

Enlightened Reform in Southern
Europe and its Atlantic Colonies,
c. 1750–1830

Edited by

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Series Editors' Foreword</i>	<i>xvii</i>

Introduction: Enlightened Reform in Southern Europe and its Atlantic Colonies in the Long Eighteenth Century <i>Gabriel Paquette</i>	1
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PART I SOUTHERN EUROPE AND ITS ATLANTIC COLONIES, c. 1750–1830: AN OVERVIEW

1 Enlightenment, Reform, and Monarchy in Italy <i>John Robertson</i>	23
2 'Enlightened Reform' in the Spanish Empire: An Overview <i>Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra</i>	33
3 Enlightenment and Reform in France and the French Atlantic <i>Emma Rothschild</i>	37
4 Enlightened Reform in Portugal and Brazil <i>Francisco Bethencourt</i>	41

PART II THE RISE OF PUBLIC POLITICAL CULTURE: THE EFFLORESCENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS CONNECTION TO STATE REFORM

5 Rethinking Enlightened Reform in a French Context <i>John Shovlin</i>	47
6 Searching for a 'Middle Class'? Francesco Mario Pagano and the Public for Reform in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples <i>Melissa Calaresu</i>	63

- 7 The Spanish Monarchy and the Uses of Jesuit Historiography in the 'Dispute of the New World' 83
Victor Peralta Ruiz
- 8 Conceiving Central America: A Bourbon Public in the *Gazeta de Guatemala* (1797–1807) 99
Jordana Dym
- 9 Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and Reading Practices in the Luso-Brazilian World (1750–1802) 119
Luiz Carlos Villalta

PART III THE STATE AS AN INCUBATOR OF
 ENLIGHTENMENT AND AN ENGINE OF REFORM

- 10 In the House of Reform: The Bourbon Court of Eighteenth-Century Spain 145
Charles C. Noel
- 11 'Legal Despotism' and Enlightened Reform in the Îles du Vent: The Colonial Governments of Chevalier de Mirabeau and Mercier de la Rivière, 1754–1764 167
Pernille Røge
- 12 The Coming of Enlightened Reform in Bourbon Peru: Secularization of the *Doctrinas de indios*, 1746–1773 183
Kenneth J. Andrien
- 13 The Savoyard State: Another Enlightened Despotism? 203
Christopher Storrs
- 14 *Derecho Indiano* vs. the Bourbon Reforms: The Legal Philosophy of Francisco Xavier de Gamboa 229
Christopher Peter Albi

PART IV POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE REFORM OF
 SOCIETY AND THE STATE

- 15 The Sultan's Republic: Jealousy of Trade and Oriental Despotism in Paolo Mattia Doria 253
Sophus A. Reinert

- 16 Observing the Neighbours: Fiscal Reform and Transnational Debates in France after the Seven Years' War 271
Florian Schui
- 17 'The Proud Epithet of Enlightened': Ferdinando Galiani and the Neapolitan Debate on Colonies, Commerce and Conquest 287
Koen Stapelbroek
- PART V THE LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENED REFORM**
- 18 The Limits of Reform in Spanish America 307
Manuel Lucena-Giraldo
- 19 Pombal's Government: Between Seventeenth-Century *Valido* and Enlightened Models 321
Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro
- 20 Enlightened Reform after Independence: Simón Bolívar's Bolivian Constitution 339
Matthew Brown
- 21 José da Silva Lisboa and the Vicissitudes of Enlightened Reform in Brazil, 1798–1824 361
Gabriel Paquette
- Index* 389

CHAPTER 5

Rethinking Enlightened Reform in a French Context

John Shovlin

Between the 1750s and the 1780s, the French monarchy experimented – albeit hesitantly and inconsistently – with a broad array of reforms. Among other innovations, it extended *de facto* religious toleration to French Protestants from the late 1750s, followed by a fuller measure of legal toleration in the 1780s. In the 1760s, it temporarily deregulated the grain trade, relaxed aspects of the exclusive trading regime in the Caribbean colonies, and abrogated the monopoly of the French Indies Company. The royal government fostered agricultural improvement by establishing agricultural societies in Paris and the provinces and by subsidizing the economic and agronomic press. Censorship of the book trade loosened somewhat in the final decades of the old regime, and the administration permitted the establishment of numerous new periodicals. Royal officials promoted industrial innovation and presided over a relaxation of regulations governing manufacturing. Successive comptrollers general (effectively, ministers of finance) sought to reform the fiscal administration by centralizing receipts and payments in a single treasury, and by organizing revenue collection in publicly controlled *régies*. During a final, especially ambitious, reform drive in the late 1780s, the monarchy abolished the remnants of Crown serfdom and encouraged the few remaining French serfholders to do the same.¹

