The Political Economy of Virtue

Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution

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Introduction: Political Economy and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century France

I have studied many works which are comparatively unknown, and deservedly so, but which, as their composition betrays but little art, afford perhaps a still truer index to the instincts of the age.

—Tocqueville, L’ancien régime

The image reproduced on the frontispiece, painted in 1766 by Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, is titled, simply, Portrait of a Gentleman. An anonymous subject gazes from the canvas with an expression of startling forcefulness. The sitter’s dress is rich but sober; he wears a velvet frock coat; his wig is fastened at the nape of the neck with a black silk ribbon. He is unadorned, except for some indications of wealth and ease: the gold buttons of a waist coat, an elaborate cravat, and a pair of prominent lace cuffs. Clasped in his right hand is a memorandum, handwritten in French, its title clearly legible: “agriculture, arts, et commerce.” The subject of the painting looks outward, as if he is thinking intently on something he has just read; the expression is proud, inflexible, and shrewd. He is a man of substance, possibly a landowner, but whether noble or just notable is uncertain. He may be a member of one of the agricultural societies established by the royal administration in the 1760s, or simply part of that general educated reading public that engaged with public affairs in the eighteenth century through the medium of their own writings, or those of their peers. His anonymity mirrors that of the public itself, and his engagement with agriculture, the arts, and commerce emblemizes the broad public interest those subjects aroused in the decades between 1750 and the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Between the 1750s and the 1780s the propertied elite of the old regime turned its attention to economic matters as never before. French authors produced an enormous volume of books, treatises, pamphlets, and brochures dealing with the organization of agriculture, trade, finance, and manufacturing and the impact of these activities on the public welfare. By the 1760s, the term “po-
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litical economy" was coming into fashion to describe such works. According to Jean-Claude Perrot, French publishers issued a total of 2869 new titles in this vein between the middle of the seventeenth century and the Revolution, with about 80 percent of them appearing between 1750 and 1789. Christine Thérèse enumerates even larger totals, counting 391 new titles in the 1750s, 613 in the 1760s, 668 in the 1770s, 756 between 1780 and 1788, and a colossal 804 in 1789 alone. By the 1760s, authors writing in French were producing new works of political economy at a faster pace than new novels. Some of these works, moreover, sold remarkably well. The Affiches de province, a provincial advertising sheet, remarked in 1754 that the abbé Le Blanc's translation of Hume's political economic essays was being "snapped up as fast as the most agreeably frivolous book." The marquis de Mirabeau's L'ami des hommes may have gone through as many as forty editions between its initial publication in 1756 and the end of the century. The book appeared in nearly a quarter of the eighteenth-century private libraries inventoried by Daniel Mornet. In the 1780s, Jacques Necker's massive De l'administration des finances de la France (1784) broke all previous records for such a work, selling tens of thousands of copies.

In addition to books and brochures, a specialized press published hundreds of articles on agriculture, commerce, and manufactures. Between 1750 and 1815, publishers founded two dozen new periodicals dealing wholly or substantially with economic affairs, and mainstream journals also devoted in-

creasing attention to economic issues. Gentlemanly amateurs of rural economy gathered in agricultural societies to read the Journal œconomique, to discuss new crops and farming techniques, or to debate the unpublished memoranda of their peers. The essay competitions run by provincial academies reflected a new interest in practical economic improvement. Artificial meadows, interest rates, woodland management, silk manufacture, internal navigation, the history of trade—these were all topics of academic essay competitions. The enormous growth in the prominence of economic affairs in the intellectual life of the kingdom can be gauged by the dramatic change in the status accorded to economic matters between the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d'Alembert in the 1750s and Panckoucke's Encyclopédie méthodique of the 1780s. While the earlier work included only a few dozen entries on economic subjects, the sections of the Encyclopédie méthodique devoted to finance, commerce, and économie politique ran to several stout volumes.

The breadth, vigor, and sheer scale of economic debate in the old regime has attracted surprisingly little notice. Most historians, when they attend to political economy in eighteenth-century France, think only of the Physiocrats, a small coterie of writers notorious for claiming that commerce and manufactures produce no real wealth. As Catherine Larrère observes, Physiocracy is often conflated with eighteenth-century French political economy tout court. This school of political economy was the focal point of most research on eighteenth-century French economic thought until recent decades, and it still attracts a great deal of scholarly attention. Physiocracy enjoys a privileged status in modern scholarship because, in their own day, the self-styled économistes were such indefatigable self-promoters (no eighteenth-century doctrine enjoyed such single-minded advocacy) and also because, in the teleological history-of-economic-theory approach, influential in much twentieth-century scholarship, Physiocracy figured as the most advanced eighteenth-century French political economy and therefore as the one deserving of most consideration. But the Physiocrats were only one voice in the din of public debate on economic questions in eighteenth-century France.

1 On the emergence of the term économie politique, see Jean-Claude Perrot, Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1992).

2 Perrot, Histoire intellectuelle, 75.

3 Christine Thérèse, "Economic Publishing and Authors, 1566–1789," in Studies in the History of French Political Economy: From Bodin to Walras, ed. Gilbert Fasciarello (London, 1998). Thérèse's inventory is based on different criteria than Perrot's. Perrot counts all texts that include in their titles terms such as richesses, commerce, finances, impôts, crédit, and population—the standard vocabulary of early modern French economic thought. Thérèse models her concept of political economy on the classification elaborated by the abbé André Morellet in his Prospèctus d'un nouveau dictionnaire de commerce (Paris, 1769), and bases her enumeration on a bibliography compiled by Jacqueline Hecht and Claude Lévy at the Institut National d'Études Démographiques: Économie et population: Les doctrines françaises avant 1800, ed. Alfred Sauvy (Paris, 1956). This bibliography is based on a reading of content rather than titles, and Thérèse supplements its findings with reference to major British and American catalogues of economic literature.


5 Claude Labrosse, "Récupération et communication dans les périodiques littéraires (1750–1760)," in La diffusion et la lecture des journaux de la langue française sous l'ancien régime: Actes du colloque international, Ninègue, 3–5 juin 1987 (Amsterdam, 1988). All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.


7 Carpenter, Economic Bestsellers.
Since the 1980s, important contributions to our understanding of political economy have been made by researchers investigating the economic thought of the circle around J.-C.-M. Vincent de Gournay, a senior royal official in the 1750s, and by others exploring the work of Pierre de Boisguilbert, Richard Cantillon, Jacques Turgron, the marquis de Condorcet, and Jean-Baptiste Say.13 Invaluable as such work is, most of it remains within a tradition of intellectual history that focuses on a small number of writers distinguished by their virtuosity. The argument in favor of concentrating on such thinkers is that their more sophisticated works offer insight into categories and logics that lesser authors do not, or perhaps cannot, make explicit, but which they nevertheless use. This assumption is true in part. However, it does not follow that less self-conscious writers are doing no more than deploying a version of an intellectual paradigm expressed more artificiately by others. In fact, they often fuse this framework with much else besides, and their cultural and political significance may lie precisely in that syncrasy. To put the same point a different way, we tend to contrast popular political economic ideas—sometimes designated as a “moral economy”—with an elite political economy which tends to be identified with the productions of Enlightenment intellectuals or administrative experts. Such an assumption can be misleading. Just as there is an attenuated relationship today between academic economics and the economic assumptions of middle-class people, so there was often a disjunction between the political economy of “ordinary” elites and that of the most sophisticated economic writers in eighteenth-century France. If the original minds of eighteenth-century French political economy are now better known than they were formerly, the many unremarkable members of the propertyed elite who wrote commonplace works remain obscure.

