The Cultural Politics of Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France

John Shovlin

> Every sign is redoubtable, and produces a great effect upon the feeble imagination of men. . . . It is by signs that religion, fanaticism, sovereignty, revolt, and factions command minds, leading the blind multitudes whose thinking is subjugated by signs.
>
> Mirabeau

The term *luxury* was widely used in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to denounce the usurpation by the lowborn of clothing or other commodities appropriate only to their betters—the king, his officers, and the nobility.[1] Clothing and other consumer goods, it was held, ought to map the social hierarchy. Pomp, magnificence, and spectacular appearances were legitimate for the wellborn but illicit for those of low origins.[2] The usurpation of spectacular consumption, it

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1 Of course, *luxury* had a wider signification than this. Broadly speaking, the term was used to evoke all the various ways in which wealth, its maldistribution, or its misuse might corrupt the individual or threaten the social order. I focus here on luxury as usurping consumption because by doing so it is possible to trace a crucial shift in the representations that undergirded social order in the Old Regime. For a wider perspective on the significance of the category in early modern Europe, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994); Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire: Etude socio-historique* (Oxford, 1989); Daniel Roche, *La Culture des apparences: Une Histoire du vêtement (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1989); John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, Md., 1977); Carolyn C. Lougee, *"Le Paradis des Femmes": Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, N.J., 1976); Ellen Ross, "The Debate on Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France: A Study in the Language of Opposition to Change" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1975); Henri Baudrillart, *Le Luxe dans les temps modernes*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de luxe privé et public depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*, (Paris, 1880).

2 Sumptuousness that could only be considered luxurious if indulged in by a merchant's wife might be entirely appropriate to the wardrobe of a duchess who, as a consequence of her position in society, had both the right and the duty to set herself off from those below her in the social hierarchy. So long as the motivation of the consumption lay in appropriately marking one's

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was argued, was one of the great banes of a society corrupted by wealth, leading to the "confounding of ranks," the dissolution of the symbolic boundaries that distinguished one order or estate from another. Throughout the early modern period, critics responded clamorously—sometimes hysterically—to illegitimate consumption by the vulgar.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the term *luxury* and the conceptual vocabulary of which it was the keyword were transformed. If luxury had traditionally referred to the usurping consumption of the nonnoble, in the decades after 1750 critics began to employ the term to refer to all uses of spectacular consumption for the purpose of social distinction regardless of the social position of the user, and the focus of criticism shifted from the lowborn to *les grands*. Moralists attacked the use of spectacular consumption for purposes of social distinction, arguing not that magnificence should be the sole prerogative of the king and the nobility but that conspicuous consumption should no longer be used to constitute social order or political authority.

This shift in the central significance of the antiluxury discourse occurred in the context of a marked commercialization of social life in urban France, along with rapid and radical changes in patterns of popular consumption. Under conditions of consumer revolution, the traditional practice of deploying commodities to constitute political authority and social hierarchy produced semiotic chaos. The transformation of the luxury critique marks a resolution, in the face of such anarchy, to abandon this practice altogether. But if the primary impetus for discursive transformation came from changes in the economy of consumption, the shift to a new conception of luxury was mediated and facilitated by the reconfiguration of the traditional antiluxury discourse within the terms of sensationalist philosophy. For sensationalists, one of the primary sources of error was the human tendency to confuse signs with reality. Viewing the consumption practices of their age through the lens of sensationalism, moralists construed spectacular consumption as a deliberate conflation of sign with thing. They regarded the social order constructed on the basis of such practices as corrupt, flimsy, and unreal.

The chief significance of the traditional antiluxury discourse was that it articulated a representation of social order with "paradigmatic"

rank, the display was legitimate. Thus in one Christian moralistic version of the argument it was noted, "It is true that Christian religion permits girls and women to attire and adorn themselves according to their quality and their condition; but it must be without affectation and without excess, for propriety's sake and not for luxury" (Jacques Boileau, *L'Abus des nuditez de gorge* [Brussels, 1675], 110).

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significance in early modern France. Social order is partially constituted by the representations that claim to describe and regulate it. Representations—be they formal sets of legal categories or informal discourses of social order—impose a partition on the spectrum of social reality. This is not to deny the existence of objective contrasts in social life, but it is representation that determines which of these contrasts are to form the basis for social differentiation. Nor do I wish to claim that the antiluxury discourse was capable of entirely excluding other representations of social reality, but it enjoyed unparalleled prestige.[3] The antiluxury discourse invited the definition of social reality along certain lines of diffraction, and discouraged its delineation by other criteria. Eliding the complexity of ancien régime society, in particular the enormous contrasts of wealth within the Second and Third Estates, it posited the distinction between *noblesse* and *roturier* as a defining social contrast. So although seventeenth-century critics of luxury were almost wholly unsuccessful in achieving their ostensible end—preventing nonnobles from usurping the symbols of power—the antiluxury discourse was nevertheless effective in imposing definition on social reality.

As the central significance of the keyword *luxury* changed, this paradigmatic representation of social order fell apart. The fundamental opposition between noble and nonnoble started to dissolve. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, parts of the nobility—*grands seigneurs*, courtiers, recently ennobled plutocrats—were conventionally lumped together with financiers and tax farmers, all guilty equally of the antisocial practice of luxury. This reconfiguration of social reality might be described as the "invention of the aristocrat." If the traditional luxury discourse had elided the marked contrasts within the nobility to emphasize the categorical distinction between noble and nonnoble, the new luxury critique highlighted these intramural contrasts, drawing the fundamental line of opposition between the corrupt and idle rich and the "useful classes" among whom poorer nobles—gentleman farmers and military officers in particular—might count themselves. In the late eighteenth century then, a luxury discourse that for centuries had been pronoble shifted to being antiaristocratic.

The transformation of traditional representations of social order in response to the pressures of commercialization would likely have continued with or without the interposition of the Revolution, but 1789 hastened the process of change. The revolutionaries dealt a heavy blow

[3] On the marked tendency of nonnobles to deploy the traditional antiluxury discourse and to validate the model of social order that it posited, see Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire*, 68, 80–82. The cultural hegemony of this representation was upheld, moreover, by both the monarchy and the Catholic Church.

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to the use of spectacular display as a means for the constitution of power and social order. Moreover, the revolutionaries extended the rejection of pomp to the traditional markers of nobility itself—titles, arms, decorations, the whole panoply of noble differentiation. If the Revolution can be regarded as quickening the pace of change in the direction it was already moving, the arrow of influence can perhaps be traced running in the opposite direction also. The emergence of a new discourse on luxury seems to have shaped the social radicalism of the Revolution. The new language of luxury, by representing the society of the Old Regime as disordered and corrupt, might be ranked among the sources of the revolutionary attempt to recast the social world. Indeed, by the 1780s, attacks on the spectacular consumption of the monarch and the great as a form of luxury had become a staple of radical political discourse.

Représentation and the Traditional Conception of Luxury

Among the bases of both political power and social order in the Old Regime was the use of commodities to create a dazzling display of wealth and social distinction—a "theater of power." The practice of using pomp to constitute hierarchical relations was usually referred to in France as "représentation."[4] *Représentation* was supposed to create a kind of "aura" around the monarch, his officers, and his nobility that was calculated to awe and dazzle the common people. Several historians have commented on the importance of display as a source of power in eighteenth-century European societies. In the English case, E. P. Thompson has argued that pomp played a key role in maintaining the social and political hegemony of the gentry. Lacking a standing army or an effective police force, the social elite sustained its grip on power through the skillful manipulation of display.[5] Peter Burke has described Louis XIV's France as a "theater state," and recent work by Sarah Maza suggests the continuing importance of spectacular display as a source of social status in France during the latter half of the eighteenth century.[6]

[4] Throughout the text I use the italicized *représentation* to refer to the early modern practice of deploying commodities to construct political authority and social status. The purpose of so doing is to distinguish this specific practice from the broader issues of representation that are central to this essay.

[5] E. P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974) (republished in revised form with reply to criticisms in idem, *Customs in Common* [New York, 1991]). See also Douglas Hay, "Property, Authority, and the Criminal Law," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England,* ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (New York, 1975).

