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Toward a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Antinobility: The Political Economy of Honor in the Old Regime*

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That the French Revolution set itself implacably against the institution of hereditary nobility is a truism. But exactly why the revolutionaries were so hostile to nobility has been the subject of controversy. Under the Marxist synthesis dominant in the 1960s, revolutionary antinobility was regarded as the natural and obvious animus of a class-conscious revolutionary bourgeoisie. For Marxist scholars, the Revolution was a struggle for control of the state between a bourgeoisie, borne on the rising tide of capitalism, and a hidebound, “feudal” aristocracy that sought to defend its political and fiscal privileges. The meaning of revolutionary antipathy to the nobility was self-evident. But the “revisionist” interpretation of the Revolution, which has largely displaced this Marxist paradigm in the last two decades, rejects the view that the Revolution can fruitfully be understood as a conflict between the bourgeoisie and the nobility. From such a perspective, the antinobility of the revolutionaries is no longer axiomatic.

In the wake of the Marxist interpretation’s decline, a considerable consensus has emerged around the idea that revolutionary hostility to the nobility was a product of the political crisis of 1788. The thesis is most elegantly expressed by Colin Lucas, who suggests that the antinobility of the revolutionaries was an expression of anger and frustration on the part of nonnoble elements of the elite at the sudden loss of status they suffered with the convocation of the Estates General. Lucas contends that the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie had merged with the nobility over the course of the eighteenth century to form an elite united in its possession of seigneurial property and fiscal privilege. No real cleavage arose to divide this eighteenth-century elite until the Paris *parlement*’s call for the convocation of the Estates General suddenly and arbi-

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trarily lent new significance to the distinction between nobles and *roturiers* (commoners, plebeians). According to Lucas, the calling of the Estates General “rent asunder what was essentially by now a homogenous social unit, and identified quite gratuitously a section of that unit as irremediably inferior and to be confused not merely with the trading classes but also with the manual labourers and the vile and abject poor.”¹ Other revisionists see revolutionary antinobility as a political strategy rather than an adventitious outcome of the prerevolutionary crisis. In an influential synthesis on the eighteenth-century nobility, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret describes early revolutionary hostility to nobles as a “ploy” orchestrated by politicians such as the abbé Sieyès.² Similarly, Patrice Higonnet suggests that demagogic revolutionary bourgeois persecuted nobles opportunistically as a means to forge an alliance with the people.³

This essay will suggest that such “political” interpretations of antinobility do not offer an adequate explanation of revolutionary attitudes toward the nobility. Revolutionary antinobility was not a contingent consequence of the prerevolutionary crisis but the culmination of long-standing debates about the value and legitimacy of nobility as an institution. The sociocultural context in which these debates arose was the development of a commercial society in the Old Regime—or, rather, the widely shared anxiety that such a society was in the process of developing. The most important strand of revolutionary antinobility emerged from eighteenth-century political economy, a body of texts and voices concerned with the organization of agriculture, manufactures, commerce, and finance, and the relationship between these aspects of economic activity and the political, social, and moral life of the community.⁴ Political economy flourished in the decades after 1750, a period in which France enjoyed unprecedented commercial prosperity.

Many French political economists felt profoundly ambivalent about this new wealth.⁵ On the one hand, it was widely believed that commerce is a civilizing

¹ Colin Lucas, “Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *Past and Present*, no. 60 (1973), p. 121.

² Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 164–65.

³ Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology, and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1981).

⁴ In “The ‘Histories’ of Economic Discourse,” *Genealogies of Capitalism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1981), pp. 121–52, Keith Tribe defines political economy in the eighteenth century as an “administrative science,” a body of knowledge aimed at guiding the authorities in their regulation of economic life. This is, indeed, the character and emphasis of political economy produced during the first half of the eighteenth century in France, but as a characterization of the discourse in the decades after 1750 it is too constrictive.

⁵ I use the term “political economist” to refer to individuals who published books and pamphlets dealing with any aspect of economic life. Citizens of the French Republic of Letters used the epithet in no more specific a sense than this.

force that polishes and improves manners. Moreover, commercial strength was essential to the state's security in its hegemonic conflict with Great Britain. On the other hand, most political economists worried that the new wealth might bring with it a commercialization of social relations and of the human personality, which boded ill for the public welfare. For a majority of political economists, the idea of a "commercial" society—a society based on exchanges for profit—was a moral nullity.⁶ A society predicated on the pursuit of private interest would have no place for public virtue, and without public virtue, no society could hope to govern itself successfully. One of the central concerns of political economists was how to preserve the advantages of commerce while preventing the economic life of the country from undermining the public welfare.

In the eyes of many political economists, the key to solving this problem lay in the management of the human passion for honor. It was a commonplace of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social thought that men could be induced to behave virtuously by rewarding such behavior with honor. This kind of thinking was given new currency with the publication in 1748 of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des loix*, a work that argues that men who desire honorific rewards are forced to behave virtuously in order to win them.⁷ Animating their passion for honor could induce men to put the public welfare before narrow considerations of economic interest.

In the context of eighteenth-century political economy, however, a controversy developed over how the passion for honor might be manipulated to serve the public welfare most effectively. It was in the context of this controversy that an antinoble critique began to take shape. There were two primary axes of disagreement over the management of honor. Continuing a long tradition

⁶ An exception may have been Jacques Vincent de Gournay, an Intendant of Commerce and a prominent French political economist of the 1750s. See Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: Etat et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris, 1998), p. 317.

⁷ A seventeenth-century tradition of social thought associated with such figures as Pierre Nicole, the marquis de la Rochefoucauld, and Pierre Bayle emphasized that human beings, though naturally selfish, may be induced to behave virtuously when it flatters their vanity or their pride to do so. Thus, human vanity may be manipulated by a governing authority, which, by judiciously awarding honors, can tame the antisocial passions and enliven those that tend toward society's welfare. In the 1720s Bernard Mandeville contended in his *Fable of the Bees* that the "virtues" were nothing but the invention of clever politicians, that the legislators of classical Greece and Rome created "virtue" by flattering the pride of men with honorable distinctions when they behaved in "virtuous" ways. Mandeville regarded the desire to be praised as the sole principal that induces men to do anything praiseworthy. Montesquieu was in England at the height of the controversy raised by Mandeville's *Fable* and wrote in his journal that he would enthusiastically, if provisionally, accept Mandeville's main conclusions. See E. G. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 21.

of proude thought, some political economists argued that honor ought to be confined to nobles. According to this view, the nobility is the only social class capable of consistently placing the public good before private interest, a proclivity that follows from nobles' acute sensitivity to honor. Honor—usually in the form of titles, distinctions, or other graces—is conferred by the king to reward great deeds on the battlefield or other services to the state. According to proponents of nobility, *roturiers* are incapable of such accomplishments because they lack a strong “prejudice” in favor of honorific reward and because they are habituated to placing considerations of profit before considerations of honor. If honor is lavished on nonnobles, not only will it be wasted, but it will also lose its value for nobles, and there will be nothing left to spur them to public-spirited action.

Opponents of this view suggested that if the hope of honorific rewards could inspire the nobility to heroism on the battlefield or to service in the magistracy, it might also galvanize farmers and merchants to greater efforts in the economic realm. These commentators implicitly rejected the view that nonnobles are insensitive to honor and simultaneously articulated a wider sense of the public welfare—one that included the economic health of society. Beginning in the 1760s, proponents of this view began to develop a critique of hereditary nobility emphasizing that the noble monopoly on honor stifled “emulation” among nonnobles. Only by making nobility personal and using it to reward virtuous or useful actions, they argued, could the institution be reconciled with the common good.

Paradoxically, an ambivalence about the value of nobility also emerged from the initially conservative position that honor ought to be confined to nobles. This ambivalence took the form of an attack on titles and other formal distinctions of rank. While champions of the nobility never doubted that a noble lineage predisposed a man to virtuous and patriotic behavior, they were increasingly confronted with the fact that titles of nobility no longer necessarily entailed a glorious genealogy. As the Second Estate became increasingly venal over the course of the eighteenth century, titles fell inexorably into the hands of families distinguished by wealth rather than pedigree. Under such circumstances, proude reformers began to deploy a language that, while continuing to see noble birth as an aspect of merit, dismissed mere titles of nobility as empty formalities.

A second issue that divided would-be manipulators of honor was whether the distributor of honorific rewards ought to be the king or the public: that is, whether the gaze of the king could be depended on to discern the truly meritorious, or whether the monarch would merely reward his favorites. Once the legitimacy of the monarch's gaze was contested, the merit of the nobility—the chief beneficiary of past favor—became disputable. The strongest proponent of the view that the prince ought to be the font of honor was Montes-

quieu. The following section will analyze Montesquieu's thinking on the uses of honor and the reaction it provoked from the radical *philosophe* Claude-Adrien Helvétius. The dispute between the two philosophers highlights the terms of the debate between those who argued that the king should be the distributor of honor and those who claimed that honor must be the gift of the public.

Of course there were other sources of hostility to nobles in the eighteenth century. A series of sensational trials, publicized through lawyers' briefs, highlighted the nefarious activities of great noble families in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s.⁸ Attacks on aristocratic women and on the feminization of aristocratic culture also were a central aspect of radical discourse under the Old Regime.⁹ However, while these discourses exposed the wickedness of individual nobles, and perhaps implied the corruption of the nobility as a class, they did not delegitimize nobility as a category, and, indeed, the social value of "good" nobles was often piously affirmed. Under the more radical of the political economic critiques, by contrast, even a well-regulated and individually virtuous nobility was represented as antithetical to the public welfare. The political economic debate on the uses of honor constituted the most serious threat to nobility, because it represented both the internal weakening of the logic undergirding nobility and the development of a vision of a good society to which the existence of nobility was regarded as an obstacle.