¹ See, on censorship, Raymond Birn, *La censure royale des livres dans la France des Lumières* (Paris, 2007), and Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, 1991); on toleration, Geoffrey Adams, *The Huguenots and French Opinion, 1685–1787: The Enlightenment Debate on Toleration* (Waterloo, ON, 1991), and Dale K. Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750–1770* (Princeton, 1984); on the grain trade, Steven L. Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (2 vols, The Hague, 1976), and Judith A. Miller, *Mastering the Market: The State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700–1860*

Neither Louis XV nor Louis XVI was a reformer by conviction and, as a consequence, innovation came in the form of erratically pursued, ad hoc initiatives rather than as a concerted and coherent program for transforming society and government. However, by the eighteenth century the French monarchy, as an institution, transcended the personality of the ruler, and the regularity (if not the consistency) with which these reluctant monarchs were drawn to reforming strategies, and reforming ministers, suggests that they found themselves in a situation that stirred them to innovate and experiment. Ministers and middle-ranking servants of the Crown carried the reform impulse forward and it ebbed and flowed with their careers. In the period of his ascendancy during the 1760s, the duc de Choiseul sponsored a raft of innovations, while the triumvirate of Maupeou, d'Aiguillon, and Terray, who replaced him, undid much of this work. In the 1770s, the most ambitious reforms were the work of Jacques Turgot and Jacques Necker; Necker's fall in 1781 marked a return to a more conservative practice. Yet the monarchy found itself drawn back to a reforming strategy within a few years, when comptroller general Charles-Alexandre de Calonne told Louis XVI that to solve the monarchy's financial crisis it would be necessary 'to revitalize the entire state by reforming all that is defective in its constitution'.²

Though Louis XV and Louis XVI were not enlightened absolutists in the mold of Joseph II or Charles III, the kinds of innovations initiated in their name were similar in kind to those pursued by more thorough-going reformers. Across Central and Southern Europe, and in Spanish America, in this period, governments sought to renovate fiscal systems, promote economic growth, improve the performance of armies and navies, and expand educational opportunities. Since the late nineteenth century, some historians

(Cambridge, 1999); on colonial trade, Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: L'évolution du régime de 'l'Exclusif' de 1763 à 1789* (2 vols, Paris, 1972); on the Indies Company, Edouard Moisson, *Dupont de Nemours et la question de la Compagnie des Indes* (New York, 1968 [1918]); on agricultural improvement, André J. Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1967); on industrial policy, Jeff Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1830* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), and Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: Etat et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris, 1998); on fiscal reform, J.F. Boshier, *French Finances 1770–1795: From Business to Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, 1970), Joël Félix, *Finances et politique au siècle des Lumières: Le ministère L'Averdy, 1763–1768* (Paris, 1999), and Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, Egalité, Fiscalité* (Cambridge, 2000); on serfdom, J.Q.C. Mackrell, *The Attack on 'Feudalism' in Eighteenth-Century France* (London, 1973).

² Jean Egret, *The French Prerevolution, 1787–1788*, trans. Wesley D. Camp (Chicago and London, 1977), p. 2.

have discerned, in initiatives such as these, a commitment on the part of rulers to the new value system of the Enlightenment. Other more skeptical scholars have questioned the authenticity of monarchs' commitment to Enlightenment; they emphasize the incompatibility between authoritarianism and enlightened values, and represent 'enlightened' reform as an extension of earlier strategies aimed at increasing the power of the state.³ In this essay, I will suggest that recent trends in the historiography of the Enlightenment render even more problematic the concept of 'enlightened reform', as traditionally understood. Yet the same historiographical developments may point the way out of debates that have grown sterile and suggest ways to conceptualize eighteenth-century reform more fruitfully.

A challenge to defining any specifically enlightened program of reform derives from shifts in the way Enlightenment has come to be defined and understood over the last three decades. If scholars ever ascribed a doctrinal coherence to a unitary Enlightenment, this sense has mostly given way to a vision of multiple Enlightenments, distinguished not just on national and confessional lines, but further divided into radical, moderate, and even conservative tendencies.⁴ Historians disagree on the defining intellectual character and basic objectives of the Enlightenment.⁵ Further complicating this historiographical shift, in the French context, has been the proliferation of research and writing on political culture in the eighteenth century. Focusing, in most instances, on ideas and texts, and borrowing some of the interpretative techniques of intellectual history, the work of scholars in this area has given

³ The best introduction to these debates remains H.M. Scott, 'Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism', in H.M. Scott (ed.), *Enlightened Absolutism: Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1990). See also Charles Ingrao, 'The Problem of "Enlightened Absolutism" and the German States', *Journal of Modern History*, 58, supplement: Politics and Society in the Holy Roman Empire, 1500–1806 (1986): S161–80.

⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981); J.G.A. Pocock, 'Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective', *Government and Opposition*, 24 (1989): 81–105; Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981). In no domain, perhaps, has the revisionist trend been more fundamental than in questioning the relationship between religion and Enlightenment. See, for example, the forum 'God and the Enlightenment', *American Historical Review*, 108:4 (2003): 1057–1104.

⁵ Some continue to make a case for a unitary Enlightenment project. See, notably, John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005).

us a sense of the sheer diversity of thought and expression in this period.⁶ Not everything that was critical, new, or contestatory can be lumped under the umbrella category of Enlightenment.

Recent work has shown that reforms, once regarded as inspired by the *philosophes* were, in many cases, actually linked to more various constituencies. The now classic example is the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in the early 1760s. Claimed by some in the party of enlightenment as a triumph against superstition and priestcraft, historians now regard the defeat of the Jesuits as the culminating triumph of political Jansenism. It was supporters of this austere and heterodox strand of Roman Catholicism in the Parlement of Paris who played the key role in proceedings against the Society. The *philosophes* may have applauded the move, but their ideas did not drive it.⁷ The program of military reform – perhaps the most consistent and successful of all the reform initiatives of the old monarchy – found its most enthusiastic support among provincial nobles, who sought to shore up their own professional and social position against courtiers and wealthy *anoblis*. The rhetoric of merit, so central to army reform, was an extension of a long-standing noble discourse on royal service, not an Enlightenment novelty.⁸ Middling nobles also played a role in forwarding an agenda of agriculture-based political economic reform. They sought to recover France's international influence, damaged by the loss of the Seven Years' War, and the patriotic language in which they couched calls for economic regeneration reflected this commitment.⁹

The whole notion of philosophic 'influence' over rulers, or their agents, on which conceptualizations of enlightened reform have traditionally been based, must be treated with caution. 'Influence' can imply that ideas have a kind of causal logic of their own, leading scholars to pay inadequate attention to the contexts in which those ideas are received. As Keith Baker observes, 'texts, if

⁶ For a brief overview of this scholarship, see William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1999), pp. 35–41.

⁷ Dale K. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757–1765* (New Haven, 1975).

⁸ David Bien, 'The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution', *Past & Present*, 85 (1979): 68–98; Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750–1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (New York, 2002); Jay M. Smith, *Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, 1996). The position that a language of merit, as used by eighteenth-century nobles, represented an enlightenment-derived novelty is that of Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle (Cambridge, 1985).

⁹ John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2006).

read, are understood, and hence reinterpreted, by their readers in con-texts that may transform their significance; ideas, if received, take on meaning only in relation to others in the set of ideas into which they are incorporated. Thus it is important ... to avoid treating ideas as if they were causal, individual agents of motivation and determination'.¹⁰ The notion of influence implicitly locates agency in the wrong place – with intellectuals, or even with ideas – rather than where it belongs, with the actors being 'influenced'. It might be more fitting to speak of 'appropriation' when dealing with the relationship between government and enlightenment. When eighteenth-century policy makers confronted novel challenges for which conventional conceptual or practical tools were inadequate, they could look to *philosophes* for new resources or new solutions. In so doing, however, they took what seemed useful, and modified it for their own purposes. It was the needs of the consumers of ideas rather more than the intentions of the producers that shaped the interaction.

A further challenge to the idea of enlightened reform, as generally conceived, arises from the ongoing reconceptualization of the Enlightenment in sociological terms. A definition of Enlightenment framed within a history of ideas tradition has given way, at least partially, in recent decades, to conceptions that define the phenomenon primarily in terms of sensibilities, practices, and spaces. Historians emphasize that humanitarian campaigns against torture and slavery may have had as much to do with social practices, such as novel reading, as with the influence of Enlightenment ideas.¹¹ Scholars argue that aspirations to rational improvement were enacted within, and fostered by, institutions such as masonic lodges, *musées*, and *sociétés de pensées*. Intellectual exchange flourished in a renewed and expanded republic of letters with its foundations in academies, scientific societies, and the correspondence they sustained. The eighteenth century saw the emergence or transformation of a critical public sphere grounded in print culture, especially the periodical press and an expanded book trade. In short, Enlightenment is often viewed, today, less as a body of ideas or texts than as a new public culture, linked to novel modes of sociability, and organized around commitments to rational improvement, intellectual exchange, and the advancement of shared notions of the common good.¹²

¹⁰ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 19.

