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Commerce

Eighteenth-century France was a predominantly rural, agrarian nation whose intellectual and political classes were fascinated by the sometimes halting transformation to a modern economy taking place in their midst. As Guillaume Thomas Raynal wrote in the opening lines of his *Histoire philosophique … des deux Indes* (*A History of the Two Indies*), this process was upending the material, cultural, intellectual and political order of France, Europe and the wider world:

> there has never been an event so important for the human race in general, and for the people of Europe in particular, as the discovery of the new world and the passage to the Indies by the Cape of Good Hope. From that point forward there began a revolution in the commerce, the power of nations, the customs, the industry and the government of all peoples.[1]

For eighteenth-century observers, 'commerce' became an organizing concept of the French Enlightenment, even if the causal role of capitalism in shaping this movement has remained controversial among historians.

Since historical views of the French Enlightenment have been crucially shaped by the historiography of the French Revolution, it is little wonder that the decline of Marxist interpretations of the Revolution has made it more difficult to explain how commerce should fit into our understanding of the Enlightenment. The fate of one landmark text in the modern historiography of the Enlightenment, Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, is a case in point. Habermas himself attributed the birth of the public sphere very clearly to the growth in early modern Europe of 'early finance and trade capital'; here the symbiosis between a state hungry for tax receipts and regular loans from bourgeois merchants paved the way for a freer flow of mercantile information and, eventually, critical assessments by the public at large of the State's economic management. The dialogue between state and society so characteristic of Enlightenment social thought, in which the respective forces, influences and

https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139108959.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rights of each were carefully weighed against the other, was the result of the rise of the 'early capitalist system', which 'turned state administration into a public affair'.[2] But subsequent historians would view the causal role of capitalism somewhat differently. Keith Michael Baker and others relied upon key elements of Habermas's thesis – in particular the centrality of public reason in Enlightenment intellectual culture – but the overall thrust of the 'political culture' model developed by Baker was to reject the sociology, which pitted bourgeois against aristocrats, that went into many analyses of Ancien Régime intellectual conflicts. Adherents of the political-culture model went much further, however, denying that disagreements over authority and sovereignty were connected to the growing incompatibility between state and society caused by economic changes operating over the *longue durée* in France and in Europe as a whole.[3] Generational lassitude with social history and real weaknesses in the sociology that underpinned Marxian interpretations of the Enlightenment and Revolution encouraged historians to focus on ideas and representations; but recent attempts to account for developments in the history of Ancien Régime France raise the possibility that, for at least two reasons, cultural and intellectual historians of the 1980s and 1990s went too far in dismissing the broad material contexts for understanding the origins and development of the French Enlightenment.

First, as historians have exposed in great detail, political economy was central to many of the constitutional debates – the same debates that have fascinated intellectual historians working in the political-culture mould – that dominated intellectual life in Ancien Régime France. No assessment of the proper form that the French government should take – republic, constitutional monarchy or enlightened despotism – could be plausibly detached from European social evolution since the discovery of the Americas. Rousseau may have deplored the 'universal dependence' to which civilized men seeking tranquillity and the 'conveniences of life' submitted themselves, but, citing Montesquieu, he agreed that modern men who lived by and through commerce could not be expected to renounce their comfort and private liberty in exchange for the austere pleasures of direct, popular government.[4] The pattern of linking constitutional questions to economic forces was set quite early on in the French Enlightenment when critics such as Fénelon, Vauban and Boisguillbert urged agrarian reform as a means of achieving a wider moral regeneration of French state and society. Political economy was an essential, perhaps even dominant, element of the political culture of Enlightenment France.

Second, understanding the Enlightenment entails an appreciation of the material contexts that changed over the course of the long eighteenth century, a period notable for the expansion of domestic luxury industries, the

construction of an astonishingly profitable plantation complex in the Antilles and an expanding trade that linked metropolitan France to Europe and the wider world. The most reliable figures we now possess suggest that the French economy as a whole grew at an annualized rate of 1.2 per cent between 1701 and 1795; foreign trade grew at about twice the annual rate, 2.4 per cent, over roughly the same period, while specifically extra-European trade registered a 3.3 per cent increase. European nations bulked large in France's foreign-trade statistics, but the root of this growth lay in the French Antilles, the source of copious re-exports of sugar, coffee and cotton, and the outlet, in turn, for a host of French products, in particular high-value textiles. Put another way, between 1716–20 and 1787–9, the value of France's European commerce increased by 412 per cent, while its colonial commerce expanded by 1,310 per cent. Because of its role in linking diverse sectors of the economy and in attracting investment capital, foreign trade contributed to growth rates out of proportion to its actual weight in the economy. At between 5.5 and 8 per cent of the economy, foreign trade to all countries contributed between 8.5 and 13 per cent of growth; extra-European trade was even more dynamic, accounting for 4 and 4.74 per cent of GDP but between 6 and 7.5 per cent of overall growth, much of this concentrated in industrial sectors.[5]