HONOR AND THE MONARCH'S GAZE

The debate over whether the king or the public should be the source of honorific reward can most fruitfully be viewed within the framework of Jay Smith's argument concerning the transformation of the category "merit" in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Smith demonstrates that birth was commonly regarded as an aspect of merit in the Old Regime but that after 1750 this automatic attribution of virtue to nobility began to break down. In the seventeenth century, merit was constructed within the terms of a personal relationship between the king and his servant. To say that an individual had merit implied both that he possessed personal qualities such as generosity, liberality, and courage and that the sovereign had incurred an obligation toward him. Because merit was an aspect of the relationship between the king and his follower, Smith argues,

⁸ See Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1993).

⁹ See Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); Lynn Hunt, ed., *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore, 1991).

¹⁰ Jay M. Smith, *Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996).

only the gaze of the monarch could truly discern the meritorious. Under Louis XIV, however, this gaze was relocated to a “sprawling administrative matrix”;¹¹ increasingly, merit had to be judged by impersonal and objective criteria. As a result, according to Smith, qualities such as application, talent, and discipline became more central aspects of merit. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Smith contends, the idea that the gaze of the king alone could properly recognize merit was contested, first by administrative councils within the state that sought increasingly to use objective and impersonal criteria to discern merit, and ultimately by the public—or those who claimed to represent it. In the context of a depersonalization of the criteria used to define merit, the personal rewarding of merit by the king began to look more and more like favoritism.

The last great theorist of the view that the king should discern and reward honor was Montesquieu. For Montesquieu this process was the central mechanism for the cultivation of virtue in a monarchical order. In this *De l'esprit des loix*, Montesquieu outlines a taxonomy of three different types of “regime”: republics, monarchies, and despotisms. For Montesquieu, the three types are distinguished from one another primarily by their “principle,” the human passion that dominates the motivation of actors who live under that regime. The principle of a republic is “virtue”—which, as Montesquieu makes plain, is the civic virtue of the classical republics. A society in which men behave patriotically out of love for the public good is of course admirable, but it is feasible only in small city-states. Fortunately, according to Montesquieu, in large countries monarchies can produce the same happy effects through the manipulation of the human passion for honor. In a monarchy, to satisfy his passion for distinction and applause, a man must perform acts of heroism or public virtue that will bring him fame, good repute, and the consideration or favor of the sovereign. Thus, according to Montesquieu, when the subjects of a monarchy are allowed to play out their desire for honor, “each individual advances the public good, while he only thinks of promoting his own interest.”¹²

Although Montesquieu states that, in a monarchy, “each individual” will benefit society in his quest for honor, what he really seems to mean is that every nobleman will do so. The great deeds that Montesquieu foresees being accomplished in pursuit of honor are primarily feats of military heroism. The nobility occupy the decisive position in the conception he elaborates of a monarchical society; they are the class preeminently driven by the passion for honor. Indeed, at points in the book, Montesquieu seems to want to reserve honorific rewards exclusively for the nobility. He argues that tax-farmers must not be rewarded with honor: “Every profession has its particular lot. That of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹² Bk. 3, chap. 7.

the tax-farmers is wealth; and that wealth is its own reward. Glory and honor fall to the share of the nobility who are sensible of no other happiness."¹³ Montesquieu goes so far as to argue that honor will lose its value if tax-farming becomes an honored profession. And if honor loses its value, nothing will remain to motivate the subjects of a monarchy to heroic or virtuous action.

Indeed, Montesquieu implies, there would be little to distinguish such a degenerated monarchy from despotism. In a despotic system, according to Montesquieu, it is impossible to use honor to produce virtue. The despot destroys the value of honor by lavishing it on favorites who do not deserve it. Moreover, a despot cannot command the respect and fidelity that a rightful king can—his subjects are not motivated to pursue honor in the eyes of someone they despise. The principle of a despotism is fear, because it is this passion that primarily motivates the subjects of a tyrant.

Within a decade, Montesquieu's theories were challenged by his friend and fellow *philosophe* Helvétius. In his *De l'esprit* (1758), Helvétius collapsed Montesquieu's tripartite division of regimes into a binary opposition: republics and despotisms.¹⁴ Those characteristics that Montesquieu had regarded as peculiarly "monarchic," Helvétius divided between republics and arbitrary regimes. Thus, Helvétius attributed to republics that skillful manipulation of honor to produce virtuous behavior which Montesquieu had suggested was a characteristic of monarchy, implying that monarchies and despotisms were no different in this respect.

Helvétius's argument is a precocious statement of the view that the gaze of the king cannot be relied on to discern merit and that the gaze of the public will do so more efficiently. Helvétius observes that despotisms cannot successfully harness the passion for honor because arbitrary rulers distribute honors to the undeserving, thus rendering them worthless: "If honors receive their value from the manner in which they are administered, and if as in the East the sultans are the dispensers of them, it appears that they must bring them into discredit by the poor choice they make of those whom they decorate with them."¹⁵ Through an arbitrary distribution, honors lose their connection with true glory and become empty formalities. When honors are thus debased they are no longer the object of men's passions, and can no longer drive men to heroic action: "The desire of obtaining them grows cool, and this desire no longer drives men to achieve great things."¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., bk. 3, chap. 7. This should not be regarded as an absolute distinction for Montesquieu. In other parts of *De l'esprit des loix*, he advocates the ennoblement of particularly successful merchants. See bk. 20, chap. 22.

¹⁴ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'esprit* (1758; reprint, Verviers, 1973). Further citations refer to essay and chapter numbers.

¹⁵ Ibid., essay 3, chap. 24.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In republics, by contrast, honors are distributed in a judicious manner, because they are awarded by the people rather than by any government authority. This is why the ancient republics consistently nurtured more great men than the Eastern despotisms against which they fought: "Honors are nowhere distributed with more justice than among the people, who, having no other money to pay for the services rendered to their country, have consequently the greatest interest in maintaining their value: thus the poor republics of Greece and Rome have produced more great men than all the vast and rich empires of the East."¹⁷ Helvétius suggests that no authority other than the people can hope to be an objective distributor of honors. Certainly, such objectivity is beyond the abilities of any regime in which powerful or influential courtiers play a role: "What probity would that administration of honor demand in he who would set it in motion! What strength of character would it require to resist the intrigues of courtiers! What discernment to grant these honors only to great talents and distinguished virtues!"¹⁸

During the 1770s and 1780s, as Jay Smith shows, the view that the monarch might not be trusted to discern merit and reward it with honor gained ground within the absolutist state itself. In 1781, the baron de Bohan, an expert on military affairs, recommended that the king set up a *Conseil de la guerre*, made up of experienced officers, that would make all decisions concerning promotion in the army. Such a council was in fact adopted in 1787. As Smith notes, "The members of the *Conseil de la guerre* consciously worked to wrest away from the king much of his power to judge."¹⁹ As we will see, once the gaze of the monarch was deprived of legitimacy, the way was open to contest the merit of those formerly rewarded by kings with honors and other graces. The honor of the nobility was beginning to look like the reward for flattery, intrigue, and favor rather than recompense for true merit.

THE DEBATE ON THE *Noblesse commerçante*

In showing how the passion for honor can be exploited for the public welfare, Helvétius was probably responding not only to Montesquieu but also to a debate initiated in 1756 by the publication of a book entitled *La noblesse commerçante*.²⁰ The book sparked an explosive controversy in the 1750s because it exposed a fundamental cultural contradiction between two different conceptions of the public welfare. The author of the book, the abbé Coyer, suggested that the nobility ought to be encouraged to engage in trade in order

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Smith, p. 259.

²⁰ Gabriel François Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante* (London, 1756).

to animate commerce and thus to aid the state in its geopolitical struggle with Great Britain. Critics of Coyer, led by the chevalier d'Arcq, argued that nobles must be prevented from trading at all costs, because only by preserving noble fascination with honor could the public virtue necessary for successful soldiering be cultivated. Both visions were ultimately predicated on advancing the military welfare of the state, but for d'Arcq this welfare depended primarily on the quality of the officer corps, while for Coyer success in international commerce was more important. The debate generated by the book brought to public prominence the question of whether the passion for honor could best be harnessed within the structure of a society of orders, with the nobility playing a central role, or whether greater benefits could be realized by democratizing honor and using the passion for distinction common to all Frenchmen to induce them to behave in socially useful ways.

The author of *La noblesse commerçante* was a moderately successful literary figure who sought to acquire a more serious reputation for himself by turning to the new philosophic fad of the 1750s—political economy.²¹ Coyer associated himself with the group of young men around Vincent de Gournay, the Intendant of Commerce, who were engaged at the time in translating important works of English political economy into French and in producing some political economic literature of their own.²² Public interest in political economy during the 1750s and 1760s was little short of a mania.²³ A contemporary political economist, the abbé Galiani, described this newfound passion for economic thought as “an enthusiasm, a fashion, a Crusade . . . one of those epidemics of the mind which assails the French nation from time to time.”²⁴

In *La noblesse commerçante*, Coyer suggests that poor nobles ought to be allowed to involve themselves in all manner of commerce without fear of sanction, a subject that was topical in the mid-1750s after the appearance of an essay, written by the marquis de Lassay, suggesting that if nobles were allowed to trade the results would be disastrous for French military power.²⁵

²¹ For biographical details on Coyer's life and other writings, see Leonard Adams, *Coyer and the Enlightenment*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vol. 123 (Banbury, Oxfordshire, 1974).

²² See Gustave Schelle, *Vincent de Gournay* (1897; reprint, Geneva and Paris, 1984); Antoin E. Murphy, “Le développement des idées économiques en France (1750–1756),” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 33 (1986): 521–41.

²³ For detailed figures on the enormous production of political economic literature in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, see Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992), p. 75.

²⁴ Quoted in Jean-Claude Perrot, “Nouveautés: L'économie politique et ses livres,” in *Le livre triomphant: 1660–1830*, vol. 2 of *Histoire de l'édition française*, ed. Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin (Paris, 1984), p. 248. Galiani's comments appeared in a letter to Sartine, the lieutenant général de police.