[6] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, Conn., 1992). Burke borrows the term *theater state* from Clifford Geertz's *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Prince-

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The court was of course the central apparatus of *représentation* in early modern monarchies. Bossuet suggested that the magnificence and splendor of a court is a "necessary support of royalty." God has ordained that the courts of kings be brilliant and magnificent "in order to impress a certain respect on peoples."[7] The courtiers were themselves signs in this theater of power. In the same way that liveried servants stood as living displays of their masters' wealth and distinction, the gaudy brilliance of courtiers underlined the splendor of the monarch.[8] But the business of *représentation* did not end at the palace gates. In France, much of the wider society's artistic and cultural production was co-opted by the monarchy in an effort to produce a dazzling *représentation.* Vast sums were spent establishing academies and maintaining the arts. Artists, scientists, and scholars became instruments of monarchic glory.[9]

The same kind of power was deployed by nobles, officers of the crown, and other elites as part of an attempt to constitute hierarchical social relations. For much of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the men and women who occupied the heights of the French social hierarchy dressed in clothing distinguished by its sumptuousness and visibility. As Richard Sennett points out, "The upper ranks of society appeared on the street in costumes which not merely set them apart from the lower orders but dominated the street."[10] Clothing was not the only vehicle of *représentation* for *les grands.* Insignia such as coats of arms, weapons, decorations, and badges, along with a poetics of self-presentation—demeanor, speech, carriage, and conduct—all contributed to creating the appropriate aura. Some of the potency of this poetics was captured by that keen observer of the social world, Adam Smith, in his description of the typical young nobleman: "His air, his manner, his deportment, all mark that elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority, which those born to inferior stations can hardly ever arrive at. These are the arts by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority, and to govern their inclinations accord-

ton, N.J., 1980). Sarah Maza contends that male servants were used as spectacular status markers in both aristocratic and bourgeois households before the French Revolution; see her *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton, N.J., 1983). For a discussion of the construction of authority through spectacle in seventeenth-century Spain, see José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1986). See also Norbert Elias, *The Court Society,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1983).

7 Jasques-Benigne Bossuet, *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'écriture sainte* (Paris, 1709), bk. 10, 519–20.

8 Jean-Marie Apostolidés, *Le Roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1981).

9 Burke, *Fabrication of Louis XIV.*

10 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977), 65.

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ing to his own pleasure; and in this he is seldom disappointed." Indeed, according to Smith, these arts are "sufficient to govern the world."[11]

That public authority, or governance, should draw on the same wells of power as private individuals staking a claim to social status may seem odd to the modern reader. But in early modern Europe, political authority and social status were not so conceptually distinct as they were later to become, and pomp played a key role in constituting both.[12] Something of the complex relationship between governance, social rank, and spectacular display is captured in the complicated etymology of the term *state*. *State* did not acquire its dominant modern meaning of a governing institutional apparatus until the sixteenth century.[13] Before that, but continuing into the nineteenth century, *state* could be used to refer to station, standing, or condition, a usage most obvious in the French *état*. The term might also serve as a synonym for majesty, splendor, or dignity as in the English "stateliness," or "to lie in state." State was an ordering concept—a "keyword."[14] It evoked notions of political order; it embodied a conception of social stratification; and it was itself a source of order (in the sense that "stateliness" played a role in constituting both political governance and social rank).

There is a tendency among some modern observers to construe the pomp of the eighteenth century as part of the "trappings" of power rather than as an aspect of its substance. But such a perspective misconstrues the relationship between sign and signified in the early modern practice of power. Within the terms of this practice, the sign did not merely alert the spectator to the presence of invisible qualities, it also played a role in *constituting* those qualities. The sign *participated* in the

11 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; rpt., Oxford, 1976), 54.

12 The use of *représentation* for "political" and "social" purposes alike is an instance of the pervasive mixing of public and private that characterized social life in the Old Regime. For a penetrating discussion of the mixing of public and private in the society of privilege, see William H. Sewell Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980), 115–20.

13 On the etymology of "state," see Quentin Skinner, "State," in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge, 1989); Geertz, *Negara*, 121; and William H. Sewell Jr., "Etat, Corps, and Ordre: Some Notes on the Social Vocabulary of the French Old Regime," in *Sozialgeschichte Heute: Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen, 1974).

14 On "keywords," see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York, 1983). While I adopt Williams's useful notion of keywords, my own approach is influenced by Quentin Skinner's critique of Williams. Skinner rejects Williams's view that keywords are a reflection of social reality, arguing that they are at least partially constitutive of this reality. He suggests, moreover, that the transformation of keywords will usually entail the modification of the whole conceptual vocabulary of which these terms are linchpins. See Skinner, "Language and Social Change," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Oxford, 1988).

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signified. Signs, such as fine clothing, were not merely indications that the possessor was a man of quality, they contributed to making him such. Honorific distinctions, such as titles of nobility or membership in an order of chivalry, operated according to a similar logic. They did not simply mark or make visible a person's condition, they played a part in producing it.

This practice of signification was in constant precarious tension with a different economy of representation. Critics of courtly pomp persistently drew attention to what they regarded as the imposture inherent in the practice of *représentation,* highlighting the possibility that signs and things might be radically disjunct. The same critics dismissed the magnificence of the monarch and the grandees as vain ornament—mere baubles. This body of criticism is the lineal ancestor of a modern tendency to deny or elide the semiotic dimension of power. But for all the dismissals of display as mere vanity and ostentation, it remained an effective practice of power in early modern Europe at least until the French Revolution. Indeed, the most skeptical critics admitted as much. Pascal, for instance, sneers at the practice of *représentation* among officers, judges, and professionals, but implicitly acknowledges its potency: "Our magistrates knew this mystery well. Their red robes, their ermines, in which they wrap themselves like furred cats, the palaces where they sit in judgement, *the fleurs de lis,* all that august pomp was absolutely necessary; and if . . . the doctors had not their square hats, and robes four times too wide, they would never have duped the world, which cannot resist so authentic an appearance."[15] For Pascal, the whole business is so much mummery, but effective mummery nonetheless—for, as he puts it, by these means the magistrates "in fact . . . gain respect." Thus the frequent denunciations of magnificence as mere vainglory should not be regarded as evidence that pomp was no longer an effective instrument in the arsenal of power.

If it is assumed that pomp was not part of the substance of power, it is difficult to understand the intensity with which early modern critics denounced "luxury," the indulgence by the lowborn in commodities appropriate only to those of higher station. The usurpation of signs of social distinction was deeply subversive because signs participated in the constitution of things. Because *représentation* served to produce social distinctions and a hierarchy of power, it was supposed to be a monopoly of the governing ranks. Writing in 1744, the marquis d'Argenson recommended that magnificence be banished from the

[15] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées,* ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris, 1962 [1670]), 68; my translation.

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homes of all individuals "not charged with any *représentation* by estate."[16] When people with no legitimate right to practice *représentation* did so successfully, they appropriated to themselves some part of a power to which they had no justifiable claim (in the eyes of their betters). When they were unsuccessful, and merely made themselves ridiculous, they damaged the practice of *représentation* itself by highlighting the tension between "appearances" and "reality" that perpetually threatened to render implausible the power of pomp.

Sensationalism, Consumer Revolution, and a New Critique of Luxury

The last two decades have seen a growing recognition that the French economy in the eighteenth century was much more vibrant than had hitherto been allowed.[17] The revisionist trend began in the 1960s with the first French cliometric forays into national income accounting.[18] During the 1970s and 1980s, a French economy that had long been regarded as stagnant (especially by comparison with Britain's) came to be viewed in a much more favorable light by economic historians.[19] Indeed, it has been suggested that the issue of French economic stagnation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a nonproblem from an econometric point of view. There is some evidence that the substantial gap between British and French per capita income in 1900 had been more or less constant since the late seventeenth century, suggesting that French productivity paralleled Britain's through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[20]

The picture of the eighteenth-century French economy that has emerged over the last twenty years suggests that, from a low point in economic production reached just after the War of the Spanish

16 René-Louis le Voyer, marquis d'Argenson, *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France, comparé avec celui des autres états; suivies d'un nouveau plan d'administration* (1744; rpt., Amsterdam, 1784), 268.