Naturally, the tonic effects of foreign trade were most keenly felt in the largest of France's port cities. It is no coincidence that the more successful port cities – Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseille – served as principal ports for economically diverse hinterland areas (Normandy, Brittany, Languedoc and Aquitaine), stimulating manufacturing and agricultural output from these regions. Perche, a small town located in Basse-Normandie, furnishes one example of industrial growth stimulated deep in the hinterland by colonial trade: here, proto-industrial workers produced canvas destined for sailcloth and crude slaves' attire, as well as more elegant muslin fabrics worn by owners, as well as city-dwellers in the luxury-hungry provincial capitals of the French managers Antilles. Bordeaux and Aquitaine held a particularly privileged position in agricultural exports: wines and eaux de vie had ready markets all over Europe and in the French Antilles; as the eighteenth century wore on, moreover, Bordeaux became an important exporter of grains to hungry island colonies. Naval construction and sugar-refining sustained growth in industrial production, rounding out the regional economy and its Atlantic exchanges. While colonial re-exports supplied the most magnificent profits, cross-investments in agriculture and industry served the economic and social ends of a mercantile bourgeoisie that sought to mitigate risk in the fragile environment of colonial commerce while ensuring its social ascent.

The implications for France of this expanding world of commerce were widely discussed among *philosophes*, but no less central to the impact of

commerce on the French Enlightenment were the ways in which an increased circulation of goods and accumulation of wealth transformed the habitus of urbanized men and women in France. The French Enlightenment was not simply an intellectual movement but a cultural one whose material aspects influenced a wide range of attitudes and practices. In France, Paris was the centre of these transformations. During the regency of Philippe, the duke of Orléans (1715–23), the centre of court life moved to Paris, where aristocratic courtesans increasingly were constructing sumptuous townhouses (*hôtels particuliers*) from which to assert their wealth, power and cultural authority. Early in the century, much of the wealth that built up the chic *faubourgs* of western Paris came from traditional sources – land, *rentes* (bonds) and royal sinecures – but, particularly after the Seven Years' War, wealth from the West Indies contributed to the luxury construction boom in Paris.[6] The ruinously expensive war for prestige within the plutocratic kernel of the Parisian elites provoked a never-ending process of innovation and refinement that consistently set the French luxury trades ahead of their European competitors. Dressmakers, such as Rose Bertin, established a name for themselves by catering to spendthrift courtesans; on house calls or in their carefully appointed Parisian shops, ever-solicitous *marchands de mode* hunted smaller but more plentiful game, luring socially ambitious or merely bourgeois with the latest refinements. And this competition was not restricted to clothing: houses, interior decor, carriages, hunting paraphernalia, pleasure gardens, wines and gastronomic fantasy were all subject to cycles of refinement, diffusion and renewal.[7] Paris and its elites were at the summit of Europe's new consumer economy, and fashions were diffused socially downward and geographically outward from this privileged centre; the power and intellectual prestige of the French Enlightenment developed in tandem with other forms of Parisian taste-making.

In moving from Versailles to Paris, the court aristocracy carved out a space from which to assert its political and cultural autonomy; in so doing, it helped to create the public sphere, which, along with the market for all sorts of cultural goods, including paintings, grew in size and social inclusiveness. The retreat to Paris helped to fuel the rise of Rococo painting, which was based upon an explicit rejection of official standards of taste promulgated by the Royal Academy of Painting, which stressed the sort of history painting that drew upon edifying, regime-friendly classical subjects. Aristocrats newly arrived from Versailles adorned their townhouses and chateaux with works by Antoine Watteau, François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, whose canvases depicted a closed, often mysterious world of eroticism and leisure that reflected the *art de vivre* this class was refining through its private, conspicuous consumption. These works also reflected the values of