This book will suggest that the center of gravity of French political economy lay in a public composed of middling elites anxious about the effects of economic transformation on their own social position and on the nation’s capacity to compete in the international system. The explosion of political economic literature in the latter half of the eighteenth century was one phase in the rise of an educated reading public claiming for itself the right to pass judgment on public affairs. Writers offered critiques of the monarchy’s economic policies, and appeals for new economic initiatives, governed by a rudimentary set of assumptions about how economic activity affects the public welfare. My principal objective has been to explore those assumptions that were most prevalent, to analyze the most pervasive critiques, and to understand the significance of this wide public engagement with political economic issues in the eighteenth century. One of the primary conclusions of my analysis is that much of the political economy elaborated and embraced by ordinary elites was animated and shaped by a patriotic impulse. Patriotism has emerged in recent years as a crucial category in the study of the eighteenth century. Patriots sought to create a political community in which citizens subordinated their private interests to the welfare of the public, a polity stirred by the same spirit of civic virtue that had characterized the republics of the ancient world. Patriots expected the renewal of such virtue to solve a range of problems. Most believed it would restore French greatness in the international sphere—a pressing concern after the humiliating reverses France suffered in the Seven Years’ War (1756–63). Others believed patriotism would counter what they perceived as the increasing despotism of the monarchy. Monarchists, meanwhile, hoped to harness patriotism to increase the popularity of the Crown. Many commentators believed that society had been corrupted by an excessive interest in wealth and that patriotism would reverse this troubling development. With such stakes attached to it, by the 1760s patriotism had become a powerful legitimating category of French politics.14

The shadow that patriot preoccupations cast on political economy in this period can be seen in the way many writers combined calls for an expansion of national wealth with attacks on the deleterious effects of money on social, political, and cultural life. The development of economic resources would permit France to regain the position of European supremacy lost to Britain in the Seven Years’ War. But most patriots also believed that moral qualities were crucial to the regeneration of France, and that wealth, in the hands of the wrong people, produced in the wrong way, or used perversely, might destroy those qualities. The kind of venal or mercantile ethos that could come with expanding wealth was the very reverse of the disinterested spirit patriots idealized.

At the heart of the broad public engagement with political economy in France lay a modernized and economized version of the ancient problem of luxury. Luxury evoked the venality and corruption that were supposed to have destroyed the Roman Republic after the Romans conquered the East and were seduced by its riches and refinement. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment moralists attempted to redefine luxury, to represent it as a harmless byproduct of commercial prosperity and a stimulus to economic develop-

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ment. While they succeeded in destabilizing the meaning of the word itself, many of the anxieties traditionally reflected by references to luxury were actually strengthening in the decades after 1750, and were expressed in the burgeoning literature of political economy. Recalling the classical concern with the way luxury hastened the decay of virtue, many eighteenth-century French political economists worried that the material conditions of French life had sapped the French capacity for patriotism. Some held that the pursuit of what they construed as ungrounded, or “unreal” wealth, be it in international commerce, in the luxury trades, or in finance and speculation, had undermined the production of “true” wealth in agriculture or domestic commerce. Though they conceded that such unreal wealth could render a state powerful in the short run, in time it would undermine the foundations of a polity’s prosperity and power and render it vulnerable to decline. The shadow of the old luxury critique was manifest also in the concern shown by many political economic writers that economic changes were disturbing the proper distribution of honor and status in society. Discussions of how the distribution of honor could best serve the public welfare were ubiquitous in French political economy.

For many French elites who engaged with political economy in this period, the central problem was one of balancing wealth and virtue. France had to create the wealth necessary to meet the British challenge, but she had to do so without jeopardizing the moral qualities crucial to patriotic regeneration. Historians of Anglo-American political thought have long regarded the problem of maintaining an equilibrium between wealth and virtue as central to debates on political economy in the Atlantic World.15 According to J. G. A. Pocock, Whig defenders of the Hanoverian regime sought to reconcile commerce with virtue by arguing that commercial modernity fostered moral dispositions—manners and civility—that could function as surrogates for an irrecoverable civic virtue. Many French authors, notably Montesquieu, deployed similar arguments, as Albert Hirschman’s celebrated discussion of le doux commerce suggests.16 But in the long run this mode of argument proved less persuasive in France than in Britain. It was not principally to trade, but to agriculture that French writers looked for the foundations of a society that would foster both wealth and virtue (one sees a similar impulse in the Jeffersonian political economy of early national America).17 Most French political economists believed that a reinvigorated agriculture would constitute a stable foundation for the prosperity of the state while fortifying the moral fiber of the nation.

But it was not enough to revive agriculture; luxury-producing forms of economic activity also had to be curtailed. Principal among such sources of corruption was the system of public finance, and its beneficiaries, known generically as financiers. Financiers were contractors who ran a system of what has been called “private enterprise in public finance.”18 They collected taxes, lent money to the state, made most payments on behalf of the treasury, and advanced money to supply the army, the navy, and other public services. Public finance was big business, and the most successful financiers were among the richest individuals in the country. The growing concern about luxury in the middle of the eighteenth century reflected, in part, the conviction that financiers had risen to a position of new authority and status. By mid century a dense network of marriage alliances linked the highest tiers of finance with the court aristocracy, as did investments in tax farms, government loans, and privileged “court capitalist” ventures in international trade, mining, and manufacturing.

There was vigorous debate in the 1750s and 1760s about whether commerce and manufactures also produced luxury. Unsophisticated writers often viewed trade with a mistrustful eye, seeing the wealth it generated, and the new consumption patterns it made possible, as sources of corruption. Such attitudes changed over time, at least in the mainstream of French political economy. Even among the devotees of agriculture, most came to see that commerce was vital to agricultural prosperity. Defenders of commerce, many associated with the world of trade, elaborated representations validating trade and reconstituting entrepreneurship as a patriotic endeavor. Although some partisans of commerce sought to represent the profit motive itself in positive terms, more commonly champions of trade elided the egotistic dimension of economic behavior and represented merchants, farmers, and entrepreneurs as driven by the desire for honor. No longer actuated exclusively by interest, these might now be seen as potential patriots.

Along with such shifts in the representation of trade, critical changes occurred in the late 1760s and 1770s with respect to thinking about sources of luxury. Critics of luxury argued that the causes of luxury lay in political institutions, not in wealth per se. They elaborated distinctions between a healthy commerce that fostered agriculture, distributed prosperity widely, and supported national power, and harmful speculation, tax farming, and privileged companies that fostered corruption and sapped patriotism. In the 1770s and

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16 Albert O. Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph (Princeton, 1977). The term “doux” can be translated as “gentle,” “sweet,” or “soft,” and is used in this context to denote the refining and civilizing effects that some eighteenth-century writers attributed to trade.