¹¹ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007).

¹² Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *L'Espace des francs-maçons: Une sociabilité européenne au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes, 2003); Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *L'Europe des Lumières* (Paris, 2004); Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York and London, 2000); Daniel Roche, *La France des Lumières* (Paris, 1993);

This reconceptualization of Enlightenment in terms of spaces and practices unsettles the whole notion of 'enlightened reform', or at least renders the meaning of such a category less self-evident. Yet, such a sociological vision may also offer a useful way to think about many aspects of eighteenth-century reform. If we see the Enlightenment as a new public culture, the monarchy can be regarded as playing an active role in the elaboration of that culture.¹³ In the final decades of the old regime the French monarchy began to experiment with new modes of communication and social mobilization. Several closely related and overlapping practices are at issue here. First, the Crown sought to intervene in the public sphere, to shape public opinion, and to deploy it to promote projects of rational improvement. It did so both by deliberately creating institutional spaces in which opinion might be elaborated, and from which it might be shaped, and by directly encouraging certain intellectual tendencies in the public sphere more broadly. Second, using its regulatory and administrative power, the monarchy sought to construct pockets in which certain kinds of liberties – especially economic and scientific – could be exercised, though in limited ways. It is in this experimentalism, perhaps, that we can most clearly distinguish enlightened tendencies.

If the French Crown sought new ways to articulate its relationship with civil society in this period, it did so, in large measure, because traditional forms of mediation proved ineffective or unwieldy. The old regime monarchy mediated its relationship with its subjects through corporate bodies – the Catholic Church, the *parlements*, provincial estates, guilds, and *corps* of venal office holders – and also via informal patron-client relationships that ran vertically through French society from Versailles to the provinces.¹⁴ As the monarchy

Daniel Roche, *Les républicains des lettres: Gens de culture et Lumières au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988); Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des Lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680–1789* (2 vols, Paris and The Hague, 1978); Franco Venturi, *Europe des Lumières: Recherches sur le 18e siècle* (Paris and The Hague, 1971); Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe*, trans. R. Burr Litchfield (2 vols, Princeton, 1984–9).

¹³ For a contrary view – that the French monarchy signally failed to alter its cultural policy in the face of the emergence of a new public sphere – see T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 357–427.

¹⁴ An older historiography, which construed absolutist monarchy in an antipathetic relation to such corporate bodies, has largely given way, in recent decades, to a more nuanced view which sees cooperation between the Crown and privileged elites as the key to the success and stability of this form of government. See William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985); Peter R. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France* (London and New York, 1996); Sara E. Chapman, *Private Ambition and Political Alliances:*

expanded its sphere of governance in the eighteenth century, however, the traditional mediators often emerged as obstacles to royal initiatives. A case in point is the troubled relationship between the Crown and corporate bodies over taxation.¹⁵ Immediately following the War of Austrian Succession, the administration met with sharp resistance when it established a peacetime tax, the *vingtième*, designed to amortize the inflated public debt. The Catholic Church and some of the provincial estates led the opposition. The Seven Years' War had hardly begun in 1756 before further signs of tax resistance became apparent; this time it was the *parlements* that attempted to block higher taxes.¹⁶ If it was more difficult for the monarchy to mediate its relationship with the political nation via traditional corporate channels, it was increasingly easy to do so via the public sphere, thanks to shifts in the size, literary culture, and social composition of the elite. Nobles had become far more oriented to print culture by the eighteenth century than they had been before and, more importantly, there was rapid growth in the size of the non-noble elite – that class of city dwellers living comfortably on its investments or from work in

The Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family and Louis XIV's Government, 1650–1715 (Rochester, NY, 2004); James B. Collins, *Classes, Estates, and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge, 1994); Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon, *L'Absolutisme en France: Histoire et historiographie* (Paris, 2002); Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy* (London and New York, 1992); Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1986); Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 1988); David Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France: The Road to Modernity?* (London and New York, 1996).