aspirants to this group, who purchased them in quantity. Although these paintings drew upon popular forms of theatre that were on the rise in Paris – Watteau's famous harlequin Pierrot provides one example – their significance for the development of a more broadly based, highly politicized public sphere lay elsewhere. The growth in the market for aristocratic confections was only part of a wider trend, in which the creative energies and commercial potential of genre painting – still life, portraiture, landscapes – were unleashed in the salons, shops and ateliers of Paris. For a number of reasons, these paintings and their public called forth a whole new apparatus of art expertise and criticism: genre paintings offended the official canons of taste established by the Royal Academy; they were purchased by a public unsure of its right to assert aesthetic judgements; and they were acquired through new, more explicitly commercial channels.[8] Works by painters such as Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin depicted socially modest individuals with sensitivity and grace, investing their faces, activities and the objects of their domestic surroundings with dignity and meaning. Material objects themselves, these paintings demonstrate the valorization of everyday life made possible by widely experienced improvements in material life.[9] Others, like Jean-Baptiste Greuze, one of Rousseau's favourite painters, took a more didactic route onto the psychological terrain of sensibility. *Philosophes*, seeking aesthetic alternatives to aristocratic decadence and the brittle grandeur of the absolutist state, advanced these burgeoning forms of artistic expression through their critical writings. Even if art critics such as Denis Diderot did not call upon an oppositional public opinion so much as they sought to create one through their writings, the existence of a well-developed critical apparatus by the 1780s demonstrates the manner in which the expansion of consumer markets, in this case for art, helped to produce publics and forms of criticism characteristic of the French Enlightenment.[10]

The rise of genre painting, and its thematic and commercial extension beyond the closed world of privilege, suggests that while the aristocracy may have provided a necessary cultural and economic stimulus, its values were not entirely dominant and only partly defined new patterns of consumption. Even the male wig – symbol if ever there were one of the dominance of courtly style in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France – was subject to modern notions of comfort and naturalness that contravened the constraint and formality of courtly fashion. The loss of popularity of the full-bottom wig worn by Louis XIV and the spread of the shorter, more comfortable and easily maintained bag wig symbolized a broader cultural reorientation in France after the Regency. Personalized experiences of pleasure, beauty and comfort (*commodité*) began to trump the overtly status-bound norms of consumption that characterized the high aristocracy. Tellingly, while the

huge full-bottom wig was baptized the 'folio', the more convenient bag wigs were called 'quarto', 'octavo' and 'duodecimo' – a nod to the more portable, cheaper and hence more accessible book formats that were being produced for an expanding eighteenth-century readership.[11] The adoption in 1783 by none other than Marie Antoinette of an uncossetted, loosely draped muslin dress called a *gaulle* shows the degree to which naturalness and comfort began to inform elite notions of elegance.[12] In the home, dishware, furniture (including beds) and heating technology began to emphasize comfort, utility and privacy over the constraining norms of aristocratic display.[13] The comfortable, unostentatious and morally unobjectionable comfort that some commentators called 'luxe de bienséance' (seemly luxury) was the product of an *embourgeoisement* of French cultural norms over the eighteenth century.

The spread of one tropical commodity, coffee, encouraged new forms of consumption and sociability in Enlightenment France. Cafés were a fixture of Parisian life since the seventeenth century, as Jacques Savary des Brulons observed in his *Dictionnaire universel de commerce* (*Universal Dictionary of Commerce*): 'The Parisian cafés are for the most part magnificently decorated spaces, adorned with marble tables, mirrors and shining crystal where respectable city people [*d'honnêtes gens de la ville*] get together for the pleasure of conversation, to learn the news, and to sip this drink.'[14] Up until the mid eighteenth century, Paris cafés combined and reinforced three growing categories of consumption in a novel social milieu: luxury goods (Savary's mirrors, marble and crystal); the periodical press (papers and *libelles* were read aloud and circulated hand to hand); and the stimulants (coffee, chocolate and sugar) coming from American colonies. At first, these cafés attracted the *beau monde* of Paris, and, in contrast to London, women of quality freely entered them. But, as coffee production increased and the price of this beverage fell within reach of the 'populuxe' consuming classes, the social significance and dynamic of Parisian café life changed: after mid-century, cafés were increasingly regarded as male, proletarian places to be avoided by people of quality – especially women. Café sociability further segregated more strictly along social and occupational lines: *philosophes* such as Franklin, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert met for serious discussion at the Procope, while merchants and artisans gathered at their own occupationally defined haunts to exchange professional gossip or news. Later in the century, the Palais-Royal, home to many shops and cafés, came under the ownership of Philippe d'Orléans, the future Philippe d'Egalité. Because the immunity from police scrutiny granted to a prince of the blood extended to his property, the Café de Foy, located in the Palais-Royal, began to attract a highly politicized clientele who could converse more freely there.