17 McCoy, Elusive Republic, passim.

1780s, the attack on luxury took on an increasingly anti-aristocratic edge. Aristocratic engagement with court capitalism, and connections with financiers, both personal and pecuniary, made the court nobility vulnerable to the charge that it too had become part of a corrupt plutocracy. A political economy preoccupied by problems of luxury and plutocracy articulated the resentments and the ambitions of middling elites: provincial nobles of modest means, many with a tradition of military service, along with that part of the non-noble elite drawing its income mainly from land, the professions, and office holding. Substantial segments of the propertied class felt threatened in the eighteenth century by the increasing influence money seemed to enjoy as a basis for social status. Many resented the social ascension of families who profited from expanding trade, and especially finance, to achieve ennoblement and the rewards of office and honor. They criticized the protection the state gave to manufactures and commerce and its relative neglect of agriculture. They deplored a tax system that systematically favored financiers, grandees, and “capitalists” at their expense. Patriot political economy expressed these prosaic concerns in an idealized fashion, identifying the interests of middling elites with the interests of the nation. This is not to imply that political economy simply reflected the experiences and interests of such groups. The language they used shaped their perceptions and helped to create common interests by simplifying a complex reality and offering a framework to make sense of it.

The discontent of broad, middling sections of the elite with the existing political economic order had profound political implications: it allowed privileged groups, paradoxically, to feel like victims of a social order from which they richly benefited, and it strained the implicit contract that tied them to the monarchy. Since the seventeenth century, as historians of absolutism have shown, the relationship of elites to the Crown was predicated on an exchange of loyalty for benefits. The elite abstained from rebellion against the authority of the monarchy, while the king guaranteed the integrity of an hierarchical social order in which elites enjoyed a privileged status. The Crown also delivered a wide array of material benefits to the elite in the form of exemptions from taxation, salaries paid to venal office holders, careers in the military and the administration, interest payments on rentes (annuities), pensions, and gifts. As Michael Kwass has recently pointed out, this bargain showed signs of breaking down in the eighteenth century as the monarchy introduced universal taxation and pressed elites to pay their share. Of equal importance, I suggest, was the widespread feeling that the monarchy bilked middling sections of the elite to benefit an aristocratic and plutocratic few. The political economic policies sponsored by the monarchy, including universal taxation, the Colbertist encouragement of manufactures and commerce, and the regulation of the grain trade, seemed to benefit one section of the elite at the expense of another. In the perception of many middling nobles, and notables, the political economic order sponsored by the monarchy delivered disproportionate advantages, at their expense, to a small super-elite defined by its wealth: the court nobility, great merchants and manufacturers, and financiers. Viewed through the prism of a political economy oriented to problems of luxury, such injustices could also be perceived as the root cause of the nation’s degeneration.

Recognizing that political economic problems were a central feature of what many elites thought was wrong with the old regime enriches our understanding of the origins of the French Revolution in several important respects. First, as I have already pointed out, it tells us much about why sections of the French elite—ostensibly the beneficiaries of absolutism—were alienated from the absolute monarchy, and why demands for change took the form of a patriot discourse calling for the regeneration of the nation. Second, an attention to political economy sheds light on why the financial crisis of the 1780s was so symbolically important. It is a truism that the French Revolution was touched off by the near bankruptcy of the state, a predicament exacerbated by a sharp economic slump. This crisis is often viewed instrumentally, as a trigger, or opening, to be exploited by the monarchy’s critics, rather than as a powerful impetus to revolutionary transformation in its own right. What is not appreciated is the heavy symbolic charge the financial and economic crises carried, the powerful way such breakdowns bore out claims critics had been making for decades: that the monarchy was sponsoring a political economic order that was ungrounded, destructive of the “real” economy, vulnerable to collapse, and inimical to the regeneration of national power. The administration sought to regain credibility in the only way it could, by sponsoring a program of deep political economic reform to regenerate the nation. This move lent further authority to the critics without restoring confidence in the Crown.

To understand the negative public response, one must see the royal reform project in the context of earlier failed initiatives. In the 1760s the monarchy made a concerted effort to identify itself with the forces of political economic revitalization, sponsoring agricultural improvement, deregulating the grain trade, and revoking the privilege of the Indies Company. The abandonment of most of these efforts in the early 1770s by a deeply unpopular ministry shook the faith that the monarchy would transform the political economic order. A second round of reform and retreat followed under Turgot, controller general from 1774 to 1776. When the monarchy once again proclaimed its commitment to regeneration in 1787, the public was rightly skeptical.

Mistrust was heightened by the fact that the royal administration in the 1780s appeared to be presiding over an extraordinary expansion of unreal and corrupting wealth. Fueled by royal borrowing, and the establishment of new
joint-stock companies, the Paris stock exchange of the 1780s played host to wild speculation. Speculation became the fixation of many political economy writers, the most recent and disturbing avatar of the luxury they had railed against since the 1750s. Through its reform plan, the monarchy placed sweeping transformation on the political agenda but it failed to persuade elites that it should be the agency of that transformation.

Attention to political economic debates also helps explain why hostility to absolutism morphed so readily into antagonism to aristocracy in 1789. In their attack on aristocracy, critics borrowed heavily from old regime critics of luxury, who had long castigated the monarchy for patronizing a plutocratic order that benefited only financiers and court nobles. Critics charged that the nobility was a corrupt plutocracy wallowing in luxury, whose existence was imetical to agriculture and commerce, a group that pursued its own pecuniary interests at the expense of the public. There is certainly an irony here, if not a paradox, because the provincial nobility had pioneered this language to criticize financiers and the court, and now it was turned against them by their erstwhile allies, nonmone provincial elites. In fact, I will suggest, this critique of plutocracy was modular—it could readily be invoked by any group to challenge a rival distinguished from it by relative wealth.

To view the Revolution from the standpoint of the patriot political economy that had flourished in the old regime is also to see the economic transformations it wrought in a clearer light. Scholars have tended to measure the economic significance of the Revolution in terms of its contribution to the development of capitalism, or economic growth, and many have judged it a failure on both counts. But these are not the only metrics of structural change. A large literature on the French economy in the old regime has shown us what was self-evident to most eighteenth-century political economists: that the economy was structured, through and through, by the exercise of political authority. Fundamental transformations of the locus and character of political authority necessarily had structural implications for the formatting of the economy by the state. Once the power of the aristocracy had been broken and absolutism replaced with new constitutional arrangements, patriots dismantled the institutional order they regarded as a source of luxury and took steps to regenerate France economically. They lifted regulations on the grain trade, abrogated the exclusive privileges and monopolies enjoyed by court capitalist enterprises, dismantled the system of private enterprise in public finance, and created a new paper currency, nominally based on the value of land, to bring order to the public finances. These reforms were intended to remove the political economic obstacles to the emergence of a polity combining prosperity with patriotism. In the short term, they mostly failed. In aggregate, and in the longer run, however, the Revolution altered basic political economic structures in ways commensurate with the critiques elaborated before 1789, creating a France more attuned than the old regime to the interests and values of the former middling elites.

Behind the palpable and dramatic transformations of the revolutionary decade and the tempests of eighteenth-century French politics another quieter revolution was taking place: a shift in the relationship of elite culture as a whole to the economic, mediated by political economic debate. It has long been recognized that the late eighteenth century was a significant moment in the reorientation of elite attitudes toward the economy, but the precise character of that adaptation is disputed. Some scholars have traced in the final decades of the eighteenth century the rise of “market culture,” a set of cultural schemas and categories that classified and ordered aspects of social reality according to how they fit into the logic and modalities of a market system. Others have argued that it is to the course of the eighteenth century representations of pecuniary interest were transformed, and profit-directed activities came to be validated as innocuous, if not socially beneficial. Historians who explore nineteenth-century attitudes, by contrast, argue that suspicion of interest, economic individualism, and the market remained central features of French culture long after the French Revolution. An attention to the massive literature of political economy produced in the eighteenth century, much of it authored by ordinary French elites, allows us to clarify the exact nature of the cultural transformation underway in this period.