²⁵ Although various French monarchs had passed statutes permitting nobles to be-

However, although his book was ostensibly concerned with removing the obstacles that prevented impoverished nobles from mending their fortunes in trade, it was not really sympathy for the plight of provincial *hobereaux* (country squires) that led Coyer to write *La noblesse commerçante*. The book was published in 1756, on the eve of the Seven Years' War, and its framing preoccupation was with the hegemonic commercial rivalry between France and Great Britain. Coyer feared that Britain had drawn ahead in the race for world domination through a more thorough exploitation of its commercial resources, a feat it had achieved because the British honored commerce and the merchants who pursued it while France scorned them. The real reason why Coyer wanted to get the poor nobility involved in commerce was not (or not primarily) so that they might recoup their fortunes. Rather, Coyer wanted to borrow the luster of their birth, their honor, and their stock of social legitimacy for the sake of commerce. Throughout the book, Coyer pleads that commerce should be honored and insists that commerce flourishes where it is respected. Coyer did not believe that monetary profit was incentive enough for commercial activity in France. Commerce required the spur of honor.²⁶

Coyer's most eloquent critic was Philippe Auguste de Saint-Foix, chevalier d'Arcq, a doubly illegitimate grandson of Louis XIV (he was the bastard son of Louis XIV's bastard son, the comte de Toulouse). D'Arcq, following the marquis de Lassay, contended that the nobility ought to stay out of trade lest they become infected with a spirit of calculation.²⁷ According to d'Arcq, the

come involved in wholesale and international commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and although nobles were heavily involved in some economic sectors such as mining and shipping, the practice of retail commerce was still closed to them. On noble commercial involvements, see Guy Richard, *Noblesse d'affaires au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1974). See Lassay, "Réflexions," *Mercure de France*, vol. 2 (December 1754). For an excellent summary of the debate engendered by *La noblesse commerçante*, see J. Q. C. Mackrell, "The Nobility and Business," in his *The Attack on "Feudalism" in Eighteenth-Century France* (London and Toronto, 1973), pp. 77–103.

²⁶ To fully appreciate the force of Coyer's argument, it is important to remember that a considerable stigma had traditionally been attached to the merchant profession in France. Merchants were commonly regarded as crooked, grasping, and egoistic people who would cheat the consumer at any opportunity. A typical expression of this negative attitude toward traders is offered by La Bruyère in his *Caractères*: "A tradesman carefully displays his goods, so that he may sell you the worst; he uses a preparation to give them a luster, or else holds them in a false light, to conceal their defects and make them appear sound; he charges too much for them, so as to sell them for more than they are worth; he has false and mysterious trademarks, so that people may believe they are getting full value for their money; he uses a short yard measure, so that the buyer may obtain as little for his money as possible, and has a pair of scales to make sure the gold he receives is of full weight." Jean de La Bruyère, "Des biens de fortune," in *Les caractères* (Paris, 1688), in par. 43.

²⁷ Philippe Auguste de Saint-Foix, chevalier d'Arcq, *La noblesse militaire, ou le patriote français* (n.p., 1756).

nobility is entrusted with the single most important social function, that of protecting the nation, and to perform this function nobles must be courageous. D'Arcq suggests that men act courageously because this brings them the esteem of their fellows and the consideration of society. Only nobles are sensitive enough to considerations of honor to be valorous in battle and thus to be effective warriors. He observes that it is essential to preserve this "prejudice" among the nobility if the nation is to remain well defended. The animating passion of commerce, by contrast, is "interest"—the desire for wealth. The personality structure that commerce demands and creates is that of the "calculator." Nothing could be further from the military spirit. The merchant does not care enough about honor—he is not vainglorious enough—to chase madly after glory. Once a soldier begins to calculate and weigh his interest against his vanity, he will become incapable of the kind of valor that soldiering requires.

D'Arcq's argument concerning the way nobility tends to produce battlefield heroism is only one example of a broader Old Regime discourse that sought to explain why "virtue" could be expected to follow from noble birth. Many of the same assumptions underlie the thinking of La Bruyère when he explains the connection between nobility and virtue.

The common soldier entertains no thoughts of becoming famous and dies unremarked, among the crowd . . . this is one of the sources of the lack of courage in the low and servile conditions. Those, on the contrary, whose birth distinguishes them from the common people, and who are exposed to the eyes of men, to their censures and praises, are capable of transcending their temperaments even if they are not naturally courageous; and this disposition of heart and mind, which passes from their ancestors to their descendants, is that courage so often found among persons of noble birth, and is perhaps nobility itself.²⁸

²⁸ La Bruyère, "Des grandes," in *Les caractères*, par. 41. Perhaps the earliest example of an argument, similar to d'Arcq's, claiming that nobles tend to be more virtuous than commoners because they are conscious of the gaze of others upon them can be found in Baldesar Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (1528). First translated into French in 1537, *Il cortegiano* became an influential courtesy manual in France during the seventeenth century. Castiglione has one of his courtiers, Count Ludovico da Canossa, state that "noble birth is like a bright lamp that makes manifest and visible deeds both good and bad, kindling and spurring on to virtue as much for fear of dishonor as for hope of praise. And since this luster of nobility does not shine forth in the deeds of the lowly born, they lack that spur, as well as the fear of dishonor, nor do they think themselves obliged to go beyond what was done by their forefathers; whereas to the wellborn it seems a reproach not to attain at least to the mark set them by their ancestors" (Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* [Garden City, N.Y., 1959], p. 39). In a similar observation, the marquis d'Argenson notes that it can be presumed that those born noble will have "distinguished sentiments of courage and virtue; that the example of their ancestors continually preaches to them the glory of imitating them and the horror of degenerating." René-Louis le Voyer, marquis d'Argenson, *Considérations sur le*

In the social logic of which La Bruyère and d’Arcq are representative, it is vital to insure that some people—namely nobles—remain sensitive to considerations of personal and familial honor. If nobles start to become more concerned with making money than with upholding the name of their ancestors, then the nation as a whole will suffer.

D’Arcq’s comments can, of course, be interpreted as an apology for a selfish nobility. But regardless of personal motivations, his argument resonated with a wider public because it tapped into anxieties that French society was becoming commercialized and that this process would prevent the cultivation of public virtue and lead to a weakening of the state.²⁹ A typical attack on the

gouvernement ancien et présent de la France, comparé avec celui des autres états; suivies d’un nouveau plan d’administration (1744; reprint, Amsterdam, 1784), p. 14.

²⁹ D’Arcq’s argument was seconded by many other participants in the war of words that followed the publication of *La noblesse commerçante*. Among them was a Madame Belot, who alerts her readers to the dangers of introducing the “spirit of calculation” in place of the “military spirit” (Octavie Guichard, dame Belot, *Observations sur la noblesse et le tiers-état* [Amsterdam, 1758], p. 7). Belot notes that “a vast kingdom has needs that a great number of citizens prefer the vanity of rank, public consideration, the immortality of the name, the favor of the sovereign, to the tranquil *douceurs* of opulence” (p. 111). If the military spirit ceases to be the soul of the nation, she fears, the “French Empire” will fall either to the Scylla of invasion from abroad or the Charybdis of internal despotism. Belot’s prognostications of disaster seem to be based on a frank acknowledgment of the attractiveness of wealth and a life spent in its pursuit. She seems to believe that, without the sentiment of honor to keep him in arms, the noble would quickly adopt a life oriented to private interest and profit. Similarly, in his *Lettre à l’auteur de la noblesse commerçante* (Bordeaux, 1756), the abbé Barthoul notes that it is dangerous to change the spirit of a country: “A commercial nobility confuses ranks: France henceforth will be the theater of revolutions, like England” (p. 31). According to the abbé, it is honor, prejudice, *amour propre*, and the desire for glory and distinction that have made the French soldier invincible. But if Coyer’s scheme were realized, interest would take the place of honor, and France would become a nation of calculators. Barthoul concludes that when “the members of each rank are occupied as they ought to be: all is in equilibrium” (p. 38). In his *Le commerce remis à sa place; réponse d’un pédant de collège aux novateurs politiques . . .* (n.p., 1756), an author named J. J. Garnier agrees, arguing that the “principle” of a monarchy is honor. Garnier defines honor as “an elevated sentiment that makes us scorn fortune, the conveniences of life, even life itself in order to acquire consideration.” Those schooled in commerce, he warns, “will not sacrifice what they will call real goods for imaginary and fantastic goods”; “the merchant . . . tramples underfoot the marks of honor in order to follow interest” (pp. 24–26). To mention just two other examples of anti-Coyer pamphlets, De La Hausse notes in his *La noblesse telle qu’elle doit être, ou moyen de l’employer utilement pour elle-même et pour la patrie* (Amsterdam and Paris, 1758) that “each estate has its spirit; the nobility has its (and merchants have their’s): that of the nobility is quite distinct from that of commerce, which is only a spirit of calculation and interest” (p. 7). And E.-L. Billardon de Sauvigny, in his *L’une ou l’autre, ou la noblesse commerçante et militaire, avec des réflexions sur le commerce*

commercialization of society was launched by the baron de Haller from the pages of the *Dictionnaire universel* in 1780.³⁰ Haller suggests that his own age could be called a “mercantile century” because the “spirit of traffic” is so strong in all nations. Because an incentive structure based on the pursuit of gain is incompatible with an incentive structure based on the pursuit of honor, according to Haller, the spread of this mercantile spirit will destroy the love of glory and deprive virtue, talent, and merit of the environment they require to flourish. Why, after all, Haller asks, should a person cultivate virtue and talent when consideration is given to “colossuses of money” only?³¹ Haller does not deny that commerce can be beneficial, but the commercial spirit must be kept within the bounds of the mercantile profession: “Retained within its limits, [the spirit of commerce] is a fertile source for vivifying society, but going beyond its bounds, it becomes a torrent and swallows up virtue and talents.”³² In a country where only money is respected, “the best born spirits will be plunged in the details of commerce, and all the nation will be mercantile.”³³

Such fears must be viewed against the background of unprecedented commercial prosperity in the second half of the eighteenth century. From a low point in economic production reached just after the War of the Spanish Succession, the French economy began to recover in the 1720s and 1730s, and economic growth was quite impressive in the decades between 1750 and the 1790s.³⁴ Growth rates in average real output and income per head may have been comparable to those in England during the same period.³⁵ One estimate suggests a fourfold expansion of Britain’s industrial output in the eighteenth century, with French growth increasing by a factor of seven.³⁶ Between 1730 and the late 1770s, according to one reckoning, the country’s overall trade expanded between 400 and 500 percent.³⁷ Internal commerce did not grow at

et les moyens de l’encourager (Mahon, 1756), suggests that if nobles are allowed to trade they will lose their taste for war (p. 54).