Consequently, the Café de Foy earned the sobriquet 'Estates-General of the Palais-Royal' during the Revolution. Respectable members of the upper crust retired to their homes, continuing to consume coffee in small groups or privately, accompanied by elaborate serving paraphernalia – yet another niche of luxury and 'populuxe' production in eighteenth-century France. In the case of coffee, a widening circle of consumption helped to expand production in the Antilles and to push down prices, bringing coffee within the reach of still more consumers in what were initially mixed spaces of sociability and consumption. But this materially and socially democratizing market logic, widely celebrated by scholars of the consumer revolution, was neither inevitable nor durable: social hierarchies – some old, some more recently evolved – reasserted themselves relatively quickly.

The history of consumption has enabled historians to widen their view of Enlightenment culture and therefore of the people who might have had access to it; moving beyond the world of arts and letters, moreover, invites a more experiential analysis of the modes of Enlightenment. The shift in perspective to material culture makes possible a more precise description, in certain domains, of the linkages between commercial expansion and cultural transformations. To those who had access, the sensorium of the new consumer economy – a self-renewing spectacle of sights, sounds, textures and tastes – dignified daily life in a way that reinforced the celebration of utility, comfort and material progress found in the pages of the *Encyclopédie*.[15] But even as the market liberated urban consumers by breaking down certain social hierarchies and opening up new forms of cultural expression, it also subtly enforced existing hierarchies or brutally asserted new ones. The same may be said of France's eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, which grew thanks to realignments within a modestly expanded elite rather than to a process of wholesale cultural democratization as we might conclude from the recent historiographical emphasis upon a new consumer economy. Robert Darnton describes the transformation, by the final decades of the eighteenth century, of France's literary and scientific public sphere into a greasy pole, with members of the high Enlightenment establishment dominating the salons and academies, enjoying state protection and sinecures by dint of close – and therefore necessarily scarce – ties to Parisian ruling classes.[16] Turning to the famous salons, the *locus classicus* of the French Enlightenment's democratized sociability, Antoine Lilti has found instead a world utterly dominated by traditional elites, in which dependent *philosophes* served as chic accessories, the new must-haves in a constantly evolving world of competitive display.[17]

Although literate elites and those who surrounded them in Paris and in provincial capitals both reflected upon and inhabited a world transformed

by commerce, the French economy as a whole remained rural, agrarian and traditional. Until well into the mid nineteenth century, agricultural production outweighed other sources of wealth, including trade and industry; rates of urbanization, occupational structures and demographic patterns reflected this basic fact. On the eve of the Revolution of 1789, 78 per cent of France's 29 million inhabitants lived in the countryside, and 87 per cent of these rural dwellers (and 67 per cent of the population as a whole) made their living primarily from agricultural pursuits.[18] Although Paris and certain Atlantic port cities enjoyed some population growth in the eighteenth century, France's rate of urbanization remained essentially static. Demographic growth occurred mainly in the countryside – precisely the pattern one would expect in a traditional, agrarian economy where low crop yields strictly limit the possibility of growth among urban, non-agricultural populations. The situation was much different in Great Britain, which experienced galloping population growth *and* urbanization throughout the eighteenth century, thanks to industrialization accompanied by gains in agricultural productivity; London nearly doubled its already immense population to about a million, while flourishing port and new industrial cities such as Manchester, Bristol, Glasgow and Dublin grew like fungi, from virtually nothing to rich agglomerations that concentrated industry, trade and banking in one urban centre and its hinterland. This pattern had existed in the Low Countries and in Italy for some time, although these regions experienced comparative declines in the eighteenth century. Despite some signs of consolidation and centralization, France's urban system remained characteristic of the great agrarian monarchies where juridical, administrative and, naturally, fiscal cadres were distributed relatively evenly among urban centres situated close to primary agricultural producers. Paris did not grow at the expense of large provincial cities such as Lyon and Bordeaux, but it profited by reinforcing the links between central and peripheral nodes of the French urban system.[19]