¹⁵ Tax resistance was far from the only problem state finances faced in the eighteenth century, but it was a significant one. See Peter Mathias and Patrick O'Brien, 'Taxation in Britain and France, 1715–1810: A Comparison of the Social and Economic Incidence of Taxes Collected for the Central Governments', *Journal of European Economic History*, 5 (1976): 601–50. On structural problems in French finances, a useful overview is Kathryn Norberg, 'The French Fiscal Crisis of 1788 and the Financial Origins of the Revolution of 1789', in Philip T. Hoffman and Kathryn Norberg (eds), *Fiscal Crises, Liberty, and Representative Government 1450–1789* (Stanford, 1994). On the 1750s, see James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton, 1986).

¹⁶ Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*. Ultimately, the sense that taxpayers could not, or would not, pay more led the administration to finance most of the cost of the war through borrowing, a policy that proved disastrous in the long run. See Riley, *The Seven Years War*, pp. 142–3.

the expanding professions and in trade. By a conservative estimate, this group expanded from 700,000 or 800,000 in 1700 to 1.7 million in 1789.¹⁷

Historians have long recognized that the Crown engaged in public debate in the latter half of the eighteenth century, but most read such interventions as defensive measures, or as a supplement to a policy of repression. In the face of repeated resort to the public sphere by the parlements to contest the policies of the monarchy, royal publicists had to respond. 'Unable to stifle these processes of political contestation', Keith Baker writes, 'the government found itself under increasing pressure to participate in them'.¹⁸ The point is well taken, but in some areas of debate the role the Crown played was less reactive. Its objective was not so much to curb criticism as to stir civil society and tap its dynamic potential. A parallel may be found in the use of the public sphere by the administration to animate patriotism during the early stages of the Seven Years' War. Publicists in the service of the monarchy, among them Jacob-Nicolas Moreau, Antoine-Léonard Thomas, and Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, advanced a patriotic and proto-nationalist vision of the conflict with Britain, representing the war as a struggle between nations rather than royal houses, and equating love of country with loyalty to the Crown.¹⁹ The monarchy did not resort to print simply in self-defense, or because it was forced to give an account to a critical public, but because it (or some of its servants) saw, in the public sphere, a mode of mediating its relationship with society outside the traditional corporate channels.

The monarchy patronized institutions designed to be permanent sites of intellectual exchange and practical improvement. In the early 1760s, the royal government established thirteen agricultural societies. Certainly, strictures were placed on what it was permissible for members to discuss – global issues of political economic reform, like recasting the fiscal system, were placed out of bounds. But, within these limits, the administration hoped the societies would be engines of innovation and education for the agricultural sector. Similar

¹⁷ Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la population française*, vol. 2, *De la Renaissance à 1789* (Paris, 1988). Already, in the seventeenth century, the monarchy had launched the first national newspapers in an effort to reach elites. See David Bell, 'The "Public Sphere", the State, and the World of Law in Eighteenth-Century France', *French Historical Studies*, 17:4 (1992): 912–34.

¹⁸ Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, p. 171.

¹⁹ David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), pp. 77–106; David A. Bell, 'Jumonville's Death: War Propaganda and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century France', in Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (eds), *The Age of Cultural Revolution: Britain and France, 1750–1820* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750–1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de Sept Ans*, SVEC, 365 (Oxford, 1998).

expectations were invested in provincial academies. These institutions had functioned in the seventeenth century principally as sites for the production and representation of monarchical glory.²⁰ By the latter part of the eighteenth century the monarchy was treating them primarily as nodes of intellectual innovation and practical improvement. The essay competitions run by provincial academies reflected a new interest in economic and social progress. Artificial meadows, interest rates, woodland management, silk manufacture, and canals – these were all topics of academic essay competitions in the final decades of the old regime.²¹ The Crown looked to the Academy of Sciences as a body of experts whose knowledge might be drawn upon, by the government, to serve useful public ends.²² As is well known, the *Académie française* became a bastion of the *parti philosophique* in the 1770s and 1780s – a development that could hardly have occurred without the knowledge and assent of the administration. The monarchy was by far the most important patron of writers and intellectuals, employing many as censors or in the official press, and pensioning others through the official learned societies. In 1786, the king paid out pensions of over 300,000 livres to writers and intellectuals.²³ Should we interpret this solely as an effort to manipulate, control, and repress public opinion – to curb potentially dangerous voices? Or should it also be viewed, in part, as an effort to promote and encourage useful discussion?

Censorship was another area in which government policy evolved in the second half of the century. In theory, all books (barring a few special categories²⁴), had to receive prior publication permission from a royal censor: either a formal ‘privilege’, implying royal approval of the text in question, or a simple ‘permission’, which implied no such sanction. A shift came with the appointment of Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes as *Directeur de la Librairie* in 1750. As Raymond Birn has noted, ‘Lamoignon de Malesherbes and some of his royal censors envisaged transforming the classic institution of repression, the Direction of the Book Trade, into a

²⁰ Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 49–59.