³⁰ Baron de Haller, “Du commerce et du luxe,” *Dictionnaire universel des sciences morale, économique, politique et diplomatique: ou Bibliothèque de l’homme-d’état et du citoyen*, vol. 12 (London, 1780).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 556.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 559.

³⁴ Jan Marczewski, “The Take-Off Hypothesis and French Experience,” in *The Economics of Take-Off into Sustained Growth*, ed. W. W. Rostow (London, 1963), p. 137.

³⁵ François Crouzet, “England and France in the Eighteenth Century: A Comparative Analysis of Two Economic Growths,” in *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England*, ed. R. M. Hartwell (London, 1967), pp. 139–74.

³⁶ Don R. Leet and John A. Shaw, “French Economic Stagnation, 1700–1960: Old Economic History Revisited,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8, no. 3 (1978): 531–44.

³⁷ Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1970–82), 2:503.

the same rate as foreign trade, but in this area all indicators point to a healthy increase in the circulation of goods. In addition, manufacturing increased its share in the gross domestic product of the country from a mere 5 percent of the total in 1700 to about 13 percent by the 1780s—testament to strong growth in the textile industry. Between 1715 and 1790, industrial growth proceeded at a rate of approximately 1.9 percent, with a marked upturn after 1750—a rate higher than Britain's in the same period.

A CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUE OF RANK HONOR

Ironically, the kind of thinking of which d'Arcq and Haller are representative gave rise to a corrosive critique of nobility. Faced with the widespread sale of venal offices that granted immediate or near immediate ennoblement to wealthy families, some commentators came to the conclusion that titles and other formal distinctions of rank had lost their association with true nobility and had become mere commodities. Fueled by the commercial revolution generating the immense capital necessary to buy such offices, ennoblement by this means increased dramatically in the 1730s and remained high until the Revolution. During this period, according to David Bien, the office of *secrétaire du roi* alone brought nine hundred to one thousand new nobles and their families into the Second Estate each generation—a rate of nearly one family per week.³⁸ By 1789, the bulk of the Second Estate owed its origins to venality in the previous two hundred years. One historian relates that, in a district of the Beauvaisis, “of fifty-eight noblemen who assembled to draw up their list of grievances in 1789, only ten could trace their origins back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, most dated from the reign of Louis XIV, and sixteen from the period after 1740.”³⁹

The fact that nobility was bought and sold undercut the logic on which the arguments of men like d'Arcq and Haller were based. These champions of the nobility argued that nobles are more likely to be public-spirited or heroic because they grow up in noble families that offer them heroic ancestors to emulate and that impart to them a strong personal sense of honor. But by the latter part of the eighteenth century, a great many “nobles” had only tax-farmers, financiers, or merchants for ancestors, and many had not grown up in noble families at all. For instance, the children and grandchildren of a *secrétaire du roi* who became nobles on his death or retirement had been brought up, not in noble families, but in mercantile ones.

Anxiety about the value of formal-rank honor may be discerned as early as the *Noblesse commerçante* debate. In a pamphlet published during the contro-

³⁸ David D. Bien, “Manufacturing Nobles: The Chancelleries in France to 1789,” *Journal of Modern History* 61, no. 3 (1989): 479, 485.

³⁹ C. B. A. Behrens, *The Ancien Régime* (London, 1967), p. 73.

versy, J. H. Marchand suggests that nobles ought to claim distinction on the basis of their personal superiority, not on the basis of titles that can be bought and sold.⁴⁰ Marchand, an *avocat*, royal censor, and prolific hack, points out that everyone wants to be noble, a desire that has its source in the unquenchable spring of *amour-propre*.⁴¹ The question is how to make use of this passion for the advantage of society and the kingdom. Marchand suggests that “estate” should be a reward for virtue, probity, and service to the *patrie*. He then goes on to describe, in a satirical tone, the way a free market in honor might function. Why not, he suggests, make nobility “*commerçable*” rather than “*commerçante*”?⁴² A poor noble should be able to sell fifteen or twenty years of his nobility to a rich man in order to recover his ruined fortunes. The age, quality, and kind of nobility would determine the price. In this way, there would be no new nobility, just an old nobility that circulated. Of course this proposal is ludicrous, but it allows Marchand to emphasize the fact that nobility had in fact become a commodity. The point of the satire becomes clear in the closing pages: according to Marchand, when nobility is sold openly, nobles have to rely on their own courage and virtue—which cannot be bought and sold—rather than on titles to distinguish them.⁴³

⁴⁰ J. H. Marchand, *La noblesse commerçable ou ubiquiste* (Amsterdam, 1756).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴³ One of the clearest statements of the view that formal titles of nobility had become an adjunct of a commercial rather than an honorific incentive structure was elaborated by the British critic John Brown. Brown’s *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, 2 vols. (London, 1757), was perhaps the most influential eighteenth-century moral treatise published in Britain, and it won a European reputation for its author. The *Estimate* was translated almost immediately into French and published as *Les mœurs angloises, ou appréciation des mœurs et des principes qui caractérisent actuellement la nation britannique*. Brown notes that the “Principle of Honour,” that is, “The Desire of Fame, or the Applause of Men, directed to the End of public Happiness,” is no longer to be found among Englishmen (1:58). It has been replaced, according to Brown, by “the Pride of *Equipage*, the Pride of *Title*, the Pride of *Fortune*, or the Pride of *Dress*, that have assumed the Empire over our Souls” (1:58–59). Here, Brown assimilates formal rank—“title”—to wealth, dress, and other frivolous accoutrements. According to Brown, title is no guarantee that a person will desire “the Applause of Men, directed to the End of public Happiness.” Brown complains that a mercantile incentive structure prevails in England, banishing the public spirit associated with the “Principle of Honour.” According to Brown, a man who goes out of his way in pursuit of glory to serve the public at his own expense would be thought an idiot: “the Laurel Wreath, once aspired after as the highest Object of Ambition, would now be rated at the Market-price of its Materials, and derided as a *Three-penny Crown*. And if its modern Substitutes, the *Ribbon* or the *Coronet*, be eagerly sought for, it is not that they are regarded as the *Distinctions of public Virtue*, but as the *Ensigns of Vanity and Place*” (1:59–60). Again Brown dissociates formal distinctions of rank—“the *Ribbon* or the *Coronet*”—from heroic action or public virtue, and implies that they are appurtenances of a commercial incentive structure. Brown attributes this collapse of

By the early 1780s, the tensions in pronoble discourse that Marchand had so skillfully exposed had ripened to the extent that many nobles and pronoble reformers customarily denounced titles and other formal distinctions of rank as empty forms. As Jay Smith puts it, “Many well-established nobles who were firmly committed to the idea of an all-noble officer corps found themselves attacking those signs of distinction and privilege most apt to be associated with the nobility in the popular imagination.”⁴⁴ Noble reformers in the army did not reject the view that having noble ancestors to emulate makes one a better officer. Indeed, the logic of this view still permeated the French military establishment in the early 1780s and inspired such initiatives as the Ségur army reforms in 1781.⁴⁵ But by the 1770s, these same military reformers were attacking “distinctions” and titles as chimeras. Nobility no longer signified an exalted ancestry; indeed, it was often the possession of those just ennobled. Burgeoning venality in the eighteenth century had created a disjunction that could no longer be ignored between titles and the “reality” of nobility.

USING HONOR TO ENCOURAGE COMMERCE AND AGRICULTURE

After all the criticism heaped on Coyer’s *Noblesse commerçante*, the idea that nobles ought to involve themselves in trade seems to have lost momentum. However, the underlying logic of Coyer’s view—that commerce could be energized by making it honorable—was to enjoy an extraordinarily successful career in French political economy over the next thirty years. Instead of arguing that nobles ought to become involved in commerce so that the stigma attached to trade would be lifted, political economists suggested that merchants who were particularly successful should be showered with honors by the state.⁴⁶

the principle of honor to the effects of an overextended commerce. While commerce has beneficial effects in the early and middle stages of its development, according to Brown, in the later stages it is “dangerous and fatal” (1:152). In properly “commercial” societies such as Holland, the desire of applause and the fear of shame are altogether extinguished by the ruling passion for gain. In “mixed” societies such as England, by contrast, the excess of trade and wealth destroys the principle of honor by fixing the desire for applause and the fear of shame on ridiculous objects such as dress, equipage, and formal rank (1:170–71).

⁴⁴ Smith (n. 10 above), p. 245.

⁴⁵ The Ségur reforms, as David Bien points out, were directed at keeping the sons of *anoblis* out of the officer corps and limiting commissions to the scions of old military families. The reforms were based on the belief that boys raised in families with a military tradition would make better officers than those raised in newly ennobled families. See David Bien, “The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution,” *Past and Present*, no. 85 (1979), pp. 68–98.

⁴⁶ The idea that commerce could be encouraged by conferring honors on successful merchants was raised in the early part of the eighteenth century by the abbé de Saint-

The logic of this view was that the prospect of winning honors would act as a spur to enterprise and would prevent merchant families from leaving trade to become landowners or office holders.

A number of different motivations underlay this political economic discourse. Some of the proponents of the view that merchants should be honored were themselves merchants and obviously stood to gain from an increase in social esteem for their profession. But it would be wrong to see political economy, broadly speaking, as the expression of mercantile interests. Businessmen did not play a central role in the elaboration of the discourse. Indeed, if it was associated disproportionately with any one class, it was the nobility.⁴⁷ Another motivation for arguing that economic activity should be animated using honorific distinctions might be found in *raison d'état*—the state stood to gain in its wider struggle with other great powers by maximizing its economic resources. Finally, the argument can also be seen as an attempt to save society from commercialization by bringing economic agents into the charmed circle of a social incentive structure based on honor.