Through the political economic debates that played out in the public sphere, economic activity was remade as a quasi-patriotic pursuit, and economic agents—farmers, merchants, and manufacturers—came to be seen as potentially capable of civic engagement in a way they had not been before. The primary impetus behind this change was the need to engage with the problem of national success in a competitive international order where wealth was a basic determinant of power. Ordinary elites were more willing to view the work of farmers, entrepreneurs, and merchants as patriotic when they came to see it as


23 Hirschman, Passions and the Interests.

vital to the national well-being. These changes were effected not through a successful repackaging of the profit motive as benign, or by embracing the idea that market exchange was a peculiarly beneficent mode of social intercourse. Instead, economic activity was recast as patriotic through the virtual elision of the profit motive. Economic agents were represented as acting out of a civic regard for their fellow citizens or, more often, out of a desire to win legitimate honor and esteem.

To be sure, there was an alternate tradition that rose to prominence at several critical moments during the eighteenth century. Writers in this tradition tended to represent the economy as an auto-regulatory mechanism governed by the laws of the market. They embraced interest and economic individualism as the basic and legitimate motors of all economic life. Such views enjoyed some traction in the old regime where they could be used to solve particular political problems, such as defending the government’s liberalization of the grain trade in the 1760s. Ultimately, however, the economic imaginary that underpinned such approaches did not fit well with the way most French elites thought about the sources of order in material life. The state, or the political community, was always viewed as the ordering matrix of the economic world. The only moment at which this dominant imaginary was seriously challenged was during the 1790s. As the Revolution veered in more radical directions, and began to seem a threat to property, some elite revolutionaries claimed that further economic transformations might precipitate a collapse of national wealth. Their premise was that the economy is not infinitely malleable to exerions of sovereign will. They posited a natural economic order which was refractory to political tinkering, a mechanism that might break down completely in the face of a coup d’authorité, precipitating the nation into a new barbarism. This rhetorical move constituted a virtual “invention” of the economy for political purposes.

The debates of the revolutionary period gave an impetus to such recognizably “liberal” modes of representing the economy, and a liberal political economic tradition enjoyed a position of prestige in French higher education during the nineteenth century. Liberals also exerted some influence on public debate, but never in a way authoritative enough to decisively challenge the major tradition emerging from eighteenth-century political economy. The primary legacy of the long public engagement with economic matters in the old regime was a continuing suspicion of consumption, a preference for agriculture over industry, and a proclivity to validate economic activity not for its own sake but for its patriotic contribution to the nation. It would be easy to view this sensibility as a rejection of economic modernity and a hankering for an earlier simpler society. But this would be a mistake. From the provincial notables of the old regime to the economic planners of the twentieth century, such an orientation mediated a sometimes reluctant embrace, rather than a backward-looking rejection, of economic development.

CHAPTER 1

Commerce, Finance, and the Luxury Debate

I know that our philosophy always fertile in singular maxims, claims against the experience of all ages, that luxury is what underpins the splendor of a state; but will it deny that good manners are essential to the duration of empires, and that luxury is diametrically opposed to good manners? Let luxury be regarded as a sure sign of riches; let it serve, if you will, to multiply them: what is to be concluded from this paradox so worthy of having arisen in our time; and what will become of virtue if wealth must be acquired at any cost?

—J.-J. Rousseau, Discours sur les sciences et les arts (1750)

In a chapter of De l’esprit (1758) illustrating the kinds of fruitless debates that occur when disputants do not first agree upon the meaning of words, Claude-Adrien Helvétius contrasted two competing views of luxury. According to its defenders, he noted, luxury augments the power of states by putting financial resources at their disposal to buy stores, fill magazines, and subsidize foreign armies. In the domestic sphere, luxury improves moral habits, moderates brutal dispositions, and generates happiness by disseminating ease, comfort, and diversion. It provides employment for artisans, accelerates the circulation of goods and money, and stimulates industry. The critics of luxury took the opposite view. “The happiness and apparent power that luxury for a time imparts to nations,” they insisted, “may be compared to those violent fevers from which, during the paroxysms, the patient derives an astonishing strength, and which seem to augment his powers only to deprive him at once, when the fit is over, both of this strength and his life.” The true source of a nation’s might, they claimed, resided in the number and vigor of its inhabitants and their patriotism. Luxurious nations were sooner or later struck by despotism because neither the elite, mired in pleasure-seeking, nor the poor, in pinching want, would fight to preserve liberty. Wealth, moreover, produced happiness in a state only if it was evenly distributed, while luxury gave rise to grotesque inequalities that generated only misery.¹

momentum, moreover, it could function as a weapon in the factional struggles that were the stuff of French politics in the old regime. Thus, in the 1770s and 1780s, financiers and speculators deployed criticisms of luxury to focus public anger on competing cartels. Nor were middling elites the sole consumers of writings attacking luxury; these might appeal to members of any social group alarmed by the perception that France was weakening, or degenerating, vis-à-vis its European rivals—a view increasingly widespread in the 1750s. The same perception of decline, however, also gave rise to a quite different intellectual impulse in the 1750s. Those who believed that the chief means to enliven the kingdom lay in the animation of trade elaborated this view in a new literature of political economy during the 1750s. The resurgence of luxury as a central cultural problem created an ideological problem with which the new political economists would have to wrestle.

The Political Economy of the Gournay Circle

In the 1750s, a key figure in the royal administration of trade, J.-C.-M. Vincent de Gournay, patronized a circle of writers, encouraging them to translate works from English and to produce political economic writings of their own. Gournay and his acolytes saw commerce as the basis of power in the international system, and they generally endorsed the arguments of Enlightenment moralists that commerce improves manners and redistributes wealth. As the son of a Saint-Malo merchant, and the manager of his family's trading concerns in Cadiz, Gournay understood and valued the world of trade. He was well-versed in the works of English economic writers, and he had visited the ports of northern Europe on spying missions for the French government. Several of Gournay's associates were also close to the world of trade: François Véron de Forbonnais came from a family that made a fortune in manufacturing; Simon Clicquot de Bleranche was a substantial merchant in Reims; and Jean-Gabriel Montaudouin de la Touche was the scion of a Nantes slaving dynasty.

In encouraging such men to produce works of political economy, Gournay was motivated principally by a fear that France's position was slipping in relation to her competitors in the international order. France had emerged as the premier continental power by the middle of the seventeenth century. The French could, and did, continue to think of themselves as the dominant European state until the middle of the eighteenth. Though the disastrous wars of Louis XIV's final years shook that confidence, they nevertheless demonstrated that the concerted opposition of all Europe was necessary to check French power. Critical reflection was occasioned, however, by the War of Austrian Succession (1744–1748), the first conflict to engage all the great powers since 1713. The war had by no means proved disastrous for France, but the expenditure of much blood and treasure had not placed the nation on a better footing. The Parisian diarist, Edmond-Jean-François Barbier complained that “of all the belligerent powers we shall have gained least by this war which has cost us immense sums and the loss of three or four hundred thousand men.” Moreover, far from marking the dawn of a new era of harmony, the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) seemed merely the harbinger of future conflict. Indeed, a new age of international discord and uncertainty was opening and, by the early 1750s, war with a dynamic Britain again seemed imminent. Gournay believed that only a greater attention to developing her economic resources would serve to recover France's position, which is why he led a campaign to promote political economy as a key discourse of public affairs.