²¹ See the list of essay competitions inventoried in Antoine-François Delandine, *Couronnes académiques, ou Recueil des prix proposés par les sociétés savantes* (Paris, 1787).

²² Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 40–41, 67–8.

²³ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 10.

²⁴ Books published at the Imprimerie royale were exempt, as were memoranda written by lawyers for use in the law courts, prayer books and some other classes of devotional works issued by dioceses, and the edicts of parlements and other sovereign courts. See Birn, *La censure royale des livres*, p. 72.

mechanism which encouraged a public discussion of ideas'.²⁵ In a series of memoranda written in the late 1750s, Malesherbes outlined a new philosophy on censorship.²⁶ He expanded a system of 'tacit permissions' to publish as a quasi-legal way to loosen restrictions on publishing. In practice, such informal permission did not always shield authors from prosecution, as the parlements and the Church also enjoyed the right to prosecute works they deemed subversive. If Malesherbes' loosening of restrictions proved very partial, a more liberal spirit nonetheless began to pervade the personnel and the practice of censorship by the 1770s. As the censor Jean-Baptiste-Claude Cadet de Saineville noted in 1777, 'Truth always appears precious to me ... and so long as discussions are wisely presented, without invective or slights, I believe that one cannot leave to it a field too broad'.²⁷

Servants of the Crown did not simply relax censorship; they actively promoted debate they regarded as useful to the monarchy. The case is especially clear for French political economy. In the 1750s, figures within the royal administration (notably Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay and Daniel Trudaine) launched public discussion of political economic questions by patronizing a stable of young writers, many of whom would go on to become key figures in French political economic debate. As Loïc Charles shows, Vincent de Gournay believed that France was in danger of losing its preeminence in Europe because prejudices and misapprehensions concerning commerce, long dispelled in England, continued to enjoy credence in France. In the words of François Véron de Forbonnais, one of the most prominent of Gournay's acolytes, 'It is no longer conquests, slaughters and fright which decide the superiority of an empire; it is the happiness of its subjects. It is to trade, father of industry, that the world owes these happy changes'.²⁸ In Gournay's view, it was vital that French elites – especially the high nobility of the sword and robe – be enlightened about trade, that the 'science of commerce' be disseminated.²⁹ The writers linked to Gournay published

²⁵ Birn, *La censure royale des livres*, p. 135.

²⁶ Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, *Mémoires sur la Librairie. Mémoire sur la liberté de presse*, ed. Roger Chartier (Paris, 1994).

²⁷ Quoted in Birn, *La censure royale des livres*, p. 37.

²⁸ François Véron de Forbonnais, *Considérations sur les finances d'Espagne* (Dresden, 1753), pp. iii–iv.

²⁹ Loïc Charles, 'French "New Politics" and the Dissemination of Hume's Political Discourses on the Continent', in Margaret Schabas and Carl Wennerlind (eds), *David Hume's Political Economy* (London and New York, 2008). See also Simone Meyssonier, *La balance et l'horloge: La genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil, 1989); Antoin E. Murphy, 'Le développement des idées économiques en France (1750–1756)', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 33 (1986): 521–41.

dozens of translations of foreign works and numerous writings of their own, and succeeded in giving an enormous stimulus to political economic debate in France. In March 1755, the *Correspondance littéraire* remarked that 'over the last eighteen months nothing has been more common than works on trade'. Six months later Grimm noted that 'This subject is becoming each day more interesting; and as the public fixes its attention on it, as it seems bent on doing, we will have the double advantage of being instructed in a science which will soon become the basis for the superiority ... of the French government'.³⁰

Some scholars have read the activities of Gournay and his circle as a challenge from outside the monarchy to the pervasive practice of government secrecy in the name of political publicity.³¹ But Gournay and his chief collaborators, Malesherbes and Trudaine, worked within the structure of the monarchy, using the power of censorship (vested in Malesherbes' hands as *Directeur de la Librairie*) to accord tacit publishing permissions to Gournay's acolytes, and to grant them an unofficial protection. They did so as loyal servants of the Crown, not as hostile critics, and with the intention of increasing the power of the monarchy. Gournay and his collaborators certainly had to deal with opposition to their initiative from within the administration. This opposition might be viewed as an instance of what Kenneth Banks has called the 'fractured royal voice' – the fragmentation of royal authority that was such an evident feature of French government in the eighteenth century.³² Such factionalism does not alter the insider status of Gournay and his collaborators, or make their interventions any less an instance of the monarchy acting on civil society.