One of the clearest statements of the view that merchants must be honored in order to encourage commerce, and one of the most succinct synopses of the underlying logic of this view, was outlined by a Bordeaux merchant, L. H. Dudevant de Bordeaux, in a tract written in 1777.⁴⁸ The basic logic of Dudevant's perspective is that if the passion for honor can be exploited so successfully in the military sphere, then why not use the same principle to encourage people to perform well in the field of commerce? Dudevant contends that one of the greatest obstacles to the growth of French commerce is the prejudice of

Pierre. See Mackrell, *Attack on "Feudalism,"* (n. 25 above), 80. François Veron de Forbonnais made the same suggestion in his authoritative *Elements de commerce*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1754), 1:84.

⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Perrot gives the following figures for the social background of French political economists in the eighteenth century:

	1715–75	1776–89
Clergy (%)	26.5	11.5
Nobility (%)	37.5	39.4
Commons (%)	36.0	49.1

See Perrot (n. 23 above), p. 78. Christine Théré points out that less than 3 percent of the eighteenth-century political economic authors for whom biographical information can be obtained were merchants. See "L'édition économique et ses auteurs en 1789," in *La pensée économique pendant la révolution française*, ed. Gilbert Faccarello and Philippe Steiner (Grenoble, 1990), pp. 59–65.

⁴⁸ L. Hte. Dudevant de Bordeaux, *L'apologie du commerce, essai philosophique et politique . . . suivi de diverses réflexions sur le commerce en général, sur celui de la France en particulier, & sur les moyens propres à l'accroître & le perfectionner* (Geneva, 1777).

the nation. He complains that the nobility, who, more than any other corps, ought to have the benefit of the country at heart, have long regarded commerce as a vile and unworthy *état*.⁴⁹ Because of this prejudice, when a merchant passes on a fortune to his son, the son gives up trade and buys an office, causing a continual drain of money and talent out of commerce. Among the nobility, Dudevant points out, the love of glory draws a man from a quiet country life, or a life of city pleasures, and throws him into wars and battles. Similarly, the love of an honorable condition induces the nobility of the robe to give up the pleasures of youth for the rigors of study.⁵⁰ The love of glory thus has very positive effects in these estates. But with commerce, this same love of glory draws men out of their employment where, for the good of the country, they ought to stay. Therefore, he suggests, commerce must be made honorable. To do this, Dudevant proposes that wholesale merchant families who maintain an honorable commerce through three generations be ennobled, so long as the ennobled generation agrees to remain in commerce.⁵¹

The view that commerce could be encouraged by bringing it under the umbrella of an incentive structure that would reward appropriate behavior with applause and distinction was also applied to agriculture—though there was much initial skepticism about the idea that farmers had the sophistication to find honors alluring. An article in the *Journal de commerce* of 1759 suggests that, whereas merchants crave honor and consideration, the farmer is not interested in this kind of reward: “Gentleness, humanity, equity in a superior, good food, and good clothing; it is these that constitute the happiness of the cultivator. . . . His ambition does not raise itself to more exalted objects of ambition at all.”⁵² But other authors came forward to testify that even the humblest peasants could be actuated by the desire for distinction. For example, a Breton noble named Pinczon du Sel des Mons proposes the use of honorific distinctions to animate agriculture, suggesting that a prize, “a distinctive mark,” be awarded in each parish to the farmer who brings the most wasteland into cultivation:⁵³ Pinczon notes with satisfaction that even peasants are subject to “emulation.” He remarks that young peasants will exert all their efforts to win a prize at a fete, even if this prize is merely a bouquet or a ribbon.⁵⁴ The rudest entrepreneurs could be inserted into an incentive structure based on honor.

The argument that farmers and merchants must be honored in order to en-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵² “Réflexions sur le mérite du négociant et sur la considération qui lui est due,” *Journal de commerce* (1759): 1:53–54.

⁵³ Pinczon du Sel des Mons, *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne* (n.p., 1756), p. 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

courage agriculture and commerce may have brought about a transformation of attitudes toward economic life by giving some currency to two new assumptions. The first of these held that farming and trade contribute to the public welfare—an assumption that tended to break down the distinction between *oikos* and *polis*, economic activity and the exercise of public functions, elevating the former to the same status as the latter. The second was that farmers and merchants are sensitive to considerations of honor and thus are not locked into an interest-based personality structure—are not, that is, incapable of public spirit. Commercial life, long assumed to be inimical to the cultivation of public virtue, was reevaluated, in the context of these arguments, as a kind of public service, and merchants, long presumed to be incapable of public spirit, were reimagined as potential patriots.

The argument that honor could be used to encourage agriculture became a cliché of economic and agronomic thought in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was commonly held that one of the chief causes of what was perceived in this period to be a depression in French agriculture was the fact that enterprising people would not stay in an *état* that was held in contempt.⁵⁵ In response to an essay competition organized by the Académie Royale des Belles-Lettres of Caen, one author drew attention to the distinctions used in China to make agriculture a more honorable profession. Every year, according to the author, the grand mandarin of each province sends the name of the cleverest and most virtuous farmer of his district to the emperor. The emperor then accords the selected farmer the dignities of a mandarin, with all the decorations and privileges that go with that office.⁵⁶ The Physiocrats also saw much to be imitated in the Chinese example. Quesnay, leader of the “sect,” frequently referred in glowing terms to the honor accorded agriculture by the Chinese emperor who, once a year, would plow part of a rice field himself.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Nor was this sort of reasoning confined to French economic thinkers. The Italian jurist and political economist, Beccaria, noting “the extreme abjection into which the farming profession has fallen,” suggests that the way to deal with this problem is to honor agriculture and to give the farmer his due “recognition.” Noting that “everyone wishes to shine above his fellows,” Beccaria suggests that “the most laborious among the cultivators in a village [should] obtain a distinctive sign, which, by drawing the gaze of his equals, would excite a praiseworthy emulation and prepare for them a better future.” Cesare Bonesana, marquis de Beccaria, *Principes d'économie politique appliqués à l'agriculture* ([1760s?]; reprint, Paris, 1852), pp. 35–37.

⁵⁶ See the review of the essay, “Discours qui a remporté le prix à l'Académie Royale des Belles-Lettres de Caen, sur cette question: Quelles sont les distinctions que l'on peut accorder aux riches laboureurs, tant propriétaires que fermiers, pour fixer et multiplier les familles dans cet état utile et respectable, sans en ôter la simplicité qui en est la base essentielle,” in *Ephémérides du citoyen, ou Bibliothèque raisonnée des sciences morales et politiques* 1 (1767): 166–67. The author of the original essay was one M. Dornai, director of the Academy of Rouen.

⁵⁷ Georges Weulersse, whose scholarship remains the best guide to Physiocratic

Proposals to animate commerce and agriculture using honor appear to have been pursued with some vigor by both the monarchy and private individuals in the 1770s and 1780s. Twice as many people were ennobled between 1760 and 1780 as between 1712 and 1760—four times as many administrators and artists, and twelve times as many merchants.⁵⁸ The monarchy attempted to display its respect for agriculture in other symbolic ways. The future Louis XVI, presumably in imitation of the Chinese emperor, lent a hand in plowing a field—at least this is what a print commemorating the event would have us believe.⁵⁹ Louis XV had agricultural experiments performed on the royal domain at his own expense. Finally, it is recorded that an individual proprietor attempted to mobilize the energies of neighboring farmers by establishing a festival of “vaillants et francs laboureurs,” where the two best farmers occupied the places of honor beside the patron of the village.⁶⁰

FROM HONOR AND EMULATION TO ANTINOBLISM

The kind of thinking that called for the use of honor to encourage commerce and agriculture was not explicitly antinoble, but the logic on which it rested was antithetical to that on which the legitimation of nobility depended. First, by arguing that an honor-based incentive structure should be extended into the economic realm, it undermined the view that nonnobles are purely “calculators” and thus incapable of the kind of patriotism and heroism that nobles alone display. Second, it prepared the way for the idea that the human passion for honor can most successfully be exploited for society’s benefit if the competition for honor is extended to as many areas of life and as many social actors as possible, rather than confining the competition for honor to nobles. Third, and most subtly, arguments of this sort began to change attitudes about the qualities that are worthy of honor. The older view was that honor ought to

thought, suggests that the Physiocrats placed far greater emphasis on economic incentives than on honorific ones. While this is substantially true (they were criticized by Mably for overemphasizing economic incentive at the expense of honorific incentive; see Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Doutes proposées aux philosophes économistes, sur l'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* [La Haye, 1768], p. 11), the Physiocrats by no means rejected the efficacy of honorific incentives for agriculture. Weulersse notes the importance of the argument, across a broad section of French opinion, that agriculture must be honored in order to encourage it. See Weulersse, *Le mouvement physiocratique en France (de 1756 à 1770)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1910), 1:367.

⁵⁸ See Chaussinand-Nogaret (n. 2 above), p. 36.

⁵⁹ The print was engraved by P.-M.-A. Boizot at the request of Poulin de Fleins. For a copy, see Perrot (n. 24 above), p. 246.

⁶⁰ Weulersse, 2:156.

go to birth, and commentators such as the chevalier d'Arcq offered coherent justifications for this position. In contrast, the discourse on the use of honor to encourage economic activity set out from the premise that work, enterprise, and production ought to be honored because these activities are useful to the country and serve the public good.