17 The argument that the French economy was heading toward structural crisis in the eighteenth century had dominated historiography for three decades after it was first elaborated by Ernest Labrousse in 1933. See Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1984).

18 See, for instance, Jan Marczewski, "Some Aspects of the Economic Growth of France, 1700–1958," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 9 (1961): 369–86.

19 Richard Roehl, "French Industrialization: A Reconsideration," *Explorations in Economic History* 13 (1976): 233–81; Don R. Leet and John A. Shaw, "French Economic Stagnation, 1700–1960: Old Economic History Revisited," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1978): 531–44; Rondo Cameron and Charles E. Freedeman, "French Economic Growth: A Radical Revision," *Social Science History* 7 (1983): 3–30; Robert Aldrich, "Late-Comer or Early-Starter? New Views on French Economic History," *Journal of European Economic History* 16 (1987): 89–100.

20 George Grantham, "The French Cliometric Revolution: A Survey of Cliometric Contributions to French Economic History," *European Review of Economic History* 1 (1997): 353–405.

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Succession, the economy began to recover in the 1720s and 1730s and economic growth was vigorous in the decades between 1750 and the 1790s. Between 1730 and the late 1770s French foreign trade expanded between 400 and 500 percent. Colonial trade may have increased up to 1000 percent in the same period—albeit from a low starting point.[21] Port cities benefiting from the profits of colonial commerce grew rapidly between 1720 and 1790.[22] Internal commerce did not grow at the same rate as foreign trade, but in this area all indicators point to a healthy increase in the circulation of goods. A recent reexamination of credit transactions in eighteenth-century Paris suggests that notaries mobilized vast sums in impersonal private debt and that the curve of private lending closely tracked the general trend of the commercial economy. From a low point in 1720, real private long-term debt in Paris grew steadily until about 1770, and then expanded very rapidly up to 1789.[23] Manufacturing and urban development matched the pace set by commercial growth. Manufacturing increased its share of 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 in particular.[24] Production in the French woolen industry grew at three times the rate that population expanded.[25] French cities grew substantially during the century; indeed, the population of urban France grew as much as 48 percent on average.[26] Paris was the second-largest city in Europe during the eighteenth century, and French cities in aggregate had a population of 5.3 million in 1789—twice the urban population of Great Britain.[27]

The expansion of the commercial economy was accompanied by a veritable consumer revolution in urban France. Summarizing the effect of shifts in popular consumption, Colin Jones notes that it became far more common in the eighteenth century for people of very mod-

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

22 François Crouzet, "Bordeaux: An Eighteenth-Century Wirtschaftswunder?" in *Britain, France, and International Commerce: From Louis XIV to Victoria,* ed. François Crouzet (Aldershot, U.K., 1996).

23 Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, "Information and Economic History: How the Credit Market in Old Regime Paris Forces Us to Rethink the Transition to Capitalism," *American Historical Review* 104 (February 1999): 69–94.

24 Jan Marczewski, "The Take-Off Hypothesis and French Experience," in *The Economics of Take-Off into Sustained Growth,* ed. W. W. Rostow (London, 1963). According to the same source, "between 1702/10 and 1781/90, industrial growth proceeded at a rate of about 1.9 per cent, with a significant acceleration during the years 1750–85."

25 Tihomir J. Markovitch, *Les Industries lainières de Colbert à la Révolution* (Geneva, 1976).

26 Georges Duby, ed., *Histoire de la France urbaine,* 4 vols. (Paris, 1981), 3:295–98.

27 Jacques Dupâquier, *De la Renaissance à 1789,* vol. 2 of *Histoire de la population française,* (Paris, 1988), 296.

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est means to own consumer goods that in previous generations had been the province of the well-to-do: "Showy pieces of furniture such as writing-tables, card-tables and coat stands [became] more common; wallpaper, wall-hangings, mirrors, snuff-boxes, teapots, razors, chamber pots, and clocks [were] found in greater abundance."[28] In a more recent article, Jones indicates the existence of a lively urban market for all manner of consumer goods and services, brokered by the provincial and Parisian *affiches*, or advertising press.[29] According to Daniel Roche, consumption of clothing among the "people" of Paris crossed the threshold from an immobile and traditional pattern to the conscious pursuit of fashion. The urban lower orders were much better dressed in the eighteenth century than ever before. The value of popular wardrobes, especially those of women, increased dramatically over the century, both in terms of their absolute value and as a percentage of an individual's total assets.[30] For Parisian professionals and their wives, the value of clothing increased by a factor of three or four over the century. Servants enjoyed a fourfold increase and the wives of skilled workers a sixfold augmentation in the value of their wardrobes. This was the age of the *petits-maîtres*, fops of modest social origins "who displayed extravagant vests with buttons of aromatic wood or mother-of-pearl, encrusted with gemstones or decorated with miniatures under glass, while pockets bulged with gold watchcases and gold chains."[31] Similar, if less spectacular, changes in consumption patterns seem to have occurred in provincial towns. A bourgeois of Montpellier noted in 1768 that "in this town, from one season to the next, all of this [fashion] changes, and it is truly an occupation, for those who wish to be fashionable, to study and to practice the changes that occur daily."[32]

However, although historians in the last decade have begun to recognize the increasingly commercialized and consumerist aspects of eighteenth-century French urban society, they have been slower to

28 Colin Jones, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," in *Rewriting the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford, 1991), 89. See also Natacha Coquery, "Hôtel, luxe et société de cour: Le Marché aristocratique parisien au XVIIIe siècle," *Histoire et mesure* 10 (1995): 339–69; Cissie Fairchilds, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London, 1993); and Annick Pardailhé-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'intime: 3000 foyers parisiens, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1988).

29 Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 13–40.

30 Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987). See also Roche, *Culture des apparences*.

31 Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 18.

32 Joseph Berthelé, ed., *Montpellier en 1768, d'après le manuscrit anonyme, intitulé: Etat et description de la ville de Montpellier, fait en 1768* (Montpellier, 1909), 99.

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perceive the cultural consequences of these socioeconomic transformations.[33] Colin Jones, for example, seems unaware of the cultural ferment sparked by the changes he describes.[34] One widespread initial reaction to the eighteenth-century consumer revolution was a trenchant restatement of the traditional position on luxury. The French public sphere between the 1750s and the Revolution was literally awash in complaints that immoderate consumption was leading to the dissolution of social order. For example, the bourgeois of Montpellier cited above complained that "the vilest artisan behaves as the equal of the most exalted of artists or of those who exercise professions superior to his. They are confounded equally by their expenditure, their clothing, and their houses."[35] He was horrified to see servants dressed in the cast-off finery of their masters or mistresses without any other mark to distinguish them from their social betters: "For nothing is more impertinent than to see a cook or valet don an outfit trimmed with braid or lace, strap on a sword, and insinuate himself among the finest company in promenades . . . or to find domestic servants of any kind decked out like gentle people. All that is revolting." If servants must be allowed to mix with polite society in public, according to this critic, "one should be able to pick them out with a badge indicating their *état* and making it impossible to confuse them with everyone else."[36]

However, the dominant thrust of this antiluxury discourse was transformed after 1750. Although continuing to bemoan the fact that luxury was leading to the confounding of ranks and the dissolution of social order, moralists elaborated a significantly different conception of luxury. Turning the logic of the traditional critique on its head, the new critics defined luxury as all use of spectacular consumption to construct relationships of power. They argued not that the usurpation of spectacular appearances by the lowborn was destructive of social order but that *représentation* was illegitimate *tout court.* The novelty of this new perspective is obfuscated, in many instances, by the fact that critics of aristocratic consumption appropriated and deployed the very traditional-sounding tropes and imagery of the early modern discourse. That this

33 One notable exception to this generalization is Sarah Maza, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (June 1997): 199–229.