The persistence of rural, peasant France was mirrored in the absolutist state and in the elites that simultaneously served and exploited country-dwellers through the management of estates, the administration of justice, the maintenance of order and the dispensation of charity. Logically enough, land remained the source of social and political power among the First and Second Estates (the clergy and the nobility) and attracted investment by risk-averse and socially ambitious bourgeois. Landed wealth also ensured the existence of a large and so-to-speak rural bourgeoisie – the army of pettifogging lawyers, estate stewards and tax collectors necessary to sort out the baroque array of rents, dues and taxes to which a single plot of land might be liable, and which enriched the Church, the State and noble landlords.

France's seigneurial system on the eve of the Revolution was an immense source of wealth for landholding elites and a veritable permanent employment act for petty officialdom, but not necessarily an efficient conduit for agricultural surplus or a forcing ground of dynamic mercantile elites.

The comparatively high shipping cost, low value and short shelf-life of many agricultural products ensured that they were usually consumed locally, so that intermediate economic activities such as rough manufacture, transportation and food-processing also remained evenly distributed among the provinces, resisting the funnelling into large cities more natural to financial operations, high-value manufacture and, later, industrialized production. In contrast to England, where comparatively higher rates of industrialization and urbanization favoured lower ages of marriage and growing birth rates, France's peasantry remained stubbornly 'Malthusian' in its habits, limiting family size in order to prevent the division of agricultural land that large cohorts of children and relatively egalitarian inheritance customs produced. France's population grew by 30 per cent over the course of the eighteenth century, while Great Britain's leaped by 71 per cent.[20] In the absence of large productivity gains, even this comparatively modest increase in population put pressure on the incomes of rural dwellers, who struggled with land hunger, increasing rents and a burden of taxation that penalized non-privileged landholders in the form of the *taille*, France's land tax.[21] Rural workers, representing the overwhelming mass of the French population, were excluded by poverty from participating in the new consumer economy. The situation among the urban working classes is much less clear-cut: inflation unquestionably ate away at real wages over the course of the century, but there is ample evidence from other sources that many workers held their own and were thus able to afford new 'populuxe' goods and enjoy the new forms of sociability they engendered. But even if urban participation in the consumer economy was more broad-based than pessimistic accounts of the eighteenth century have led us to believe, France nevertheless remained polarized between, on the one hand, a numerically small urban world that was stimulated by thriving Atlantic commerce, a world-leading luxury industry, consumers with disposable income who helped to shape taste and, on the other, a preponderating rural world that, despite some pockets of growth and dynamism, generally remained cut off from the material and cultural advances that characterized the French Enlightenment.

In an era when economic progress was supposed to be entirely remaking Europe and its colonial periphery, the spectacle of two incommensurate and in some senses opposed worlds made commerce a persistent topic of discussion in Enlightenment France.[22] For some it was a question of asserting the value of past social forms and habits of material life; but for the overwhelming

majority of *philosophes*, men of state or merchants, the problem of political economy – or what was often termed 'the science of commerce' – was how best to reconcile commercial and agrarian France into a wealthy and progressive, but politically and socially stable whole. Two related circumstances raised the stakes of this discussion and helped define it. First, France's commercial expansion took place against the backdrop of escalating conflict with another commercial power, Great Britain. Early modern commercial dynamos such as the United Provinces and Great Britain posed economic threats, but the implication that commercial prosperity was the result of ostensibly republican political and social forms posed another sort of menace to the monarchical nations that would imitate them. *Philosophes* sought a more systematic understanding of the circuits of production, exchange and consumption through the science of commerce, but they also addressed broader questions of political and cultural identity. Second, rivalry between commercial empires became exceedingly costly as the eighteenth century progressed; France's agrarian economy seemed, in contrast to that of Great Britain, unable to meet the expenses of conflicts such as the War of Spanish Succession (1700–13), the War of Austrian Succession (1740–8), the Seven Years' War (1756–63) and the American War of Independence (1776–83). Disagreements among French elites over war finance and taxation sharpened over the course of the century, leading some to question the desirability and affordability, for France, of modern commercial empire. In this context, the *philosophes* developed approaches to political economy that can be divided into three broad categories: republican, physiocratic and a final camp that argued for commercial monarchy. Few writers advanced these approaches in their pure form, but these three ideal types provide useful points of triangulation for navigating the highly varied *topos* of intellectual responses to the rise of commerce.