One of the earliest explicitly antinoble tracts that draws upon and develops the antinoble potential implicit in the argument that agriculture and commerce should be honored is the abbé Pierre Jaubert's *Eloge de la roture* (1766).⁶¹ Jaubert, a collaborator on Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and a member of the Academy of Bordeaux, takes up the elements immanent in the view that economic activity ought to be honored and molds them into a critique of hereditary nobility. He draws a positive picture of the virtue and patriotism of nonnobles, pointing to the regularity and order of their domestic arrangements, their industry, their economy, and their love of work.⁶² He notes that the Third Estate is the richest corps and thus makes the greatest financial contribution to the state.⁶³ The Third Estate is the most necessary order of the nation: it is the executor of all the mechanical and liberal arts, of agriculture, commerce, navigation, and the sciences. The virtue and utility of the order entitles it to honor, not to the contempt of an arrogant nobility.

Jaubert is not satisfied with pointing out that commoners ought to be honored because they are virtuous, useful, and industrious. He also casts a jaundiced eye on the nobility, denying that it deserves much of honor that it currently monopolizes.⁶⁴ He contends that the virtue and valor of the nobility have been exaggerated at the expense of *roturiers*; noble officers have taken credit for the heroic actions of their subordinates in the Third Estate. According to Jaubert, many generals owe the honors they have won not to personal merit but to flattery and protection.

⁶¹ Abbé Pierre Jaubert, *Eloge de la roture dédié aux roturiers* (London, 1766). Jaubert (1715–80) was the *curé* of Cestas, a parish near Bordeaux. He was elected a member of the Academy of the port city in May 1751. Some of his other works include a *Dissertation sur un temple octogone . . . à Sestas* (1743) and *Causes de la dépopulation, et moyens d'y remédier* (1767). He also edited the *Dictionnaire raisonné universel des arts et métiers* (1773).

⁶² Jaubert, *Eloge de la roture dédié aux roturiers*, pp. 47–51.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.

⁶⁴ The contrast that Jaubert draws between the domestic order of common people and the dearth of personal merit among nobles was a stock-in-trade of sentimental drama and the sentimental novel. See, e.g., Michel-Jean Sedaine, *Le roi et le fermier* (Paris, 1762), which was first shown at the *Comédie italienne* in November 1762. In this sentimental play, the virtue of an honest woodsman, Richard, is repeatedly contrasted with the villainous antics of Milord Lurewel, a *grand seigneur*. In the dénouement of the drama, the king banishes the wicked Lurewel from his presence and ennobles the virtuous Richard.

Ultimately, Jaubert suggests that personal nobility ought to be substituted for hereditary nobility, because the former encourages emulation while the latter stifles it. Jaubert contends that nobility was a privilege originally granted by commoners to the bravest and wisest of their number as a reward and to encourage emulation. These rewards for virtue were not passed on to descendants except “when . . . they rendered themselves worthy of them through great actions.”⁶⁵ Being a reward for virtue, nobility ought to be personal, not hereditary. Any other policy would be foolish because it is perfectly obvious that virtue and merit do not necessarily run in families and that families with noble ancestors degenerate.

Jaubert’s argument was echoed by other commentators in the 1770s and 1780s. Augustin Rouille d’Orfeuil, intendant of Champagne from 1765 until 1790, suggested that agriculture be encouraged by rewarding particularly active and enterprising farmers with honor.⁶⁶ He combined this warm endorsement of emulation and the use of honor to stimulate agriculture with a frontal attack on the “hereditary principle,” denouncing the latter as an absurdity on the grounds that nobility must be a purely personal reward for public service if “emulation” is to be encouraged. Much the same point was articulated by Jean-André Perreau in an imaginary dialogue between a king of Lydia and his faithful councilor, Ismin. Perreau has the king ask Ismin if “the heredity of the name” is not a property like any other that should be heritable. Ismin denies that honor can be hereditary because it is accorded only personally, and for the lifetime of the person so honored: “Glory, in a word, is a public property, inalienable, and accorded for life only; nobody can transmit, as a title to property, a good of which he only has the usufruct.”⁶⁷

THE STRUCTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY ANTINOBLILISM

The revolutionary onslaught on nobility drew together themes from all the dissident discourses on the management of honor—the view that commerce and agriculture ought to be honored in order to stimulate production; the discourse voicing concern that a commercial society was replacing one based on honor, with disastrous consequences; and the theory exemplified by Helvétius’s *De l’esprit*, which argued that the public alone ought to be the dispenser of

⁶⁵ This theme is anticipated in a pamphlet published in the context of the *Noblesse commerçante* debate: M. A. Rochon de Chabonnes, *La noblesse oisive* (n.p., 1756); this tract savagely satirizes noble idleness.

⁶⁶ Augustin Rouille d’Orfeuil, *L’alambic moral, ou analyse raisonnée de tout ce qui a rapport à l’homme* (Morocco, 1773).

⁶⁷ Jean-André Perreau, *Le roi voyageur, ou examen des abus de l’administration de la Lydie* (London, 1784), p. 108.

honor because, if left to the king, favorites and court flatterers would be the beneficiaries. If the early revolutionary critique differed from that articulated in the 1770s and 1780s, it was in its tendency to push the previously articulated logics to their extreme conclusions.

An intriguing development in early revolutionary tracts was a tendency to invert the old stereotypes of the noble and the merchant. The noble, formerly characterized as honor driven and thus public spirited, was increasingly represented as profit driven and thus egocentric. The merchant, long condemned as a selfish calculator, incapable of patriotism, was increasingly depicted as a servant of the public welfare engaged not so much in profit-seeking as in the management of an important sector of the national interest. This shift was the logical consequence of arguments that merchants deserved to be honored for their social utility and that nobility had become a mere reward for money-making. In some instances, the nobles' passion for money was explicitly contrasted with their lack of interest in honor and consequent lack of patriotism. An obscure Breton journalist calling himself "Monsodive" derides the nobility in precisely these terms: "These French Gentlemen, so jealous of honor, so extravagant of their blood, we would think them avid for glory, but they were avid only for money: and for a little of this vile metal, they have set fire to their Country, and preferred the loss of their Nation to the loss of their tyranny."⁶⁸

The latent antinobilism of the view that honors ought to be accorded to commerce and agriculture became manifest in many revolutionary tracts. In one of the most bizarre revolutionary articulations of the argument that agriculture ought to be honored, a woman claiming to represent "Agriculture," dressed in green, wearing a crown of sheaves and a fleece decorated with emblems of a plow, a sickle, and a hive, came before the *Assemblée nationale* and addressed the legislators.⁶⁹ "Agriculture" complained that she was not appropriately honored, that work in the fields was despised. She begged the deputies to ordain "that agricultural labors be reestablished in the greatest

⁶⁸ Monsodive, *La sentinelle du peuple, aux gens de toutes professions, science, arts, commerce et métiers, composant le Tiers-Etat de la province de Bretagne* 5 (December 25, 1788), p. 18. Another clear expression of this line of thinking can be found in Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès's *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788), which is analyzed in more detail below. Sieyès explicitly argues that members of the nobility, more than any other class, are driven by the desire for wealth. Because they tend to be prodigal in the way they spend their money but, given the prejudices of their class, have no honest way to replenish their fortunes, the passion for gain burns all the more strongly within them.

⁶⁹ It is not clear whether this event actually occurred or whether it was the fantasy of Louis-Sebastien Mercier, who reproduced "Agriculture's" discourse in a pamphlet entitled *Adresse de l'agriculture à messieurs de l'assemblée nationale, régénératrice de l'empire français* (Paris, 1791).

honor.”⁷⁰ The potential antagonism between honoring agriculture and respecting titles and formal distinctions became manifest in “Agriculture’s” discourse. She noted that the *Assemblée nationale* had destroyed “that chimerical distinction of *orders*.”⁷¹ She demanded that the assembly now rid the nation of “genealogical chimeras and worm-eaten papers.”⁷² Praising the agronomists Olivier de Serres, Duhamel de Monceau, Rosier, and Parmentier, she went on to argue that man “will not truly embrace civil and political liberty until he knows how to find in himself, through the work of his hands, the resources for his subsistence and his repose.”⁷³

The view that agriculture ought to be honored received official endorsement when the Convention ratified the proposal of its Committee on Agriculture that a “Festival of the Farmer” be instituted in every commune, “where the honest cultivator reputed to be the most intelligent will receive the prize of his virtue and his labor.”⁷⁴ As marks of honor to agriculture itself, the legislators ordered that a plow and the principal instruments of farming be “suspended in the vault of the temple of the laws.”⁷⁵ Busts of the agronomists Bernard de Palissy and Olivier de Serres were to be placed in the Convention. And, finally, it was solemnly declared that “agriculture, among a free people, is the first of the arts.”⁷⁶

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 25. These sentiments were echoed by Mercier in his introduction to the pamphlet, where he contends that there is nothing but honor in the names “*roturier*” and “*paysan*” and that these names sound better than those of “squire,” “tax collector,” “intendant,” or “aristocratic officer” (*ibid.*, p. vii). Epigrams from the writings of Cicero and the abbé Raynal on the title page of the pamphlet emphasize the dignity of labor, especially agricultural labor.

⁷³ Agriculture/Mercier’s remarks here suggest that the adoption of agriculture as an ideological basis for virtuous citizenship during the period of the Directory—as described by James Livesey in a recent article—was anticipated quite early in the history of the Revolution. See Livesey, “Agrarian Ideology and Commercial Republicanism in the French Revolution,” *Past and Present*, no. 157 (1997): 94–121.

⁷⁴ See “Analyse du rapport fait au nom du comité d’agriculture, par Eschasseriaux . . .,” in *La décade philosophique, littéraire et politique: Par une société de républicains* 1 (1794): 1:225.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* The outpouring of public spirit associated with the early years of the Revolution seems to have encouraged some private individuals to offer honorific distinctions to encourage emulation among farmers. *La feuille villageoise* reported in April 1791 that the parish priest of a community called Saint-Gaudent, in the Vienne, had founded an agricultural prize consisting of a small silver medal carrying the representation of a plow. Three young farmers were awarded the medal in the same year: “Witness to their young victory, their comrades applauded without jealousy and their families cried with joy.” See “Événemens: Saint-Gaudent,” *La feuille villageoise* (April 7, 1791).