34 Referring to the *affiches*, Jones remarks that "the market was presented as anodyne, socially desirable, even lovable; within it, speculation, famine, greed, and want seemed to find no place." Although this may be true of the advertising press, it does not capture the profoundly ambivalent attitudes prevalent among a majority of French social commentators (Jones, "Great Chain of Buying," 25).

35 Berthelé, *Montpellier en 1768*, 68.

36 Ibid., 69.

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traditional idiom had become uncoupled from its original discursive moorings only becomes obvious when it appears in texts that are overtly critical of the nobility.

The new luxury critique was not a response to changes in patterns of consumption in any simple or mechanical way. Daniel Roche suggests that nobles were spending two and a half times more money on clothing, in real terms, at the end of the eighteenth century than at its beginning.[37] But they were not, for all that, behaving in qualitatively new ways. Under the traditional logic of the antiluxury discourse, such lavish consumption might be interpreted as detrimental to the noble families themselves, but it could not be regarded as socially illegitimate. In any case, changes in consumption most visibly affected "le peuple"— urban wage earners became participants in a kind of consumer culture for the first time in the eighteenth century. Yet late-eighteenth-century critiques were not directed primarily at this stratum of the population.

Ultimately, I suggest, the emergence of a new conception of luxury articulated a crisis of representation. Changes in popular consumption were so radical and so rapid that they destabilized the whole system of constituting social order through consumption. With large numbers of new consumers engaging in the pursuit of fashion for the first time, the consequence was symbolic anarchy. There is a sense in the new discourse on luxury that society is awash in signs, many of them unconnected to real things, their signification shifting and unstable. The social order constructed on the basis of this practice of representation seemed unreal, flimsy, and insubstantial. The complete abandonment of an attempt to constitute social order through consumption seemed preferable to the continuation of such semiotic chaos.

A further sense in which the transformation of the luxury discourse is not a simple mirror of socioeconomic change lies in the close relationship that appears to have existed between the new luxury critique and sensationalist philosophy. Sensationalism seems to have flourished in a kind of dialectical relationship with the emergent luxury critique. Elaborated most influentially by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), sensationalism formed one of the central matrices of Enlightenment intellectual culture. It offered an approach to the acquisition of knowledge that could be applied in a wide variety of fields, from the experimental sciences to aesthetics, from medicine to social theory. A tendency to think about the problem of

[37] Daniel Roche, "Between a 'Moral Economy' and a 'Consumer Economy': Clothes and Their Function in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris,* ed. Robert Fox and Anthony Turner (Aldershot, U.K. 1998).

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luxury using the categories of sensationalism facilitated a rejection of spectacular consumption. Sensationalist philosophy highlighted representation—the relationship between signs and signifieds—as a crucial epistemological problem. According to Locke and his disciples, the close connection between language and the systems of categories the mind uses to make the world intelligible was the source of nearly all failures of the human understanding. Language, although it is the indispensable medium of cognition, constantly corrupts the operations of the mind. This corruption occurs because people use language carelessly, without thinking about what ideas they are attaching to words. Words are bandied about that have no ideas attached to them, or to which no two people attach the same meanings. The road to enlightenment, for sensationalists, lies through the purification of language, the careful definition of words and the removal of those that sow false ideas in the human mind. Moreover, Locke and his philosophical successors attacked ornament in discourse, rhetorical flourish, and flowery language. Only through simplicity could the human mind remain uncontaminated.[38] Finally, sensationalists complained that people tend to confuse words with things, rejecting as error or abuse any kind of representation that blurred the distinction between sign and thing.[39]

As should be clear from the foregoing remarks, sensationalist epistemology has at its core a rather impoverished conception of representation, placing inordinate emphasis on one possible relationship between signs and things while implicitly rejecting others as an abuse. The relationship between sign and signified on which the practice of *représentation* depended—that is, the participation of the sign in the constitution of the thing—was an impossibility under the sensationalist conception of representation. In the sensationalist scheme of things, the tendency of the low to take the pomp of the great for power or authority —the very core of *représentation*—is a false connection of ideas. Authority constituted on such a basis is "chimerical." The use of spectacular consumption by the great is equivalent to an abuse of language—*représentation* is like eloquence, a use of big empty words to dazzle one's audience and to convince them of falsehood. The audience, in turn,

38 Locke complains that "all the artificial and figurative applications of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheat" (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [Oxford, 1975], 508).

39 Human beings, Locke notes, "often suppose their words to stand also for the reality of Things"; but, it "brings unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification, whenever we make them stand for any thing, but those Ideas we have in our own Minds" (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 407–8). "Even when they would apply themselves to an attentive Consideration, [people] set their Thoughts more on Words than Things" (ibid., 497).

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take the empty "jargon" (luxury) of the great for reality, thereby confounding mere signs with real things. In every register, *représentation* is coded as an abuse that leads the human mind to acquire a false idea of reality. Within the sensationalist paradigm, the manipulation of spectacular appearances was interpreted as a deliberate attempt to confuse mere signs with real things; the tendency for people to be "taken in" by *représentation* was construed as error; and the social order predicated on such confusion was decried as flimsy, nebulous, and unreal.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of Locke's *Essay* on the French Enlightenment.[40] Sensationalist epistemology and consequent anxiety about the corrupting effects of language on the human understanding were among the central preoccupations of the philosophes. The Enlightenment philosophical project was, to a considerable extent, an attempt to fashion a perfect language. This is one light in which the undertaking of the *Encyclopédie* may be viewed—in producing a *dictionnaire raisonné*, the Encyclopedists were endeavoring to purify language by appropriately fixing the meaning of words.[41] Only by reasoning and debating through the medium of a perfected language would philosophical speculation be grounded in the order of nature and reality rather than in the airy realm of unmoored signs.

The popularity of sensationalism, its intellectual power, may itself be partially accounted for in terms of how such a philosophical theory mapped onto existing sociocultural tensions surrounding the problem of constituting social order through spectacular display. Changes in consumption—already problematic because of their implications for a society that deployed commodities to constitute and fix relations of social status and political authority—may have rendered sensationalism a peculiarly appropriate and compelling methodological paradigm. Sensationalism in turn, once mapped onto the social problem of spectacular consumption, functioned to radicalize and sharpen it.

A sensationalist theory equating luxury with *représentation* was first elaborated during the 1750s. The earliest example of such a conflation that I have found appears in a text titled *L'Andrométrie, ou examen philosophique de l'homme* published in 1753. The author, Pierre-Joseph Boudier

[40] Five translations of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* were published in French between 1700 and 1787 in ten separate printings: 1700, 1723, 1729, 1735, 1742, 1750, 1755, 1758, 1774, and 1787. In addition, a translation of Wynne's abridgment of the *Essay* appeared in seven separate printings under the title *Abrégé de l'Essai de M. Locke sur l'entendement humain*: in 1720, 1738, 1741, twice in 1746, 1751, and 1788. See Ross Hutchison, *Locke in France, 1688–1734*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 290 (Oxford, 1991), 242–46.

[41] My argument here is indebted to Keith Michael Baker's *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago, 1975) and to Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses: Une Archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966).

