (4) note 481: “Pour le trône de Pologne, c’est Stanislas Poniatowski (1676-1762) qui est élu le 7 septembre 1764 (sic!) avec le soutien de Russie.” No comment is necessary here, but for the sake of accuracy – the given dates pertain to the father of Stanisław August.

Locations:

- (1) note 159: “Petrykaw, ville de l’actuelle Biélorussie” – this actually refers to Piotrków Trybunalski in central Poland, as is clear from the text. Strangely, the very same name, “Petrikau,” is correctly identified in note 101.
- (2) note 182: “Sandecz” (in the text “Sandeck”) – this actually refers to Nowy Sącz.
- (3) note 614: “Nowe Miasto” – translated as “Nouvelle ville, quartier de Varsovie,” when it actually refers to Nowe Miasto Korczyn, the seat of the Lesser Poland regional assembly (*sejmik*), as indicated in the text.

Institutions:

- (1) note 390: “Advocaties” – explained as “des fiefs dépendants de la couronne polonaise que les rois cédaient à des membres de la noblesse pour les aider à payer les frais des armées.” In reality, these were a type of municipal courts handling criminal cases, which is made clear in the text.
- (2) note 482: “Petita” – explained as “pétition,” whereas they were actually draft legal norms.
- (3) note 556: “Laudum” – defined as “attestation écrite de la régularité de l’élection d’un député,” when in fact it refers to any resolution passed by a *sejmik*.

Once again, it must be stressed that this rather extensive list offers only a selection – albeit a revealing one – of the many errors, omissions, and inaccuracies found in the footnotes. In short, the commentary that accompanies this edition is riddled with scholarly and factual missteps of every kind and ultimately fails to serve the reader in any meaningful way.

Conclusion

To summarize this review: the texts presented in this volume are undoubtedly of significant value for research on Enlightenment political thought, and their publication in a single edition was, in principle, a commendable scholarly undertaking. Unfortunately, this important and timely project suffers from such substantial editorial shortcomings that they seriously undermine – and ultimately disqualify – the volume’s academic reliability.

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