If the Old Regime attack on hereditary nobility drew its basic logic from discourses that called for the application of honorific rewards to agriculture and commerce, it also owed something to the tradition of thinking represented by d'Arcq, arguing that public virtue was incompatible with a commercial incentive structure. The clearest expression of this line of thinking is Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès's *Essai sur les privilèges*. According to Sieyès, there are two dominant passions that tend to motivate people in society. One of these is the passion for money; the other is the passion for honor. Sieyès believes that the desire for honor—which he identifies as an aspiration to be esteemed and respected by other people—naturally leads people to perform actions that benefit society, because, in return for such actions, they receive the approbation and esteem of others. The other dominant social passion, the desire for money, cannot serve a similarly useful social function. In fact, Sieyès implies that the passion for money is an antisocial force that the passion for honor may be used to tame: “The desire to merit the public esteem . . . is a necessary brake on the passion for riches.”⁷⁷

The view that the public, not the king, ought to be the distributor of honorific rewards can also be clearly discerned in Sieyès's pamphlet. The thesis of the *Essai* is that the existence of honorific distinctions, such as titles of nobility, along with a social class that monopolizes such honors make it difficult or impossible to harness the human passion for honor for the public good. Instead of allowing the “public” to apportion honor to “great men” as it sees fit, the court has arrogated this right to itself, honoring intrigue, flattery, and even vice rather than talent, merit, or virtue, and thus rewarding the wrong sorts of behaviors quite as much as the right sorts.⁷⁸ Moreover, the crown honors a

⁷⁷ Sieyès, p. 31. The social thought analyzed in this essay bears some resemblance to that which Albert Hirschman explores in *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1977). Hirschman argues that the idea of using one passion to tame another originated in the seventeenth century, but that over the course of the eighteenth century it developed into the idea that the passion for wealth—increasingly denominated as “interest”—could be used to tame all the other passions. These generalizations, based on very meager primary evidence, need to be nuanced considerably. Certainly, many eighteenth-century commentators—especially political economists—devoted considerable attention to interest-based incentive structures. But the argument that honor could be used to restrain the antisocial passions remained much more common until the 1790s. In addition, many commentators believed that it was precisely the passion for wealth that most needed to be restrained and that the passion for honor must be cultivated in order to provide this restraint.

⁷⁸ Similarly, in his *Les chaînes de l'esclavage* (Paris, Year I), the Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat suggests that nobility was invented by princes in order to stifle the love of glory and thus to destroy patriotism. In *Les chaînes*, Marat traces the process whereby the power of princes becomes increasingly unlimited and ultimately transfigures itself into

man by awarding him a “distinction” that becomes his property for life and then passes on to his descendants. After he has acquired a distinction, a man no longer has any incentive to behave in virtuous or meritorious ways—his honor is assured. When the apportionment of honor is in the hands of the public, it is quite otherwise: “The esteem which emanates from the people, necessarily free, is withdrawn the instant that it ceases to be merited.”⁷⁹ Finally, because people can pass on honorific distinctions to their descendants, there exists a class of people—the privileged—who enjoy honor as a birthright. The privileged have little to gain from acts of public virtue and little to lose from the antisocial pursuit of gain. As honor is theirs by right, they can hardly be deprived of it by the public. Thus they have no incentive to behave in socially useful ways. Sieyès demands a complete reorganization of the social incentive structure. First, he suggests that the state reward ordinary services with ordinary salaries. Great services ought to be rewarded with a promotion, a distinguished job, or, in rare cases, a pension, but never with honorific distinctions. Honor must be the gift of the public alone; Sieyès demands that we “allow the public to dispense freely the attestations of its esteem.”⁸⁰ Second, he implies, the whole institution of honorific “distinctions,” along with the class that monopolizes them, must be abolished. He wants a “free competition of all” for public esteem.⁸¹

tyranny. A crucial stratagem the prince employs in this process is to destroy the love of glory in his country, because citizens animated by the passion for glory have too much devotion to the public good to allow a tyrant to destroy their liberty. According to Marat, princes extinguish the love of glory by substituting distinctions for public esteem: “For glory, which the public alone dispenses, they substitute dignities which they alone distribute; and instead of using them to reward services rendered to the State, they only reward services rendered to themselves”; “henceforth their creatures alone are covered with marks of honor, and those new distinctions are soon accorded without regard to merit” (p. 88). The result of this substitution is that honor loses its value, the love of glory is eradicated, and nothing is left to excite patriotism and public virtue.

⁷⁹ Sieyès (n. 68 above), p. 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10. Similarly, Nicolas Bergasse, a leader of the moderate monarchist faction in the National Assembly, argues in a 1789 pamphlet that nobility destroys “emulation” and “encouragement.” See Bergasse, *Observations sur le préjugé de la noblesse héréditaire* (London, 1789), p. 28. Bergasse asks the reader to imagine the progress that society would make “if the hope of success encouraged work and talent in all orders of Society; if finally, the field of honor and glory was open equally to all kinds of merit” (p. 28). Bergasse suggests that the French nation “accord [its] homage only to justly merited glory” (p. 42) and holds out the prospect of this people—“so sensitive to honor”—“delivered finally to the energy of the most free emulation” (p. 42).

⁸¹ Sieyès, p. 13. Not all revolutionaries who advocated the abolition of hereditary nobility were quite as radical as Sieyès. Some were willing to allow the government

That a version of Sieyès's theory was influential in inspiring liberal revolutionaries to do away with nobility and titles is clear from an exchange that took place during the debate on the abolition of nobility in the *Assemblée nationale* on the night of June 19, 1790.⁸² Deputy Lambel proposed a motion to abolish titles. Charles de Lameth, a liberal noble, seconded Lambel's motion and demanded the abolition of nobility outright. Echoing Sieyès's *Essai*, he suggested that distinctions that confer honor on people, regardless of how they behave, are a disincentive to virtuous action: "There is no emulation of virtue where citizens have another dignity than that attached to the functions confided in them, another glory than that which they owe to their actions."⁸³ Opposing Lameth's proposition, the marquis de Foucault demanded to know how a man ennobled for saving the state could be recompensed for the loss of his title. The marquis de Lafayette countered that the real distinction lies not in ennoblement but in the patriotic action of the hypothetical noble; instead of saying that such a man was ennobled, one ought simply to say, "this man has saved the state."⁸⁴ Sieyès makes the same point in his *Essai* when he notes that "the

to award honorific distinctions for the life of the bearer. See, e.g., a pamphlet entitled *Abolition de la noblesse héréditaire en France, proposée à l'Assemblée nationale; par un philanthrope, citoyen de Belan* (n.p., n.d.). The anonymous author proposes that nobles of ancient race who possess lands raised to duchies, marquisates, counties, and baronies be permitted to keep their titles for life but not to pass them on to their heirs (pp. 42–43). He also advocates that three chivalric orders be maintained: "one of *Saint-Esprit* for persons who fill the highest offices in the state, and for all those who signal themselves by a brilliant patriotism in whatever class of society they should be; the other of *Saint-Michel* for all those who excel in the sciences, the arts, commerce, and navigation; and the third finally of *Saint-Louis*, destined solely for the military estate" (p. 43). But the *chevaliers* of the various orders will be ennobled for life only. As the title of the tract suggests, the author favors the immediate suppression of hereditary nobility. "Respect . . . ought to be free," he contends, "it is against the nature of things to make it the object of a law, to accord this respect independent of the sentiment of those who give it and the merit of those who are its object" (p. 26). If hereditary distinctions are abolished, he argues, future citizens "will be made to feel the necessity to acquire talents, knowledge, as being the sole means that remains to them to obtain distinctions among their fellows" (pp. 44–45n). Similarly, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *L'anéantissement total de la noblesse héréditaire, ou requête urgente à l'Assemblée nationale* (Paris, 1789) notes that "the French nation ought not to recognize any distinction but that acquired through talent or merit, that is to say, that it ought not to admit into its bosom any other nobility than personal nobility, because that is the only one that may support the analysis of reason" (p. 6). The author complains that "a ridiculous prejudice seems to exclude [the commoner] from everything having to do with the honorific, which ought to belong only to talent, to merit, and to capacity" (p. 5).

⁸² *Réimpression de l'ancien moniteur*, 32 vols. (Paris, 1847), 4:676.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

true distinction is in the service which you have rendered to the *patrie*, to humanity . . . public regard and consideration cannot fail to go where this kind of merit calls them.”⁸⁵

I suggested above that the critique of nobility emerging from the debates analyzed in this article was more radical than other strains of antinobility because it implicitly rejected the idea that a reform of the nobility would redeem the institution. The problem was not just that nobles had become corrupt; the institution of nobility was an obstacle to the cultivation of virtue. This view is perhaps most clearly articulated in an article that appeared in the aftermath of the abolition of nobility. The revolutionary newspaper, *La feuille villageoise*, published a scathing attack on hereditary distinctions in response to a query raised by two provincial readers.⁸⁶ The readers in question, a M. Marcant and a M. Picquet, wrote to the editors of the paper to praise a local ex-noble whom they describe as a friend of the people. So popular was this ex-noble locally that he had just been elected a justice of the peace. The two correspondents note, however, that their new magistrate is bitterly opposed to the abolition of nobility, titles, and other symbolic distinctions. They ask the editors of *La feuille villageoise* to explain for their benefit, and for that of their *seigneur*, the advantage to be gained from abolishing nobility and titles. The editors replied with an article couched in language similar to Sieyès’s *Essai*. Addressing their remarks to the ex-noble mentioned by the two correspondents, the editors suggest that, in a nation of philosophers, “your claim to be born with the right to public consideration would excite only a contemptuous laugh.”⁸⁷ They go on to compare nobility, titles, and distinctions to a counterfeit money that the privileged had used to buy the respect and consideration of the common people, asking whether the government should tolerate the circulation of such “false money.”⁸⁸ Then, implying that honor ought to be

⁸⁵ Sieyès, pp. 9–10, my emphasis.