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de Villemaire, was an officer of the law associated with the Paris parlement and a prolific hack. Between his birth in 1716 and his death in the early years of the nineteenth century he published at least fourteen different "philosophical" works, among them an entry in the same academic essay contest that produced Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, a treatise on the education of women, and two tracts in defense of religion.[42] Boudier de Villemaire explicitly problematizes the Old Regime practice of spectacular consumption. He suggests that *représentation* was invented in order to curb the unruliness of people in early societies: "Exterior marks of power had become necessary to men endowed with a certain portion of authority to impose on those who refused to submit to the general will."[43] Boudier casts *représentation* in a negative light. These "marks of power" were no sooner introduced than they opened a Pandora's box. They misled men and simultaneously roused their vanity and pride, inducing the worst among them to try to seize political authority: "These distinctions, relating to the office, but foreign to the man, dazzled him and awakened his vanity; those most disposed to abuse them were the most inclined to demand them; a foolish pride made the most ambitious presume that they were the only worthy ones, and made them dare anything to achieve [distinctions]: command had ceased to belong to the wisest, it had become the prize of audacity."[44]

In his chapter "The Progress of Luxury," Boudier conflates *représentation* with the problem of luxury. He laments the fact that people are "madly dazzled by pomp"—the problem of luxury becomes the problem that people are taken in by spectacular appearances.[45] But the whole point of *représentation* was that people should be "madly dazzled by pomp." In the traditional view, problems arose only when the wrong people—usually wealthy parvenus—appropriated the power of spectacular appearances for themselves. But Boudier does not draw a distinction between the "magnificence" of *les grands* and the corrupting

42 *Examen de la question proposée par l'Académie de Dijon sur l'utilité des arts et des sciences* (1753); *L'Ami des femmes, ou la philosophie du beau sexe* (1758, 1774); *L'Irreligion dévoilée, ou la Philosophie de l'honnête homme* (1774); *Pensées philosophiques sur la nature, l'homme et la religion* (1785–86).

43 Pierre-Joseph Boudier de Villemaire (or de Villermet), *L'Andrométrie, ou examen philosophique de l'homme* (Paris, 1753), 12.

44 Ibid., 12–13.

45 Ibid., 89. These sentiments are echoed by an author named de Saint-Jean, writing in 1768, who casts the tendency to be dazzled by spectacular appearances as a form of "error" with close affinities to Locke's false association of ideas. He observes that it is only "prejudice" that "accords merit to opulence and to exterior *éclat*," and "when prejudice has thrown us into error, it is very difficult to return from it." His contention that this prejudice "would have less of an empire if ideas were examined before being adopted" has the ring of a sensationalist solution to a sensationalist problem (Saint-Jean, *Pensées et réflexions morales: Par un militaire* [Paris, 1768], 122).

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"luxury" of the lowborn. Instead, he lumps all uses of pomp together and condemns them as luxury. Boudier rejects the use of spectacular consumption to constitute social rank and political authority.

A thoroughgoing sensationalist, Boudier sets up this luxury/*représentation* problem as a form of the sensationalist predicament that mere signs are being confused with real things. He notes that "all that exists outside of us is known to us only through impressions made upon us."[46] The problem is that man always takes words for things, signs for reality. Boudier complains that "sounds, which were only employed as representative signs of ideas, have replaced them. . . . and always in a position to pay in words, one thinks oneself rich in knowledge."[47] He observes that "the vain display that decorated the great is taken for grandeur itself; everybody tries hard to imitate it and is thought great in proportion to his expenditure: a bizarre idea, which confounds things so little linked."[48] Signs are being taken for real things—because display is found conjoined with the great, people take display for grandeur itself. In classically sensationalist fashion, Boudier notes that men submit to "chimeras" that derive value only from the "false ideas" attached to them.[49]

Taxonomic Anxiety and the Radicalization of the Luxury Critique

By the 1770s, complaints that unregulated consumption was leading to the "confounding of ranks" and the "mixing of estates" rarely betokened the desire to shore up a traditional society of orders. Such laments reflected a new kind of concern about social order mediated by sensationalist language. Part of the anxiety these texts expressed was taxonomic—the authors' concern was that all order had broken down and that semiotic anarchy prevailed. Such apprehensions led many to a deepening suspicion of *représentation* as a mode of constituting social order and ultimately to the rejection of spectacular consumption outright. The other keynote of the antiluxury discourse in the 1770s was

46 Boudier, *L'Andrométrie,* 65.

47 Ibid., 61–62.

48 Ibid., 100.

49 Ibid., 121. In another variation on this argument, Louis Genty, author of a prize-winning essay on luxury published in 1783, displays a notably negative attitude to the spectacular consumption of *les grands,* deploring the "false *éclat*" that it casts. He worries that ordinary people are taken in by the appearances of luxury and believe the rich are happy in proportion to their consumption: "The multitude, always seduced by appearances, will take splendor to be a certain sign of happiness." Here again, luxury is cast as a problem reminiscent of the confusion of signs with real things highlighted in sensationalist epistemology (Genty, *Discours sur le luxe, Qui a remporté le Prix d'Eloquence à l'Academie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres & Arts de Besançon, en 1783* [n.p., 1783], 43).

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its tendency to posit a very different vision of social order than that articulated in traditional antiluxury language. The new luxury critique constructed a representation of society that opposed a wealthy, idle, "aristocratic" elite to the modest, industrious, and virtuous majority. Court nobles and recently ennobled plutocrats were grouped in the first category. Luxury was the defining quality of this class. The provincial and military nobility could be categorized among the useful, virtuous, and nonluxurious majority. By the 1780s the antiluxury discourse had ceased to be the bulwark of a society of orders and had developed into a language critical of "aristocratic" society.

The taxonomic anxieties central to the sensationalist luxury critique of the 1770s are evident in a treatise titled *L'Ami des françois*, published anonymously in 1771 by the intendant of Champagne, a robe noble named Augustin Rouillé d'Orfeuil.[50] *L'Ami des françois* purports to describe a series of conversations between a French castaway and the wise chief minister of a utopian people called the Serosages. The book is encyclopedic in its ambition, entering into every major area of administration—finance and the tax system, justice and the parlements, religion and the Church, commerce and industry. In the final chapter Rouillé d'Orfeuil suggests that the most necessary of the laws essential for the maintenance of society is "the distinction of different classes or different estates that compose it . . . without which it is nothing but a chaos."[51]

He then proceeds to outline a system of social distinctions and sumptuary laws of obsessive complexity and rigidity, dividing society into a series of classes that must be carefully distinguished from one another according to what they may or may not consume. Those whose nobility is immemorial will be called *haute noblesse* and only they will have the privilege of wearing embroidery, of dressing their servants in grand livery, and of owning a coach and six. The ennobled will be called simply *noblesse* and will be permitted to wear braid and coats of gold and silver cloth. They will be allowed to dress their servants in minor livery and to harness four horses to their carriages. Apart from these first two classes, nobody will be permitted to wear gold or silver. All ministers of justice will wear black. The *haute robe* will have the privilege of wearing silk and lace, dressing their servants in minor livery and harnessing four horses. Lesser officers of justice will have to wear woolen fabrics

50 Rouillé d'Orfeuil, *L'Ami des françois* (Constantinople, 1771). According to his only biographer, Rouillé d'Orfeuil was appointed intendant of the *generalité* in 1764 and remained its administrator until the Revolution. See Etienne Prévost de Lavaud, *Les Théories de l'intendant Rouillé d'Orfeuil* (Rochechouart, 1909), 11–12.

51 Rouillé d'Orfeuil, *L'Ami des françois*, 644.

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or other less expensive robes—all in black of course. The text goes on in this manner, describing what *gros bourgeois*, and ordinary bourgeois, ecclesiastics, soldiers, and everyone else may wear or display.

Although, on the face of things, this text reads like a deeply traditional vision of social order, there is the germ of something much more radical here. Though Rouillé d'Orfeuil's whole system of sumptuary legislation rests logically on the concept of *représentation*, he is in fact deeply suspicious of this exploitation of the sign. According to Rouillé d'Orfeuil, the fact that people are "impressionable," far from being fortunate, is dangerous. Given this regrettable condition, we must be extremely careful about the impressions to which they are exposed. Rouillé d'Orfeuil contends that people derive their ideas from the impressions to which they are habitually subjected: "The different ways of thinking . . . seeing . . . and feeling that we adopt, depend on the impressions that the exterior objects that surround us, and which have surrounded us, make, and have made, upon us."[52] If one wishes people to have correct ideas, one must expose them to the correct impressions: "It is truly essential that everything that surrounds them presents to them as natural, the ideas that they ought to have."[53] People acquire false ideas because they are habitually exposed to the false and seductive association of ideas that luxury forges.