That campaign was a resounding success. Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul's Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne aroused extraordinary public interest in 1754. Assuming the identity of an English gentleman, Dangeul drew up a balance sheet of relative British and French strengths and weaknesses. The Remarques quickly became the talk of Paris, went into a second edition within a fortnight, and two more before the end of the year. Mainstream periodicals excerpted the book, and even the king claimed to be reading it. Forbonnais' Éléments du commerce, published in the same year, also captured the attention of readers and several editions appeared. J.-C. Herbert's Essai sur la police générale des grains (1755) ran to five editions and stimulated public discussion on the grain trade. In March 1755, the Correspondance littéraire remarked that “over the last eighteen months nothing has been more common that works on trade.” Among Gournay's other associates who would become celebrated in political economic debate were the abbé Coyer, the abbé André Morellier, later to distinguish himself in the fight over the grain trade and the East Indies Company, and Jacques Turgeon, who served as controller general in the 1770s. With the connivance of figures inside the royal administration, notably Daniel Trudaine, the head of the Bureau of Commerce, and Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoinqion de Malesherbes, the director of the Book Trade, there was an upsurge in the number of books published on economic subjects in the 1750s.

To make their case for economic development as the foundation of national greatness, Gournay and his acolytes had to grapple with the critique of luxury resurgent in the late 1740s and 1750s. Instead of rejecting outright the claims

134 Charles, "French Cultural Politics."
of those who saw in the rising power of money a threat to their own social position and a source of national degeneration, the writers around Gournay distinguished between two kinds of luxury, the one beneficent and the other malignant. Gournay and his acolytes enthusiastically embraced the popular consumer revolution, and other vivifying effects of trade, but condemned the parasitic self-enrichment of financiers and aristocrats. They argued that well-distributed, general prosperity and high consumption are the conditions of a flourishing economy and hence of a powerful state. Forbonnais observed that a state “is not rich through the great fortunes of a few subjects, but when everyone . . . is able to spend above real needs. It is in this sense that luxury is really useful in an Empire.” Such luxury, he suggested, generates a useful competition among men to be esteemed by others, a competition that drives them to work harder, making the state stronger and more prosperous. Forbonnais saw in Hume’s arguments a convenient corrective to the moralized vision of the opponents of luxury. Citing the Political Discourses for support, he claimed that luxury “humanizes mankind, polishes their manners, softens their humors, spurs their imagination, perfects their understandings.”

Unlike some of the earlier apologists for luxury, however, the men around Gournay did not dismiss criticism of luxury as over-rigorous moralism or mere prejudice. Alongside their celebration of the benefits of consumption, some of Gournay’s disciples acknowledged the existence of a pernicious luxury which they associated with aristocrats and financiers. According to Forbonnais, if the source of luxury was not commerce, if it was confined to a small number of cities, or to just one, if useless occupations multiplied while the most productive sectors of society languished, luxury had certainly become destructive. The defenders of luxury were defending a paradox, he argued, if they did not think such excesses were capable of undermining a polity. “If luxury is not general,” he insisted, “if it is not the fruit of national affluence, one will see disorders capable of destroying the political body arise along with it.” Dangeul equated destructive luxury with excessive inequality in the distribution of wealth, particularly when great fortunes were acquired by means other than commerce or agriculture. Twenty households with an income of 1000 livres stimulated production far more than one household disposing of 20,000, he argued. The benevolent effects of such luxury are exacerbated, he argued, if wealth is concentrated in one place—as it was in Versailles and Paris—and if labor is attracted out of essential sectors, particularly farming, into unproductive occupations such as domestic service. “Well ordered luxury consumes,” Dangeul concluded, while “excessive luxury abuses and destroys.”

This effort to define an unhealthy luxury and to link it with financiers fit into a larger critique of fiscalism. According to Gournay and his disciples, the system of public finance imposed a crushing burden on productive activity. Dangeul argued that farmers were impoverished and overburdened by taxes; land lay uncultivated but peasants hesitated to bring a new field under the plow for fear of increasing their tax burden. Fiscalism fettered manufacturing, he argued, because guild regulation had become almost purely a fiscal device. Another poisoned fruit of the French state’s fiscal operations, according to Dangeul, were high interest rates generated by excessive government borrowing. Funds that could be employed with such profit in “usury,” he argued, would not be used to improve land. The importance of low interest rates for national prosperity was also underlined by another member of Gournay’s circle, Simon Clicquot de Blervache, who attributed the superior commercial position of England to the lower rates of interest that prevailed there. High interest rates, he argued, constituted the single cause most likely to injure commerce and agriculture. Where the interest rate was too high, he observed, work was not honored because idleness paid greater dividends, and merchants were drawn out of trade because they could make more money as rentiers. Clicquot criticized those who lived off rentes as idlers who lived off the sweat of the cultivator and the merchant. Every interest payment, he claimed, was a tax levied by laziness on industry.

It is probable that Vincent de Gournay was part of the motley coalition of forces that opposed Pompadour and her financier allies. He was a protégé of the comte de Maurepas, the Minister of the Navy disgraced in 1749 after falling afoul of the marquis. Maurepas had been part of an anti-Pompadour faction at court, and he continued to direct efforts to discredit her from his provincial exile. Members of Gournay’s circle were involved in an effort to rein in the depredations of finance during the brief ministry of Étienne de Silhouette in 1759. Silhouette wanted to raise taxes and temper the policy of borrowing to meet expenses pursued by the three preceding controllers general. With Forbonnais as his advisor, Silhouette imposed what was in effect a 30 percent super-tax on the profits of the Farmers General. He also adopted a host of new duties to curb what he called the “prodigality and luxury” of the cities. The financiers forced his ouster after just a few months in office.

The Gournay circle placed political economy at the heart of public debate in
the 1750s. There, it shared center stage uneasily with the competing perspective that traced the polity’s woes to luxury rather than to an underdeveloped economy. The two frameworks were not antithetical—they could find common ground in a hostility to finance—but they were incongruous bedfellows. One might have expected a battle royal eventually to have been conducted between the proponents of the two approaches, and there was certainly some sniping. But as chapter 2 will show, in the late 1750s and 1760s a middle position emerged as the dominant attitude within public discourse.

Writers seized upon the viewpoint made fashionable by Vincent de Gournay and his associates to recast the problem of luxury in powerful new terms. In the 1750s and 1760s, they elaborated a political economy with an economized version of the problem of luxury at its core—a political economy of virtue. The writers who developed this viewpoint accepted the premise that wealth is the foundation of the power of states, but they were equally committed to the view that no state could long remain stable and powerful without civic commitment and the manners that sustained it. They argued that France had undermined both prosperity and patriotism by neglecting agriculture in favor of more brilliant but less grounded forms of wealth. They held that the containment of luxury combined with the regeneration of agriculture would revivify national wealth and also remove a central obstacle to the cultivation of patriotism. In so doing, they also produced a political ideology that identified the interests of provincial landholders with the well-being of the patrie and that offered them a new place in national life.

CHAPTER 2

Constructing a Patriot Political Economy

The best moving force of a government is love of country and this love is cultivated with the fields.