When republican political thinkers in eighteenth-century France considered the rise of commerce in modern states, their approach was informed by a rejection of two widely shared premises of early modern political economy: first, materialist utilitarianism; and, second, the belief that the market was capable, as the English man of letters Bernard Mandeville put it, of turning the 'private' vice of greed into the 'publick benefits' of prosperity and civility.[23] Republican political thinkers only ruefully accepted a third premise: the economy had come to occupy a central place in modern statecraft. Rousseau's *Encyclopédie* article 'Économie or Œconomie' counter-intuitively sought to redefine the fundamental question of political economy not as production of wealth but as the maintenance of 'virtue': 'the greatest power [*ressort*] of public authority lies in the hearts of citizens'.[24] Far from calming egoistic passions and redirecting individual desires for gain towards the public

good, the market favoured the polarization of wealth and the 'tyranny of the rich' against the poor, who, deprived of property and liberty, became 'evil slaves' who cravenly subverted the public good. A well-managed polity did not encourage the accumulation of wealth but rather kept it within strictly defined limits in order to prevent inequality and corruption: 'the word *economy* is best understood as the wise management of what one has, rather than the means of acquiring what one doesn't'.[25] Only an equality of poverty – some republicans merely insisted upon a moderation or 'médiocrité' of fortunes – could assure the reign of virtue. Although Rousseau believed in the necessity of property for subsistence and public order, his republican political economy was premised fundamentally upon the denigration of production, exchange and consumption. For republicans such as Rousseau, the sphere of needs was to remain subordinate, lest it encroach upon and corrupt the domain of freedom: politics. If by political economy one means the re-evaluation of the role of the economy in statecraft, and its promotion to a position of equality or even primacy above traditional territorial, dynastic or spiritual claims, republican political thinkers were profoundly *un*economic in their point of view. This somewhat abstract description is worth insisting upon because it helps one to differentiate thinkers such as Rousseau from the many *philosophes* who were in no sense republican but who nevertheless criticized the tendency to luxury in modern commercial societies and preached respect for wholesome agricultural pursuits. Such a description also helps explain the flexibility of republican political economy: while Rousseau and the abbé Mably sought an alternative social model in the supposed egalitarianism of the Roman republic, others used the language of republicanism to assert the rights of France's military aristocracy, whose position had been eroded by the rise of commerce among European states. Republican political economy offered a way of looking backwards, or at least of finding an alternative to a thoroughly modern France whose values and social structure were determined by commerce.

Although the physiocrats argued insistently that France should play upon its natural strengths by emphasizing agriculture over commerce, this prescription was commonplace by the time François Quesnay, the founder of physiocracy, began writing publicly in the *Encyclopédie* in 1757. In his seminal articles 'Grains', 'Fermiers' ('Farmers'), and 'Impôts' ('Taxes'), Quesnay set forth a programme for a dynamic sort of agricultural capitalism that had nothing to do with the misty-eyed elegies to bygone rural virtue proffered by Fénelon in his urtext of Enlightenment pastoralism, *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (*The Adventures of Telemachus*) (1699). The highly commercialized system of agriculture the physiocrats envisioned had no room for the small peasant proprietor who was both exploited and protected by France's

seigneurial system; the key words in this forward-looking order were scale, specialization, investment and *laissez-faire*. Indeed, as Tocqueville would later remark, while the physiocrats were hardly self-conscious Revolutionaries, the ensemble of the physiocratic reform programme implied the complete demolition of the system of privilege that characterized Ancien Régime France. For the physiocrats, France's economic problems were fundamentally political: the countryside of an inherently rich nation was largely sunk in misery, while the State and the mercantile interests to which it was captive pursued illusory profits in overseas commerce. Both of these facts resulted from France's feudal heritage, and the way forward, according to the physiocrats, was a system of law that respected property, productivity and freedom of contract.