Rouillé d'Orfeuil's system of sumptuary regulations is an expression not of a traditional antiluxury position but of a taxonomic anxiety. That Rouillé d'Orfeuil was no friend of the traditional social order is strongly suggested by a second work he published two years later. In *L'Alambic moral* he delivers a scathing attack on the institution of hereditary nobility, arguing that nobility ought to be a purely personal reward for public service.[54] The problem he is concerned with in *L'Ami des françois* is not the threat that luxury poses to the hegemony of traditional elites but the threat it poses to any kind of social ordering whatsoever. This, I suggest, is how we ought to interpret Rouillé d'Orfeuil's claim that the most necessary law for the maintenance of society is "the distinction of different classes or different estates that compose it . . . without which it is nothing but a chaos." His comments on the wearing of black are significant in this regard. According to Rouillé d'Orfeuil, nobody but magistrates ought to wear black on any pretext whatsoever. He goes so far as to suggest that the color of mourning will have to

52 Ibid., 636.

53 Ibid., 639.

54 Augustin Rouillé d'Orfeuil, *L'Alambic moral, ou Analyse raisonée de tout ce qui a rapport à l'homme* (Maroc [i.e., Paris], 1773), 427.

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be changed, because "one cannot avoid too much, in all things, that which causes confusion and equivocation."[55] Mourners pose no political threat to the status quo—the problem they embody is purely taxonomic.

Protests that might easily be mistaken for the traditional noble lament that the little people will not remain in their station appear in unambiguously nontraditional texts of the 1780s. In a dialogue between a "Tartar" and a "Frenchman" written by Jean-François André, the Tartar deplores the fact that nobody is satisfied anymore with the condition of his father—"everyone wants to raise himself up, everyone wants to appear."[56] Though this complaint reads like a traditional anxiety about social mobility, this is not at all a traditional text. André is deeply opposed to the social distinctions that characterized social order under the Old Regime. He has the Tartar refer to formal distinctions as "those odious titles that make a slave of one man, and corrupt the other."[57] The Tartar defines *représentation* as a form of luxury. "The crime of luxury," he observes, is that it makes us judge a man not according to what he is but according to what surrounds him. We confuse the man with his horses, his liveries, his equipages, his appearance.[58] According to André, luxury "accustoms [people] no longer to see the man in himself, appraising him only for what he is not."[59] André rejects the participation of sign in signified that lies at the heart of the Old Regime practice of *représentation.*

The writings of André and others of his ilk are testimony to a shift in the fundamental significance of the luxury discourse—from pillar of the traditional status quo to critique of an "aristocratic" social order. The way a sensationalist critique of luxury was grounded in antiaristocratic sentiment is illustrated by a particularly rich example of the antiluxury genre, the chevalier Du Coudray's social critique in verse, *Le Luxe, poëme en six chants.* Du Coudray repeatedly complains that one can no longer read a person's social position from his or her appearance. He cites the example of a valet who was confused with a marquis at the theater because the former was dressed more splendidly than the latter:

55 Rouillé d'Orfeuil, *L'Ami des françois,* 648.

56 Abbé Jean-François André, *Le Tartare à Paris* (Paris, 1788), 98.

57 Ibid., 46.

58 Ibid., 83.

59 Ibid., 84. André's *Tartare à Paris* is of course an expression of popular Rousseauism. Other popularizers of Rousseau, such as Louis-Sebastien Mercier, voiced similar sentiments. Mercier, like André, combines an attack on "distinctions" with frequent complaints concerning "luxury" and the "confounding of ranks." See *Tableau de Paris* (Hamburg, 1781).

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> Témoins ces jours derniers, deux hommes au spectacle,
> L'un vétu simplement, l'autre étant à miracle,
> Il se trouve donc être (& le tour est exquis)
> Ce dernier un Valet, le premier un Marquis.[60]

In another example, he tells of two beautifully attired women disputing the right to sit on a bench in the Jardin des Tuileries. One was a young countess; the other looked like a princess but was in fact the wife of a *maître d'hôtel*.[61] Throughout the text, Du Coudray lashes out at ennoblement, at financiers, at the fact that "merit" and "blood" are no longer esteemed in Paris, that only money distinguishes.

These comments—and the text is rife with similar examples—appear deeply traditional. But Du Coudray, far from adhering to a traditional line on the rights of birth, argues that nobility is a phantasm and a social evil. Addressing the "useful" artisan, and comparing him to the idle and worthless noble, Du Coudray writes, "Your industrious cares, your pain is dearer to me / Than a parchment bearing a beautiful chimera." The use of the sensationalist idiom of "chimerical" ideas is emblematic of the text's grounding in a sensationalist critique of luxury. According to Du Coudray, the concept of nobility is a tool of luxury and is associated with error:

> La Noblesse est un mal par le Luxe introduit,
> Afin de mieux servir l'erreur qui la conduit.
> Hélas! que ne sont point les mortels téméraires,
> Pour usurper des noms souvent imaginaires.[62]

What Du Coudray does here is to extend the sensationalist attack on *représentation* to the ultimate spectacular sign—nobility itself.[63]

60 A. J., chevalier Du Coudray, *Le Luxe, poëme en six chants; orné de gravures, avec des notes historiques et critiques, suivi de poésies diverses* (Paris, 1773), 42.

61 The Jardin des Tuileries seems to have been notorious for this kind of thing. In 1778 the *Journal de Paris* cites as an example of luxury the following story: two ladies were accosted insolently by a lackey in the Jardin who took them for "coquettes." When one of their husbands came to the rescue, the lackey showered him with blows (*Journal de Paris*, no. 126 [6 May 1778], 501).

62 Du Coudray, *Le Luxe*, 29–30.

63 A tendency to treat nobility as a sign is evident in other radical texts of the period. In his *Considérations sur l'ordre de Cincinnatus*, the comte de Mirabeau identifies nobility with the signs of nobility. In a pamphlet denouncing the foundation of a hereditary order of military officers in the United States, Mirabeau criticizes the American authorities for permitting members of the new order to use "signs" such as medals, ribbons, and other visible marks to distinguish themselves. To allow the officers to sport such "signs" is to set up a nobility, according to Mirabeau, and this is unacceptable in a republic.

Incidentally, part of Mirabeau's antipathy to the use of these marks of distinction is based on distinctively sensationalist anxieties. He argues that "man . . . associates or substitutes the sign for the thing. The sign so subjugates him that he places more importance on conforming himself to established convention than to true sentiments, honest motives" (14). He protests that "every sign is redoubtable, and produces a great effect upon the feeble imagination of men. . . . It is by signs that religion, fanaticism, sovereignty, revolt, and factions command minds, leading the blind

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For Du Coudray, nobility has become a sign disarticulated from the reality that it is supposed to signify. He claims that he would esteem the nobility on his knees if they were "generous," "sublime," or "great"—that is, if they were really noble. But most nobles have nothing to offer in place of these virtues but "brilliant chimeras."[64] The sign "nobility" must either be brought into some meaningful relationship with that which it represents, or it must be abandoned entirely. Du Coudray's remarks ought, perhaps, to be read against the background of the steep increase in ennoblements that occurred in the decades preceding the Revolution.[65] Nobility was increasingly becoming a commodity in this period, the most brilliant bauble in the jewel box of spectacular display.[66]

If the traditional critique of luxury had articulated a representation of social order that drew the fundamental line of opposition between nobles and nonnobles, Du Coudray's critique is predicated on a very different vision of society. He elaborates a social classification based on utility and function—farmers, artisans, merchants, and soldiers are among his basic social categories. His fundamental social dichotomy opposes useful and industrious citizens to the idle aristocratic rich:

> Nous naissons tous égaux, l'homme à l'homme est utile;
> Ce guerrier, ce Bourgeois, cet Artisan habile:
> L'un à l'autre engagés par de communs liens,
> S'entre-aidant tour à tour, font les vrais citoyens,
> Et non pas ces frélons qui, dans leur indolence,
> De la soigneuse abeille usurpent la substance.[67]

What distinguishes the parasitic group most clearly from the true citizens is pomp—or as Du Coudray says in the following lines, "éclat":

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multitudes whose thinking is subjugated by signs" Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, *Opinion du comte de Mirabeau sur la noblesse ancienne et moderne; Considérations sur l'ordre de Cincinnatus* ([1784; rpt., Paris, 1815], 15).