—Rousseau, *Constitution for Corsica* (c. 1765)

Perhaps too wide a commerce is as great an ill for a kingdom as a domination extended over provinces too vast.

—Mably, *Des principes des négociations* (1757)

On November 5, 1757, the forces of Frederick the Great inflicted a decisive defeat on the French army at Rosbach. As the Seven Years’ War unfolded, that early reverse proved an omen of future calamity. On land, French forces failed to achieve victory over Prussia, a state that France dwarfed in population and wealth. In the colonial sphere, Britain was triumphant everywhere, defeating the French in India, North America, and the Caribbean. As early as 1759, it was clear that only a humiliating peace would extricate France from the conflict. The war stirred the loyalties and national sentiments of French elites. Patriotic feeling, which had ebbed and flowed in cultural importance over the previous half century, flowered during the hostilities so that by the end of the war patriotism had become a leading feature of public life. The monarchy deliberately stimulated patriotism in an effort to mobilize the population behind the war effort, but the enthusiastic response it elicited suggests that official propaganda tapped an authentic ground swell of sentiment. Thus the failure of French arms left in its wake not just a chastened military, and a ballooning royal debt, but a public inspired by patriotic feeling, anxious to understand the sources of national debility and eager to regenerate the patrie.¹

It was easy to read the failure of French arms as a validation of the claim

that France was crippled by luxury. In fact, patriotism drew heavily on the Fénelonian politics of virtue, and antipathy to luxury was one of its central features. Patriots insisted that civic virtue was crucial to the fortunes of the state and that luxury was inimical to the preservation of such virtue. They imagined an economic order free of luxury as the basis for a regenerated polity. In his *Dissertation sur le vieux mot de patrie* (1755), the abbé Coyer argued that patriotism could not be expected to thrive in a social system characterized by great inequality and an excessive pursuit of private interest. In a description of ancient Rome that served as a metaphor for modern France, he asked why anyone should experience love of country when all wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, when excessive luxury haunted extreme poverty, and when citizens were forced to neglect the public welfare to attend to their own. Coyer’s vision of a true patrie was one marked by “wealth and mediocrity, but no paupers; men great and small, but nobody oppressed.” When the Roman emperor Trajan sought to reestablish patriotism after the reigns of the tyrants who preceded him, Coyer argued, he attacked luxury at its source by reducing taxes, selling palaces, succoring the poor, blocking excessive enrichment, restoring abundance, and returning authority to the Senate.3

But if the language of luxury offered an intuitively compelling account of French weakness, it did not blind patriots to the lessons of the political economy made fashionable by Gournay and his circle in the 1750s. Anyone committed to recovering French supremacy in the international order had to take seriously the call to increase national wealth. Patriotic feeling spurred a generation of French elites to engage with political economic ideas. A case in point is the young Pierre-Samuel Dupont who spent the war years in a patriotic fervor, dreaming up plans to storm the British fortress at Gibraltar, and who was soon to make his name as a political economist.4 However, the political economy of the Gournay circle was not well adapted to the celebration of virtue that was the stock in trade of patriotism. In embracing political economy, patriots remade it in their own image: not just wealth, but virtue, must be regenerated. The period from 1756 to 1763 saw the emergence of a new political economy in France, suffused with patriotic motifs, and deplored luxury as a source of national decline.

Though it was far from a unified and coherent discourse, some common themes can be discerned in the political economy elaborated in this period. Writers in the late 1750s and early 1760s repudiated major aspects of the existing political economic order as destructive of both virtue and national pros-


perity. Many complained that the fiscal system, regulation of the grain trade, and scorn for cultivators had destroyed the prosperity of French agriculture. Some held that the international commerce and luxury manufactures encouraged by Colbert and his administrative successors had fostered the growth of an ephemeral wealth while neglecting the genuine riches of the land. Power founded on mobile wealth was subject to “revolutions,” they held; it could strengthen a state in the short term, but such vigor was evanescent; an excessive dependence on commerce and manufactures could render a polity vulnerable to decline. The most significant unifying theme in this entire corpus of texts was the tendency to privilege agriculture as the principal source of national wealth. There was much attention to the supposedly thriving state of British farming, and the study of agronomy became something of a national fad in the late 1750s and early 1760s. Agriculture was the symbolic ground on which it proved possible to reconcile wealth and virtue. Increasingly, political economists represented agriculture as the most real source of wealth, as the true basis of national prosperity, and also as the font of the moral dispositions that would make it possible to sustain civic spirit. It was widely held that agriculture was in wretched straits and that the primary route to national regeneration lay through the creation of rural prosperity.

Aspects of the new political economy appealed strongly to the middling nobility, and they played a crucial role in elaborating it. The paradigmatic expression of this new perspective was the literary blockbuster of 1757, the marquis de Mirabeau’s *L’ami des hommes, ou Traité de la population*, a work motivated by a desire to renew the nobility, to create prosperity, and to regenerate patriotic virtue. The book represented a counter-offensive against some of the writers associated with Gournay, who claimed that nobles made little contribution to the prosperity and power of the state, and that noble honor, in particular, was an impediment to economic development. The abbé Coyer popularized a version of this argument in 1756 with the publication of his pamphlet, *La noblesse commercante*, which advocated that nobles abandon traditional pursuits and values and make themselves useful to the patrie by becoming traders. Mirabeau’s attack on luxury and his claim that agriculture was the foundation of long-term prosperity and power resonated with the values of the provincial nobility, and equated their economic interests as landowners with the national interest. But Mirabeau’s success must also be seen as part of a broader trend: a growing elite fascination with agriculture.

**The Agromania of the 1750s**

A craze for agricultural improvement swept France in the 1750s as interest in the new English agriculture of Jethro Tull, Thomas Hale, and Lord Townshend crossed the channel. The introduction of Tull’s ideas into France in the guise of Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau’s *Traité de la culture des terres*...
stead. “This occupation is more appropriate to their condition,” Quesnay argued, “than the station of retail trader in the towns.” 100 Rather than pushing them into trade, Ange Goudar recommended, the government should encourage nobles to “give themselves over to agriculture.” 101 Henri Goyon de la Plombanie, a provincial noble and military officer, also rejected Coyer’s proposal, fearing that if nobles entered commerce, the “spirit of interest” would “smother that of bravery,” ruining the “austere virtue of our ancient nobility.” Instead, Goyon argued, the nation must find a way to increase the value of noble estates, to use commerce to increase the landed revenues of the nobility. Like many of his contemporaries, Goyon believed that the problem lay with low prices for cereals and a shortage of specie which impeded economic activity. He proposed the establishment of a “Company of Agriculture” to regulate and coordinate the grain trade, and to stimulate agricultural investment by issuing a paper money backed by the value of land. 102 The potential of political economy as a program of renewal for the nobility was obvious by the early 1760s, and nobles gravitated in large numbers to the new literary mode. Of the identifiable authors of political economic tracts published between the 1750s and the 1780s, as many as 40 percent were noble; nobles, by contrast, made up only 15 percent of authors in belles lettres. 103 Nobles also distinguished themselves as authors of works on agricultural improvement, and from the late 1750s this literature increasingly took on the ethos, and echoed the perspectives, of the developing political economy of noble and national regeneration.