⁸⁶ “Suppression de la noblesse, des titres, armoiries, etc.,” *La feuille villageoise* (January 26, 1792). Another article critiquing the concept of hereditary nobility—this one authored by Benjamin Franklin—was published in the same issue of *La feuille villageoise*. Franklin notes that “the honor obtained by fine actions . . . is a personal advantage which belongs only to those who have worked for it themselves and who merit it; it cannot be transmitted or communicated.” See “Lettre de Benjamin Franklin, sur l’établissement d’une décoration héréditaire en Amérique,” *La feuille villageoise* 18 (January 26, 1792). Franklin ridicules the idea that families who can trace their lineage back to distant ancestors are the most honorable. He points out that “a simple arithmetical calculation demonstrates that proportionally as the antiquity of the family increases, the right of each individual to the honor of the chief diminishes” (p. 426). After nine generations of marriages, a child possesses only one part out of 512 of his noble ancestor (p. 425).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

at the disposal of the public to reward meritorious action, and that the existence of nobility destroys the incentive for virtuous behavior, they suggest that “esteem, consideration, the homages of citizens . . . forms a part of the public wealth: because it is the fund for recompensing those who have served the *patrie*. How will it be then if this treasure of honors is dissipated to the profit of the false merit of birth, if a sterile nobility extorts with impunity the share of genius and virtue?”⁸⁹

The radical antipathy to nobility that erupted in 1788 may have been catalyzed by the controversy surrounding the calling of the Estates General—Seyès’s attack on the “privileged” is, of course, an intervention in the struggle to change the composition of that body. But understanding the immediate political aim of this attack hardly provides an exhaustive account of its significance. Political propagandists cannot say anything they please and expect to be taken seriously. In order to galvanize support they must play on existing beliefs and opinions or creatively refurbish old attitudes or theories for new purposes. Seyès made an argument that he thought would be compelling for the radical audience he sought to mobilize. A text like his *Essai sur les privilèges* was rhetorically effective because it played upon a language of social criticism that had taken firm hold in radical and reforming circles long before the Revolution.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABOLITION OF NOBILITY

The idea that revolutionary antipathy to nobility was a product of the political crisis of 1788–89 derives ultimately from a flawed conception of eighteenth-century French society. Revisionists suppose that the revolutionaries had to invent antinobility because it had no basis in social reality—because the distinction between nobles and nonnobles had become irrelevant over the course of the eighteenth century. That the bourgeoisie and the nobility were not distinct social groups was a central argument of revisionist historiography in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹⁰ But revisionists were mistaken in suggesting that the

⁸⁹ Ibid. Conversely, pamphlets that criticized the abolition of nobility did so on the grounds that nobility was necessary to reap the advantages of honor. Why take the nobility’s distinctive marks away? one anonymous pamphleteer asks. “What will become of honor, that inexhaustible resource of wealth in a sensitive nation, if one destroys everything that is capable of exciting it and maintaining it among us?” See *Les véritables intérêts de la nation, considérés dans la vente des biens ecclésiastiques, et dans la destruction de la noblesse et des parlements* (Paris, 1790), p. 74.

⁹⁰ George Taylor argues that the nobility and the bourgeoisie shared the same kinds of property and were thus not distinct classes from an economic standpoint. George V. Taylor, “Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (1967): 469–96. That the nobility managed their estates in

distinction between nobles and nonnobles became insignificant. For all the “objective” convergence of the two groups in terms of wealth, property, and culture, the social distinction between the Second and Third Estates remained deeply meaningful. All the representations of society competing to define social reality in the eighteenth century assumed that the structuring principle of society was, and ought to be, honor. Whether they espoused the views of the traditionalist, pronoble chevalier d’Arcq, the abbé Jaubert, champion of *roturiers*, or the ascerbic Sieyès, all parties to the debate assumed that the stakes of social competition and the highest forms of social reward were honorific. Within such conceptualizations of the social, it was axiomatic that the distinction between noble and nonnoble was a weighty one. Whether these representations are seen as the cause or as the consequence of the continuing significance of nobility, they leave little doubt as to its cultural import.

Had the distinction between noble and nonnoble lost its centrality, the state could not so successfully have marketed nobility as a commodity in the eighteenth century. As William Doyle has recently shown, the cost of buying one’s way into the nobility was rising in the last decades of the old regime, suggesting that the distinction between noble and commoner remained highly significant. The office of *secrétaire du roi*, which would grant ennoblement after twenty years service or on the death of the officeholder, was officially priced at 120,000 livres in Paris and 80,000 livres in the provinces during the late eighteenth century. In many instances the market value of these offices was even higher. In Nantes, they sold for 95,000 livres. In Bordeaux, the price rose to 125,000 livres toward the end of the century—a vast sum even for those with princely incomes.⁹¹

Once the importance of rank honor in the constitution of social order is recognized, it becomes clear that the abolition of nobility represented a much more significant social transformation than many revisionists have been willing

a distinctly “bourgeois” fashion was the conclusion of Robert Forster’s study of the nobles of Toulouse. Robert Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1960). In an analysis of the eighteenth-century tax structure, Betty Behrens suggests that there was little difference between nobles and bourgeois in the fiscal privileges they enjoyed (C. B. A. Behrens, “Nobles, Privileges, and Taxes in France at the End of the Ancien Régime,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 15 [1962–63]: 451–75). The view that the nobility and the bourgeoisie were not truly distinct received further endorsement from Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, who argues that the wealthy nobility and the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie were not only identical in their investment patterns but also shared a common commitment to the so-called bourgeois values of the Enlightenment. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (n. 2 above).

⁹¹ William Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1996), p. 221.

to admit. Revisionists assume that nobility was a vestigial institution by 1789, that in abolishing it the Revolution merely gave legal recognition to changes in social structure that had already taken place: the Revolution did not alter the social structure, it merely “clarified” it.⁹² I suggest, on the contrary, that the abolition of nobility is emblematic of a structural transformation of the French social order. In depriving rank honor of the public role it had assumed for centuries, the revolutionaries were not recognizing a *fait accompli*; they were abrogating one of the structuring logics of French society.

The revolutionary alternative to aristocratic honor seems to have foundered on the rocks of the Terror. Before the end of the 1790s, it was clear to many that the vision of a society based upon open competition for honor had failed. In one searching tract, Jacques-Charles Bailleul, a former member of the Convention, affirmed that, in a well-ordered society, “distinctions” are necessary: “Social distinctions are established in favor of the governed, since without them, the state cannot exist.”⁹³ But Bailleul does not propose a return to the distinctions of an aristocratic or corporate society. Rather, he uses the language of “classes” to project an ordering grid over society. The idiom of class had been taxonomically neutral for much of the eighteenth century—it was a clinical, scientific way of categorizing a body of data. Bailleul’s use of “class,” however, points toward the nineteenth century—he uses this category to project an economic classification onto the social world. There are two great classes of people in society, he insists: the producers and the consumers. The latter, he notes, contains within it groups that would have occupied radically different rungs on the old social ladder: doctors, actors, priests, soldiers, dancers, and the lowest kind of servants are all members of one great “class.”⁹⁴

Bailleul takes a rather jaundiced view of the idea that a society can be based on virtue or public spirit. “That which is done uniquely for the sake of duty is always done poorly,” he affirms.⁹⁵ To believe that men are capable of doing anything other than pursuing their private interest is naive, and, in any case, a properly functioning society can easily be constructed on this basis: “If [personal interest] is well understood, it is the firmest support of society, which is only founded on reciprocal needs.”⁹⁶ Bailleul is convinced that it is economic interest, not honor, that motivates people. He is skeptical of the idea that honor can be used to animate agriculture, arguing that agriculture hinges ultimately

⁹² The formulation is William Doyle’s. See his “A Consensus and Its Collapse: Writings on Revolutionary Origins since 1939,” in *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980), p. 24.

⁹³ Jacques-Charles Bailleul, *Théorie des institutions sociales* (Paris, 1801), pp. 6–7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

on profit: "It is said that it is necessary to honor agriculture: but whatever is said, agriculture is engaged in for profit and not honor."⁹⁷ The principal obstacle opposing agriculture, according to Bailleul, is not that it is looked down upon, but that it is the least advantageous way to employ capital.⁹⁸

What we see here is the ideological collapse of a representation of society based on honor and the adoption of what has been called "market culture"—a representation of the social order based on the projection of an economic organizing grid over the social world. The fate of this economized representation of society in France has been investigated by William Reddy, who traces its development from the late 1790s until the eve of World War I.⁹⁹ According to Reddy, market culture became the "official" representation of French society in the decades immediately following the Revolution and over time became reified in French institutions and practice.¹⁰⁰ That an economic representation of social order could have seemed appropriate in the late 1790s may seem curious given the long history of French antipathy toward the "commercialization" of social relations. It can perhaps be explained as a consequence of that reimagining of economic life and of the virtues of economic actors that occurred in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s, as political economists argued for the integration of merchants and farmers into a social incentive structure based on honor.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93. A similar argument was made by Benjamin Constant, one of the leaders of liberal opinion under the Napoleonic regime. See Benjamin Constant, "De la liberté de l'industrie," in his *De la liberté chez les modernes: Ecrits politiques* (1818; reprint, Paris, 1980). Like Bailleul, Constant uses the idiom of class to categorize the various groups in French society, referring to "the privileged classes," "the laborious classes," and "the agricultural classes." And, like Bailleul, he was contemptuous of the idea that, to stimulate manufacturing or farming, it would be necessary to use "distinctions" to make them honorable. According to Constant, the true basis of economic life is the desire for wealth and ease, not the lure of honor: "Honorific distinctions for agriculturalists, for artisans, for manufacturers are even more illusory. Cultivators, artisans, manufacturers wish to arrive at ease or at wealth by work, and at repose by security. They do not ask you at all for your artificial distinctions, or if they do aspire to them, it is because you have distorted their intelligence, it is because you have filled their heads with false ideas" (p. 470).

⁹⁹ See William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750–1900* (Cambridge, 1984).

¹⁰⁰ William Sewell traces a similar transformation in his *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980).