But the physiocrats distinguished themselves by more than their insistence that only agriculture was the source of value and hence the true basis for a prosperous economy; they couched their economic doctrine in a highly rigorous, deductive language that admitted of no interpretation or variation. Two consequences flowed from canonizing Quesnay's famously eye-strain-inducing *Tableau économique* (*Economic Table*) as the centrepiece of physiocratic economic science. In so doing, first, the physiocrats constituted themselves as a group (some called them a sect) that could flaunt the same epistemological coherence and rigour as the natural sciences: this strategy ensured respect from an enlightened reading public that saw genuine social progress as premised upon scientific discovery and application. Second, if the conclusions of the *Tableau économique* were derived by a special scientific procedure valid in all places and in all times, it put the physiocrats' policy prescriptions beyond the ineffectual wrangling that characterized economic reform efforts in eighteenth-century France. When Quesnay adopted the term 'enlightened despotism' (*despotisme éclairé*), he did so in a deliberately provocative gesture against aristocratic republicans in the *parlements* who opposed the Crown's reform efforts in the name of freedom from despotism. In this context, Quesnay's call for 'economic government' (*gouvernement économique*) meant de-politicizing governance, converting it into a form of rational administration according to timeless laws of nature. Economic government also meant the affirmation, utilitarian in essence, of individuals' material well-being as the origin and final end of statecraft; the protection of property, which derived from the individual's natural right to ensure survival by appropriating the fruits of nature, was the only universally verifiable basis for government and defined its scope: 'it is sufficient for government to see to the growth of profits out of the kingdom's wealth, not to harass industry and to leave to citizens the capacity to follow their investment choices [*de laisser aux citoyens la facilité et le choix des dépenses*].'[26]

Quesnay and his followers' appeal to science, combined with their lucid insistence that every route to widespread prosperity must pass through the French countryside, ensured them a wide and appreciative audience, but others envisioned the modernization of France's economy and society along quite different lines.

For most contemporary observers, commercial monarchy was a *fait accompli* in eighteenth-century France; those who approved this fact affirmed two things that were rejected by republicans *and* by most physiocrats. First, France had arrived historically at a point where luxury and the commerce that supported it were necessary for widespread prosperity and the maintenance of France's international stature; they also thought this was a positive development. Such was the position of Jean-François Melon, whose *Essai politique sur le commerce* (*Political Essay on Commerce*) (1734) remained widely cited throughout the eighteenth century, and of Voltaire, who issued a direct riposte to anti-luxury republicans in *Le mondain* (*The Man of the World*) (1736):

> Others may with regret complain
> That 'tis not fair Astrea's reign,
> That the famed golden age is o'er
> That Saturn, Rhea rule no more:
> Or, to speak in another style,
> That Eden's groves no longer smile.
> For my part, I thank Nature sage,
> That she has placed me in this age:
> …
> I love the pleasures of a court;
> I love the arts of every sort;[27]

Second, although many advocates of commercial monarchy saw room for economic reforms that would help France compete against nations like Great Britain, they accepted the social hierarchies upon which Ancien Régime France was based. This situation meant several things simultaneously: a society of orders that divided all people into status groups – the nobility, the clergy and the third estate; a corporate society in which groups and the individuals that belonged to them enjoyed rights based on the inheritance, purchase or conferral of privileges; and a society marked by sometimes extreme inequalities of wealth.

No advocates of commercial monarchy denied the importance of agriculture in France; however, they maintained the entirely plausible conviction that the two Frances – based on agriculture on the one hand and commerce and industry on the other – must develop simultaneously as they had in Great Britain. *Philosophes* such as Montesquieu conceived of this fusion

between the two Frances in broadly social and political terms rather than in purely sectoral ones. For Montesquieu, promoting this fusion meant encouraging the development of French commerce by freeing it from the heavy hand of the absolutist state, whose rent-seeking behaviour distorted markets and threatened the financial system upon which modern commerce rested and states depended. The collapse of John Law's financial system in 1721 was one such event that informed Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (*Spirit of the Laws*) (1748). But for Montesquieu the corollary to this proposition was that the French nobility – along with its odious and admittedly artificial privileges – should be protected from the democratic, socially levelling tendencies at work in commercial societies: commerce should be left to merchants and government to aristocrats. Maintaining the nobility and their privileged institutions of governance (the *parlements* and *états* of Ancien Régime France) would protect *all* French people against monarchical despotism; moreover, Montesquieu argued, preserving aristocratic *mœurs* (customs, manners) would help France maintain its edge in the production of luxury goods. Other writers in this tradition, like the abbé Gabriel François Coyer, believed that nobles should be allowed and even encouraged to participate in commerce, and that the Crown should promote commerce by ennobling successful merchants. Coyer disagreed with Montesquieu on certain points, but in using ennoblement as an enticement, like Montesquieu, he proposed to reorient the institutions, manners and hierarchies of Ancien Régime France away from the pursuit of military conquest towards commercial prosperity while avoiding disruptive social changes. The circle of economic writers surrounding Vincent de Gournay, France's intendant of commerce from 1751 to 1758, articulated this basic position from numerous perspectives, advocating reforms, gently criticizing the French state (often from within) and probing the manner and degree to which France could plausibly imitate its closest commercial rivals while maintaining its coherence and identity as an Ancien Régime monarchy.