Patriotism, Luxury, and the Call for Agricultural Regeneration

In the wake of Mirabeau’s L’ami des hommes, the literature of agricultural improvement became increasingly imbued with a patriotic sensibility, by calls for the retrenchment of luxury, and by criticisms of the existing political economic order. The shift is perceptible between the editions of Duhamel du Monceau’s Traité de la culture des terres published in the early 1750s and works by the same author at the end of the decade. The early works contain no references to patriotism, while the later writings are replete with references to the patrie. Because of its largely technical character, the literature of rural economy, or agronomy, is not usually regarded as relevant to the study of political economy. However, most of these texts were framed by simple political economic assumptions, usually stated explicitly in the preface or introductory pages. A central assumption of most of the authors who wrote on agricultural improvement in the late 1750s and 1760s was that agriculture is the foundation of both prosperity and civic virtue and that luxury is agriculture’s anti-principle. Exemplary in this respect is Jean-Baptiste Dupuy Demportes, author of perhaps the most widely read work of the 1760s advocating agricultural improvement, Le gentilhomme cultivateur (1761–63).

In language charged with references to patriotism and citizenship, Dupuy Demportes calls for the regeneration of agriculture in order to bolster the power of the state and the virtue of its population. “How can it be,” he asks, “that the example of Rome has had so little ascendency over enlightened minds?” The military power of Rome was based on the land: “Nobody is unaware that in [the time of] its rustic but happy simplicity it owed the extent and the solidity of its power only to agriculture.” Roman soldiers were great because they were farmers. But Rome was corrupted and eventually brought low by luxury, which led in turn to the abandonment of agriculture. “Hardly had Rome gloried in its conquests but it was corrupted by the riches of Nations” he remarks. “Soon it moved away from its first principles, abandoned reality for appearance, was softened by luxury, and saw its original splendor insensibly eclipsed.” 104 In fact, Dupuy Demportes claimed, Rome had exchanged a form of wealth that was healthy and solid for a form that was corrupting and illusory. The richer Rome believed itself to be, the poorer it was in fact. The same misstep, he argued, would corrupt any polity. “Is it not,” he asked, “from this harmful error that dates the fall of all Monarchies and of all the empires that luxury...has overthrown?” Great military exploits could not be expected of a nation in which farming had been systematically neglected and disdained—a pointed comment in light of the military disasters of the ongoing war. One could not hope to produce another Fabricius, another Cato, another Cincinnatus, Dupuy Demportes argued, when husbandry was held in contempt. He placed the blame for this state of affairs on Colbert, complaining that Colbert gave too much attention to “luxury arts” at the expense of agriculture, while Sully encouraged cultivators. 105

Dupuy Demportes’s themes were central to the discourse on agriculture that proliferated in the late 1750s and 1760s. The founder of the agronomic movement, Duhamel du Monceau, asserted in his École d’agriculture (1759) that agriculture was the basis of the prosperity and strength of states, and he implied that in neglecting the land in favor of luxury manufactures France had jeopardized its international standing. France would become the most powerful and opulent monarchy in the world, he argued, if it fostered agriculture, but conversely, “to neglect [agriculture] is to allow a state to weaken.” 106 Like

100 Quesnay, “Grains,” 491.
101 Goudar, Intérêts de la France, 1:68.
102 Henri Goyon de la Plombanie, La France agricole et marchande (Avignon, 1762), 53–61. See also Simone Gout, Henri Goyon de la Plombanie, économiste périgourdin: Ses idées, sa place dans l’histoire des doctrines économiques (Poitiers, 1933), 23–26.
103 Perrot, Histoire intellectuelle, 78.
104 Jean-Baptiste Dupuy Demportes, Le gentilhomme cultivateur, ou Corps complet d’agriculture, traduit de l’anglais de M. Hale (Paris, 1761–64), 1:1–iv. Like Duhamel du Monceau’s Traité de la culture des terres, the Gentilhomme cultivateur was a loose adaptation of the works of an English agronomist, Thomas Hale. On its dissemination, see Bourde, Influence of England, 65–66.
105 Dupuy Demportes, Gentilhomme cultivateur, liv.-vii.
106 Duhamel du Monceau, École d’agriculture, 41.
Dupuy-Demorpes, Duhamel du Monceau blamed the neglect of agriculture on Colbertism, and many other authors followed suit. The editors of the *Journal oeconomic* remarked in 1765 that “M. Colbert, too taken with the brilliance of external commerce, sacrificed the solidity to the decoration of the edifice.”

In his *Le patriote artésien*, the agronomist and retired cavalry lieutenant, Louis-Joseph Bellepierre de Neuve Eglise, criticized Colbert for destroying the prosperity of the farmer by favoring manufactures and commerce excessively. Through the policies of Louis XIV’s minister, the nation had embraced a “fashionable commerce” that has depopulated the countryside, destroyed circulation, and “brought the Nation to the point of despising the most solid of its Arts.”

A leitmotif of the literature on agricultural improvement was that the neglect of cultivation rendered states vulnerable to “revolutions.” One of the sources of this idea was Cantillon’s crises of competitiveness, as we have seen in the case of Mirabeau. Agricultural improvers were also quick to point to the example of Spain which, they argued, abandoned farming to pursue gold and silver. Once the most powerful country in Europe, Spain had looted the Americas of their treasure but had failed to develop her own resources; the quest after an illusory wealth left the Spaniards bankrupt. This theme had been adumbrated by Mirabeau who claimed that “Gold will ruin us as it devastated Spain.” Cantillon traced the decline of Spain, but Mirabeau may also have been influenced by Forbonnais who observed in an article written for the *Encyclopédie* that Spain and Portugal had been convinced that as “the proprietors of the metals which are the measure of everything, they would be the mistresses of the world,” but “they have learned since that that is the measure of subsistence goods belongs necessarily to he who sells these goods.” While Forbonnais affirmed the value of commerce and manufacturing, many of the agronomists were more hesitant. Most claimed not that a nation could do without trade, but that agriculture needed to be sustained and developed as much or more than commerce and manufactures. According to J.-G. Hirzel, the author of *Le Socrate rustique* (1762), manufactures attracted into countries not only basic commodities but riches of every sort, causing the power of such lands to grow “in a prodigious degree.” “However,” he warned such power would “always be precarious and lacking in solidity so long as agriculture is neglected in a country.” Even the best “constitutions ... lose their force,” he insisted, and

cannot keep a state from ruin when agriculture is neglected. First published in Switzerland and translated from the original German by a lieutenant-colonel in the French army who dedicated the translation to the marquis de Mirabeau, *Le Socrate rustique* enjoyed at least four editions in French, and was still being excerpted in the press during the 1790s.

If the stakes of regenerating agriculture were to avoid the fate of Rome, for most agricultural writers this was a question not simply of creating wealth but of maintaining virtue. Fortunately, they held, both wealth and virtue could be acquired through the cultivation of the soil. Eighteenth-century *agronomes* were thoroughly convinced of the connection between farming and good *moeurs*. The anonymous author of an *Essai sur l'administration des terres* (1759) claimed that the Romans preserved their virtue so long as they remained an agricultural people. Duhamel du Monceau advised priests to try to inspire in their flocks a love of the farming life because “there is no surer means of keeping their parishioners on the path of virtue than to make them love an estate that keeps them quite naturally from vice.” In the first issue of the *Journal oeconomic*, the editor remarks that agriculture was dear to the Romans and Greeks while they still preserved their virtue. He observes that there is an air of “modesty,” “gentleness,” and “tranquility” attached to the cultivation of the soil that draws people away from vices.