64 Du Coudray, *Le Luxe,* 30. A tendency on the part of some liberal nobles to repudiate the traditional marks of nobility—titles and other such distinctions—in response to the increasing commodification of such signs has been remarked upon by Jay M. Smith. In a discussion of noble army reform in the decades before the Revolution, Smith argues that "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" (Smith, *Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996], 245).

65 An increase documented by David Bien and William Doyle (Bien, "Manufacturing Nobles: The Chancelleries in France to 1789," *Journal of Modern History* 61, no. 3 [1989]; Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* [Oxford, 1996]).

66 For further elaboration of this point, see John Shovlin, "Towards a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Anti-Nobilism: The Political Economy of Honor in the Old Regime," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 35–66.

67 Du Coudray, *Le Luxe,* 30.

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C'est chez l'Agriculteur, chez le Bourgeois tranquille,
Le noble Campagnard, & l'artisan habile,
Vivant presque ignorés, existans sans éclat,
Qu'on trouve un citoyen colonne de l'Etat.[68]

Du Coudray's text is not so much antinoble as anti-"aristocratic." Du Coudray claims to hail from a provincial, military, noble family. He notes with pride that his father is the "Chevalier Seigneur du Coudray, du Plessis, & autres lieux" and a former captain of cavalry.[69] His antipathy does not extend to the provincial nobility who can be fitted without too much difficulty into the categories "noble campagnard" or "guerrier" of which he heartily approves. It is those nobles whose nobility is a sign of wealth rather than a token of "virtue," or "merit," that he condemns. Du Coudray gives voice to a split in the ranks of the Second Estate that had existed in some objective sense for well over a century but had been systematically elided by the traditional luxury discourse. This split opposed *les grands*—enormously wealthy nobles, quite recently ennobled in many instances—to a provincial nobility that found itself increasingly excluded from its traditional functions in the military and the magistracy by a lack of wealth.

The "New" Luxury Critique and Radical Political Culture

In recent years, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that radical political discourse in the 1780s and 1790s was committed to a new practice of representation. In words and images, radicals rejected the stylistic flourish of the rococo and adopted a plainness of speech and sign. Thomas Crow argues that Jacques-Louis David was lionized by the radical public not because of the subject matter of his paintings but because of his stark, almost Spartan, style (or rejection of "style").[70] Joan Landes suggests that a new symbolic politics came into existence in the decades preceding the Revolution. The artificial stylized discourse associated with *le monde*, and especially with the feminine space of the salon, was spurned by radicals in favor of simple, "natural" language.[71] This new politics of representation was closely tied to the cultural developments explored in this essay. Rejection of flowery excesses of style

68 Ibid., 21.
69 Ibid., 132.
70 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), 223–29.
71 Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 39–65.

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and the embracing of plainness was very much an aspect of sensationalism. Sensationalist complaints about the misuse of words, the need to purify language, the relationship between false ideas—prejudices and chimeras—and false language, are ubiquitous in the radical literature of the 1780s and the Revolution. For instance, in a pamphlet vilifying the Calonne ministry, the future revolutionary Jean-Louis Carra complained that

> The abuse of words is not as dangerous without doubt as the abuse of things; but unfortunately, the latter abuse may derive, and in fact often derives from the former. Nowadays especially as universal morality seeks to purify its language and finally fix our ideas on the true character of good and evil, of justice and injustice, it is very important not to mistake the positive meaning of words, for fear of leaving the mind in uncertainty. . . . the language of truth does not admit vague nuances and uncertainties in the direct construction of its phrases.[72]

David's austere style and the attack on "effeminate" or "precious" discourse closely paralleled the rejection of *représentation* as a practice of power. The structure of the radical problem with language was analogous to the structure of the luxury problem—both were aspects of a crisis of representation mediated by sensationalism.

One text that illuminates the connection between the abuse of language and the problem of luxury with particular clarity is Charles Remi's *Considérations philosophiques sur les mœurs, les plaisirs et les préjugés de la capitale* (1787). Remi characterizes ornate discourse in terms similar to sensationalist criticism of figurative language. Remi apologizes, in an ironic manner, for the simplicity of his writing; it will be without that "tone" that is so admired, without play on words, without "rare" and "frivolous" expressions. Instead, Remi claims, he will offer the reader only his "sensations," his "observations," his "reflections," and his "ideas."[73] In using these words loaded with sensationalist connotations, Remi contrasts ornate discourse with more epistemologically grounded language, language having a more direct relationship with reality.

Remi compares the stylistic extravagance of the literary idiom to luxury. He suggests that ornate language obscures the real content of literature in the same way that luxury obscures the real character of

72 Jean-Louis Carra, *M. de Calonne tout entier, tel qu'il s'est comporté dans l'administration des finances, dans son commissariat en Bretagne, &c. &c.* (Brussels, 1788), 31.

73 Charles Remi, *Considérations philosophiques sur les mœurs, les plaisirs et les préjugés de la capitale* (London, 1787), 1–3.

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les grands: "Today [luxury] dazzles some men's faculties, as style does the content of works."[74] Luxury is analogous to the abuse of words. Locke charged that the flowery excesses of literature "insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead Judgment";[75] similarly, the spectacular excess of the Old Regime's social distinctions implant false conceptions in people's minds, obscuring the true character of social reality. According to Remi, a writer with only the good and the useful in mind does not use "pompous" and "noisy" words that only prevent the truth from being revealed. Radical critics of the society of the Old Regime argued that pomp disguises the vices and inadequacies of the great and prevents people from recognizing true merit, true virtue, and the real nature of social order.

This line of argument was developed to denounce the entire social system of the Old Regime by the abbé Sieyès.[76] In his *Essai sur les privilèges* (1788), Sieyès lodged the same complaint against the social categories of the ancien régime that sensationalists had launched against abstract philosophical language—that they are mere jargon, words without any grounding in real things, empty sounds. Sieyès charges "the privileged" with abusing and perverting language by detaching words from their true meanings:

> I give up all idea of grasping all the nuances, all the subtlety of the habitual language of the Privileged. We would need a special Dictionary . . . because, instead of presenting the proper or metaphorical sense of words, it would be a question, on the contrary, of detaching from words their true sense, in order to leave nothing underneath but a void for reason, and admirable depths for prejudice. . . . We would learn in this new Dictionary, that there is no *birth* except for those who have no *origin* whatever. Those Privileged by the prince, themselves, dare not think they have more than a *semi-birth,* and the Nation has none at all. . . . If you had thought, for example, that every man necessarily had his father, his ancestors, etc., you were mistaken. In this regard, physical certitude does not suffice. . . . The newly Privileged are *men of yesterday*; and non-Privileged Citizens . . . they have not yet been born.[77]

According to Sieyès, the language of social order in the Old Regime is debased. The words that the privileged have detached from their true signification are the words of social order. As the privileged use them, these categories are devoid of meaning.

74 Ibid., 3.
75 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 508.
76 Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788).
77 Ibid., 21–23n.