In this respect, Montesquieu and members of the Gournay circle represented the consensus position on commerce in Enlightenment France. The material benefits of commercial expansion were disputed and fretted about in certain quarters, but never seriously called into question: the lively spectacle of Paris and provincial capitals, enriched by commerce and projecting an unprecedented cultural prestige, ensured this result. Most observers were aware of the impasses that stood in the way of integrating the other, rural France fully into this new economic system, and they feared the loss of France's commercial empire and the internal political divisions that could result. The Seven Years' War gave a heady foretaste of both threats. But the basic question for most *philosophes* was not whether but *how* commerce

should be integrated within the traditional structures of French society. The element of socio-political critique that was ever-present in French political economy – particularly in its physiocratic and republican variants – issued from an essentially self-confident, prosperous and increasingly comfortable nation.

NOTES

1 Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Amsterdam: 1773), vol. I, p. 1.
2 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 20, 24.
3 Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 171–2.
4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes' (1755), *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), vol. III, pp. 153, 187 and 282–3.
5 Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005), pp. 24, 397, 406 and 415. The statistical ranges given indicate the admitted imprecision of Daudin's estimates.
6 Allan Potofsky, 'Paris-on-the-Atlantic from the Old Regime to the Revolution', *French History*, 25 (1) (2011), 89–107.
7 Natacha Coquery, *L'Hôtel aristocratique: le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998), chaps. 2–3. On the plutocratic kernel of the aristocracy, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 52–9.
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9 Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 610 passim.
10 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), chap. 4.
11 Michael Kwass, 'Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France', *The American Historical Review*, 111 (3) (2006): 631–59.
12 Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: H. Holt, 2006), pp. 160–3.
13 Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge University Press, 2000), chaps. 7–8.
14 Jacques Savary des Brulons, 'Caffe', *Dictionnaire universel de commerce* (Paris: 1741), vol. II, p. 30.
15 Roche, *A History of Everyday Things*, pp. 250–5; Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, chap. 19.

16 Robert Darnton, 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (1) (1971): 81–115.
17 Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), chap. 5.
18 P. M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 4; for comparable figures, see Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité*, p. 28.
19 Bernard Lepetit, *The Pre-industrial Urban System: France, 1740–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 82–91; Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 91; Paul Bairoch, 'Une nouvelle distribution des populations: villes et campagnes', in Jean-Pierre Bardet and Jacques Dupâquier (eds.), *Histoire des populations de l'Europe*, vol. II: *La Révolution démographique, 1750–1914* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp. 139–229.
20 Bairoch, 'Villes et campagnes', p. 197.
21 Jones, *Peasantry*, pp. 30–45.
22 The notion of two Frances is explored in Edward Whiting Fox, *History in Geographic Perspective: The Other France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).
23 These phrases come from the title of Bernard Mandeville's famous polemic, *The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1723) (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1988).
24 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Économie ou œconomie', in Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres* (Paris: Briasson, 1751–88), 17 volumes of articles, 11 volumes of plates, vol. V, pp. 340–1. Available at http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, spring 2013 edn, ed. Robert Morrissey) (accessed 21 May 2014).
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26 François Quesnay, 'Grains', *Œuvres économiques complètes et autres textes*, ed. Christine Théré, Loïc Charles and Jean-Claude Perrot (Paris: Institut National d'Études Démographiques [INED], 2005), vol. I, pp. 161–212, at p. 204.
27 From *The Works of Voltaire*, ed. Tobias Smollett and trans. William Flemming (New York: E. R. Du Mont, 1901), vol. XXXVI, pp. 84–5.