As traditionally understood, enlightened reform entailed a one-way flow of influence: from Enlightenment to government. It may be more realistic to posit a two-way model with the French monarchy advancing some of the key reform ideas putatively influencing it. It became common in the 1750s and 1760s for French administrators to stage political economic debates around new policy initiatives. There is good reason to believe that the abbé Coyer's *La noblesse commerçante* (1756), which famously argued that the poor nobility

³⁰ Quoted in Antoin E. Murphy, *Richard Cantillon: Entrepreneur and Economist* (Oxford, 1986), p. 308. Studies of political economic publishing bear out this anecdotal evidence. Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992); Christine Théré, 'Economic Publishing and Authors, 1566–1789', in Gilbert Faccarello (ed.), *Studies in the History of French Political Economy: From Bodin to Walras* (London and New York, 1998).

³¹ Robin J. Ives, 'Political Publicity and Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century France', *French History*, 17:1 (2003): 1–18.

³² Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713–1763* (Montreal and Kingston, 2002), p. 194.

ought to be encouraged to go into trade, was intended to pave the way for an edict reiterating *arrêts* of 1669 and 1701 that conferred on the nobility the right to engage in wholesale commerce without derogation.³³ In 1758, the abbé Morellet was commissioned by Daniel Trudaine to write a work arguing in favor of lifting restrictions on the manufacture of printed calicoes in France.³⁴ An edict legalizing the practice followed in 1759.³⁵ In the late 1760s, the Physiocrats functioned as virtual official propagandists for the policy of the monarchy on the liberalization of the grain trade. Comptroller general Étienne Maynon d'Inveau hosted a dinner each week to which the Physiocrat Pierre-Samuel Dupont was invited, along with two former associates of Gournay, Louis-Paul Abeille and the abbé Morellet. In 1769, Maynon d'Inveau invited Morellet to write an attack on the French Indies Company, whose monopoly on the China and India trades he had decided to suspend.³⁶ I am not suggesting that all initiatives for political economic reform emanated from within the royal government. Moreover, those which did originate there would have enjoyed little success had they not tapped an authentic vein of public engagement in problems of political economic order. But the fact remains that the monarchy was a participant in this public debate, not an idle bystander.

Policies of fostering debate and creating spaces for exchange – always within limits – can be seen as analogous to the royal government's efforts to create spaces of liberty and innovation in the French economy. In the aftermath of the War of Austrian Succession prescient observers judged that France was falling behind economically and that if the French monarchy was to preserve its preeminence in Europe it would have to borrow aspects of the Anglo-Dutch model.³⁷ Economic actors should be given more liberty to make their own choices because such freedom spurred innovation and created prosperity. Government policy on the grain trade is a case in point. As Judith Miller shows, the heavy-handed regulatory measures of the early eighteenth

³³ Gabriel-François Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante* (London, 1756). On the context in which the work was published, see Guy Richard, *Noblesse d'affaires au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1974).

³⁴ Abbé André Morellet, *Réflexions sur les avantages de la fabrication et de l'usage des toiles peintes en France* (Geneva, 1758).

³⁵ Pierre Deyon and Philippe Guignet, 'The Royal Manufactures and Economic and Technological Progress in France before the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of European Economic History*, 9:3 (1980): 611–32.

³⁶ André Morellet, *Mémoire sur la situation actuelle de la Compagnie des Indes* (n.p., 1769).

³⁷ Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

century – grain censuses and confiscations, capital punishment for rioters and hoarders – were gradually replaced in the fifty years before the Revolution with more gentle strategies that sought to channel market forces rather than attempting to coerce economic agents into behaving in a manner contrary to their interests. One strategy pursued by officials with responsibility for urban provisioning in the 1750s and 1760s was to use simulated sales. When prices were high, publicly owned grain supplies were sold, often at a loss, through a straw man, who masked the official intervention as a private transaction. The goal was to assure buyers that there was no shortage of supply while convincing sellers that prices would not continue to rise. Under Turgot, such official market manipulations were briefly prohibited in favor of a more purely market model.³⁸