Writers attributed to peasants the capacity for feeling associated with the virtues of humanity, benevolence, and sympathy. As the agricultural improver Sarcey de Sutères observed, “the man who makes agriculture his essential occupation is virtuous and beneficent.” Contrasting the country environment to the town, the marquis de Mesmon remarked that “in the countryside man left to himself is wholly natural . . . . Far from great interests, he is exempt from great passions; his tranquil heart is opened to natural sentiments.” Sentimental drama vulgarized and diffused such representations widely.

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107 *Journal oeconomic* (February 1765), 63.
111 Jean-Gaspard Hirzel, *Le Socrate rustique, ou Description de la conduite économique et morale d’un paysan philosophe* (Zurich, 1762), 24–25. See also *Journal oeconomic* (November 1769), 492.
113 *Essai sur l’administration des terres*, vii. Musset’s *Bibliographie agronomique* attributes this work to Quesnay’s son, Blaise-Guillaume, who was an enthusiastic and successful agronomic experimenter. The work has, on occasion, been wrongly attributed to François Quesnay himself. Hecht, “Vie de François Quesnay,” 1:245.
115 *Journal oeconomic* 1 (1751).
117 Auguste Onclein, ed., *Oeuvres économiques et philosophiques de F. Quesnay* (Frankfurt, 1888), 75.
118 See, for instance, Michel-Jean Sedaine, *Le roi et le fermier* (1762); Charles-Simon Favart, *Les moissonneurs* (1768).
such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze made careers for themselves depicting the simple virtues of country people in moving visual language, and reports in the press on events like the Rose Festival of Salency celebrated the simple virtues of country people.\textsuperscript{119}

Representations that cast agriculture as the foundation of patriotic virtue also drew heavily on the Georgic literary tradition, which underlined the contrast between a wholesome and virtuous life on the land and the corrupting artificiality of the city. The Georgic was a plastic idiom that had served in seventeenth-century England as a basis for radical claims for the redistribution of wealth, but became in the eighteenth century an ethos principally associated with the improving country gentleman.\textsuperscript{120} Enthusiasm for agricultural experimentation was often framed in terms of this paean to rural life. French agricultural improvers were fond of quoting passages from Cato, Cicero, Varro, Virgil, Columella, Palladius, Pliny, and Horace, which emphasized the simplicity and healthiness of life on the land.\textsuperscript{121} Translations and imitations of the Georgic form proliferated. In 1760, \textit{The Seasons}, by the English poet James Thompson, was translated with a foreword written by the marquis de Mirabeau.\textsuperscript{122} Saint-Lambert's \textit{Saisons} followed in 1768. Perhaps the most successful Georgic of the eighteenth century was the abbé Delille's new translation of Virgil's \textit{Georgics}, which was published in 1770 and won the abbé entry to the Académie française in 1774.\textsuperscript{123} Quotations from Delille's \textit{Georgics} were common in agronomic texts of the latter part of the century.

Landowners who lived on their estates also emerged as icons of virtue in patriotic discourse. That a single great landholder could make an enormous difference to the area in which he held his estates was a common assumption of writers on agriculture. In his \textit{Éloge de Sully} (1763), Antoine-Léonard Thomas praised Sully for encouraging proprietors to stay on their lands and damned Richelieu for attracting grandes to court. "A man who is often useless at Versailles, could, on his lands, be the benefactor of the Nation," Thomas argued.\textsuperscript{124} The gentleman who left his estates to serve his country on the battlefield, returning to a quiet rustic life at the conclusion of hostilities, was a particular favorite of agricultural improvers. The model for such a citizen was Cincinnatus, the Roman patrician who, as dictator, led Rome twice to military victory in the


\textsuperscript{121}Bourde, \textit{Agronomie et agronomes}, 447.

\textsuperscript{122}Loménie, \textit{Les Mirabeau}, 2:368.

\textsuperscript{123}Jacques Delille, \textit{Les Géographies de Virgile, traduction nouvelle en vers français avec des notes} (Paris, 1770).

\textsuperscript{124}Antoine-Léonard Thomas, \textit{Éloge de Maximilien de Béthune, duc de Sully, surtout des finances, &c. principal ministre sous Henri IV. Discours qui a remporté le prix de l'Académie française en 1763} (Paris, 1763), 79.
fifth century. In a story familiar to every eighteenth-century schoolboy, when his country called upon him to lead it, Cincinnatus was found, covered in grime and sweat, working his own small farm. Figuratively and literally, agriculture was the grounding of his civic virtue. The marquis de Turbilly, one of the most active promoters of agronomy in the 1760s, and a cavalry colonel who served in the War of Austrian Succession, represented himself in such a light. Later, representations of George Washington also owed much to this trope.

The association of virtue, good moeurs, and patriotism with agriculture allowed publicists to infer that a shift from the excessive focus on commerce and luxury manufactures back to the cultivation of the land would bring about a regeneration of manners and a renewal of public spirit. Perhaps the most striking example of this argument is the Réflexions sur les avantages inestimables de l'agriculture, probably written by Pierre-Philippe Roussel de la Tour, a robe noble with Jansenist leanings serving in the Parlement of Paris. The author advises his fellow citizens to leave their professions and give themselves over to work in the countryside, where they will find “repose of spirit,” “innocence of heart,” and “vigor of soul.” Roussel insists that God did not authorize us to “heap up money, or to shroud ourselves beneath the decorations of a revolting luxury.” He recommends that all classes of people corrupted by luxury be sent back to the land where they would “reestablish their degraded manners” and “no longer corrupt those of others.” For Roussel de la Tour, such personal moral regeneration would underpin a regeneration of the state.

It is unlikely that most of the partisans of agriculture thought in such literal terms. The point is that an agriculture-based strategy of economic development had emerged as a means to revivify the civic spirit of the nation. Agriculture was the ground on which wealth and virtue might be reconciled. The point was expressed, perhaps, most clearly by Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours in the cahiers of the Third Estate for Nemours which he drafted in 1789. Dupont said of landowners, especially landowners of the Third Estate, that “This class of citizens has not a single concern which opposes those of their fellow citizens. The better they pursue their own affairs, the more food is created, and raw materials, goods and riches for all men, prosperity for the country and power for the state.” Through agriculture, Dupont implied, the pursuit of self-interest was reconciled with the good of society and the needs of the public.

By the time Dupont deployed this idea for political purposes in the early stages of the French Revolution, it had acquired enormous authority in French political culture. The patriots, agricultural improvers, and political economists who advanced this view during the Seven Years’ War could hardly have achieved such a status for their perspective unaided. They benefited from the assistance of an unlikely set of allies. In the 1760s, powerful interests at court, including Pompadour and some of her circle, began to adopt some of the projects of the political economic and agronomic publicists as their own. The royal administration also saw in patriot political economy a body of ideas and enthusiasms from which elements useful to the state might be fashioned. Under these propitious circumstances, political economic schemes focused on the animation of agriculture flourished in the 1760s. As we shall see in the following chapter, though, the effects of official patronage were also to disaggregate the multiple strands of patriot political economy into a series of widely divergent, competing programs of reform.

125 Louis-François-Henri de Menon, marquis de Turbilly, Mémoire sur les défrichements (Paris, 1760), flyleaf.