In its policies on colonial trade, the monarchy indicated a willingness to introduce spaces of relative freedom, or to relax restrictions in an effort to animate commerce. The French Antillean colonies were governed under what was known as the *Exclusif*, a legal regime that required colonists to buy all their provisions and manufactures from the mother country. Because supplies were available from North America at much lower prices, contraband trade was rife between the French sugar islands and their British neighbors. Successive ministers of the navy and colonies in the 1760s and 1770s sought to improve the situation by maintaining what Jean Tarrade has called the *Exclusif mitigé*, a trading regime under which colonists were permitted to buy some of their provisions locally while remaining tied to taking metropolitan manufactured goods. The monarchy extended freedom of trade on a limited basis to Guyana and to Saint-Lucia, and tacitly tolerated a certain level of smuggling. Any greater measure of liberty was strongly resisted by commercial interests in the metropole which stood to gain from a monopolistic trading relationship with the islands.³⁹

A key goal of the Crown in its regulation of the manufacturing economy during the 1770s and 1780s, as Philippe Minard shows, was to animate the dynamic, innovative capacities of entrepreneurs and workers by allowing a greater degree of freedom. The most important policy shift occurred under Necker when the comptroller general redefined the mission of the Inspectorate of Manufactures from enforcing quality-control regulations on textile manufacturers to animating trade and gathering information.⁴⁰ In the royal bureaux with responsibility for industrial policy, as Jeff Horn shows,

³⁸ Judith A. Miller, *Mastering the Market: The State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 26, 56–7, 65, 72.

³⁹ Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France*.

⁴⁰ Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme*, pp. 320–24.

administrators sought to foster local invention and innovation, and to aid in technology transfer from Britain.⁴¹ The shift in regulatory philosophy since the heyday of Colbertism was quite striking. In the earlier period, as Henry Clark notes, the monarchy saw its role as one of 'attracting a reluctant and unreliable polity into self-interested enterprises the monarchy [had] chosen for it'.⁴² By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the monarchy, or some of its servants, had come to the conclusion that civil society had dynamic qualities which the administration must learn to tap.

The monarchy even flirted with introducing a measure of political liberty in order to improve local and provincial government and reform a tax system perceived to be illegitimate. In 1764 and 1765, the comptroller general, Clément-Charles-François de Laverdy, issued edicts reforming municipal government. The goal of the reforms was to revivify moribund local authorities by making more positions subject to election.⁴³ Turgot dreamed of regenerating the kingdom by establishing a network of local and provincial elective assemblies that would have responsibility for apportioning the tax burden, directing projects for local improvement, and acting as consultants to the central government on administrative questions. His secretary, Dupont de Nemours, drew up an elaborate plan for such a network of assemblies, but Turgot fell from power before any such reform could be undertaken.⁴⁴ His successor, Jacques Necker, moved in the same direction when he established two pilot assemblies in the provinces of Berry and Haute Guyenne. The assemblies, initially raised by a combination of appointment and cooptation, were intended eventually to become elective; half of their delegates were drawn from the Third Estate, and they voted by head. Necker intended the assemblies to weaken the claim of the parlements to exercise a representative political function – testament to the decreasing utility of the traditional channels of communication and mobilization.

It is customary to assess the significance of the French monarchy's reforms in the late eighteenth century in terms of their failure to avert revolution in 1789. Reforms had been too timid, or they had come too late. Reformers lacked

⁴¹ Horn, *Path Not Taken*, pp. 17–87.

⁴² Clark, *Compass of Society*, p. 20.

⁴³ The reforms were undone by the abbé Terray, comptroller general from 1769 to 1774. See Maurice Bordes, *L'Administration provinciale et municipale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1972), pp. 254–310. See also Marie-Laure Legay, 'Un projet méconnu de "décentralisation" au temps de Laverdy (1763–1768): Les Grands Etats d'Aquitaine', *Revue historique*, 306 (2004): 533–54.

⁴⁴ Gerald J. Cavanaugh, 'Turgot: The Rejection of Enlightened Despotism', *French Historical Studies*, 6:1 (1969): 31–58.

the will, or the power, to stop change from being blocked by constituencies that stood to lose their privileges. It is perfectly reasonable to consider reform from such a perspective, but viewed in a less teleological light we might also recognize that the French monarchy played an important and deliberate role in fashioning the spaces, practices, ideas and sensibilities of the French Enlightenment. One can discern a shift, in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the strategies of rule adopted by the monarchy – a move to sidestep, or supplement, traditional, corporate forms of mediation between Crown and society. In this period, the monarchy resorted ever more to the public sphere as a way to communicate with, and mobilize, its subjects. It did so by staging public debates, by creating spaces for the kinds of intellectual exchanges it believed would generate public utility, or by constructing social spaces for the exercise of a limited freedom. In so doing, the monarchy became a significant actor in the new public culture of the Enlightenment. This is the sense, I would argue, in which it is most meaningful to speak of ‘enlightened reform’ in a French context.