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Sieyès claims that the social order of the Old Regime is a false and absurd taxonomy. Stating that he is going "to lay bare, according to their manner of seeing, the true table of a political society," he presents a "social order" of the privileged divided into seven classes, the first six of which, containing a tiny fraction of the population, are hierarchized by various gradations of privilege—from "grands Seigneurs" through the "gens de Qualité," the "gens de quelque chose," the "Gentillâtres de Province," the "somewhat ancient *Anoblis*, or people of naught," and the "newly *Anoblis* or people worse than nothing." The seventh class contains all the rest of the people, or as Sieyès so acidly puts it, "Finally, and in order to forget nothing, one can well enough consign to a seventh division the rest of the Citizens, whom it is not possible to characterize otherwise than abusively. Such is the social order according to the reigning prejudice." Aristocratic social order has the status of a false taxonomy, a language composed of empty phrases, words without meaning, signs without referents. When viewed through the lens of a sensationalist conception of luxury, the social structure of the Old Regime dissolved—it was not recognizable as order at all.[78]

Complaints concerning the abuse of language are tied directly to an attack on *représentation* in Marat's *Chaines de l'esclavage*.[79] Marat argues that despotic governments mislead citizens by distorting the relationship between words and things—by systematically abusing the understanding of the people through the abuse of language. According to Marat, "Few men have sound ideas of things. . . . Misled by words, men are not horrified by the most infamous things; and they are horrified by the most praiseworthy things, described in odious terms. Thus, the ordinary artifice of cabinets is to lead the people astray by perverting the meaning of words. . . . Never are things to have their true names."[80]

78 What Rémy Saisselin identifies as a separation of the category "art" from the category "luxury" is also symptomatic of the collapse of *représentation*. Saisselin contends that until the late eighteenth century, no distinction was made between objects of art and objects of luxury. Paintings, statues, and other *objets d'arts* were used in the same way as clothing to create a theater of power. The revolutionaries sought to draw a distinction between illegitimate and wasteful luxury and art, which was the treasure of the nation. Luxury could safely be condemned, but for "art," the museum had to be invented. Saisselin points out that the popular classes smashed some works of art during the Revolution because they did not yet appreciate the distinction between art and signs of distinction. See Rémy G. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment against the Baroque: Economics and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 133.

79 Jean-Paul Marat, *Les Chaines de l'esclavage* (Paris, An I). First published in England, in 1774, as *The Chains of Slavery*.

80 Ibid., 182. Robespierre also used this trope of abused language. In his "Rapports sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention nationale dans l'administration intérieure de la république," he prefaced an impassioned attack on moderates and false revolutionaries by noting that we are still, under the Revolution, suffering the scourge of false language. His remark—"With what good nature we are still the dupe of words!"—was the prelude, in some sense, to the radicalization of the Terror that Robespierre's speech demanded and announced.

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Marat deplores the tendency among ordinary people to be taken in by spectacular appearances. He bemoans "that extreme facility of the people to be dazzled by splendor, pomp, great enterprises, good fortune and the brilliant qualities of princes."[81] Princes take advantage of this natural tendency and always show themselves "in full royal *éclat*."[82] Thus luxury/*représentation* becomes a tool of despotism, a weapon of the prince in spreading his arbitrary authority.

The ideology of the sansculottes was also shaped by the discourse on luxury elaborated in the decades preceding the Revolution. The sansculottes claimed to embody public virtue because they lived a life without luxury. In an oft-quoted passage titled "Answer to the Impertinent Question: But What Is a Sansculottes?" the author, without using the term, draws heavily on the luxury discourse:

> A sans-culottes, you rascals? He is a being who always goes on foot, who has no millions, as all you wish to have, no château, no valets to serve him and who lives simply with his wife and children, if he has any, on the fourth or fifth floor. . . . In the evening, he attends his section, not powdered, perfumed and booted in the hope of catching the attention of female citizens at the tribune, but to support good motions with all his force and to pulverize those which come from the abominable faction of the *hommes d'état*.[83]

The focus on sartorial elements as signifiers of political identity is quite striking in this passage. The sansculottes is the very negation of the luxurious man. He is not rich; he has no fancy house or servants

[81] Ibid., 262. This sentiment is echoed by a commentator of a very different political stripe to Marat, the minor physiocratic publicist, Paul Boesnier de l'Orme. Writing in 1792, Boesnier de l'Orme contends that morals become corrupted when the human mind links together ideas that have no real connection to one another. The example of such false association that he selects is *représentation*: those who habitually witness the respect and homage paid to spectacular consumption must necessarily form the false notion that splendor, wealth, and *éclat* are the truly estimable qualities in men: "A courtier, whose imagination is continually struck by the stupid homage rendered to splendor, to riches, and to magnificence, whose spirit is occupied only with pleasures and intrigues, cannot easily conceive that disinterestedness, wisdom, love of liberty, glory, and the *patrie*, talents, are really the most respectable attributes in man, and the qualities most appropriate to assuring his happiness" (Boesnier de l'Orme, *Essai sur les principes de la morale naturelle* [Blois, 1792], 185).

Boesnier de l'Orme sees it as the role of wise government to accustom men to making true connections between ideas. He contends, "To raise, form, and govern men is to accustom them to form true ideas, and to feel just sentiments" (ibid., 182). He particularly recommends the use of national education and festivals to impress appropriate ideas on people's minds: "Education, national instruction, usages, customs, public ceremonies, spectacles, games, festivals are so many means, more or less powerful, that the legislator should use to impress on the spirit of peoples, in a more or less sensitive and reasoned manner, and to maintain in them, through habit, the ideas, the sentiments, the dispositions most appropriate to forming good morals in them, and to perfecting their character" (ibid., 187–88).

[82] Marat, *Chaines de l'esclavage*, 57.

[83] Walter Markov and Albert Soboul, eds., *Die Sansculotten von Paris: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Volksbewegung, 1793–1794* (Berlin, 1957), 2.

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to attend him;[84] he is not powdered, perfumed, and booted. Indeed, the very appellation "sansculottes" suggests sumptuary simplicity and a rejection of conspicuous display.[85]

The Revolution brought about a temporary abandonment of magnificence as a way to constitute social relationships of power and subordination. Most obviously, of course, the revolutionaries did away with the court, the center of the politics of *représentation.* At a more banal level, the Revolution transformed the way that elite men dressed. The change began in the 1780s when simpler, less ornate styles, in imitation of English "country" dress, began to be popularized in patriot circles.[86] What had been only a trend before 1789 became a norm in the 1790s.[87] Men shifted to wearing dark, sober colors: blue, navy, brown, and especially black. Woolen fabrics replaced silk as the material of choice in elite men's clothing. Elaborate wigs were supplanted by short, unpowdered hair.[88] Of course, there were exceptions to this rule, the most prominent of them being Maximilien Robespierre, who, good republican though he was, remained passionately attached to the sartorial elegance of the Old Regime and was rarely seen without a silk coat, powdered wig, and breeches. But for every Robespierre there was a Jean-Paul Marat, notable for the deliberate slovenliness of his dress. Marat

84 The collapse of *représentation* as a form of power was not confined to the realm of apparel. As Sarah Maza points out, through much of the eighteenth century, wealthy families had employed bevies of servants as symbols of status. These servants were nearly always male, were dressed in livery or the cast-off finery of their masters, and had few official duties other than lounging around as living displays of their masters' wealth and power. According to Maza, the system of using servants in this way remained predominant until the 1790s, when the Revolution swept it away. The nineteenth century saw a new attitude to servants. They were dressed much more simply than under the Old Regime; the comparative idleness of male service in the eighteenth century gave way to a new emphasis on productivity and scheduling. See Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France.*

85 Given the multiple meanings of the term *état,* discussed above, the epithet used to denominate the enemy of the sansculottes—"hommes d'état" (a synonym for the Girondins)—may also imply a rejection of luxury. On the use of the expression "hommes d'état" to describe the Girondins, see Frederick A. da Luna, "The 'Girondins' Were Girondins, After All," *French Historical Studies* 15 (spring 1988): 506–18.

86 On this point, see Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820* (New Haven, Conn., 1995).

87 The fashion sense of the revolutionaries is often rather simplistically attributed to anglophilia and an imitation of English country-style dress. But this is an inadequate explanation of the revolutionary sense of style. Though elements of radical opinion looked to the English parliamentary system as a model, many more were suspicious of it. Revolutionary political culture quickly became quite anglophobic but without changing its commitment to simple, sometimes austere fashions.

88 According to Ribeiro, the *Journal des dames et des modes* reported in January 1799 that "everyday costume worn by the *élégant* is a coat or frock of black, cut away at the front and with metal buttons; it is worn with pantaloons and boots." The same journal, Ribeiro notes, "often confesses itself at a loss to say anything new about men's fashions," finding itself reduced to discussing minor changes in the height of a collar or the shape of a pocket flap (Ribeiro, *Fashion in the French Revolution* [London, 1988], 119).

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would habitually appear in a threadbare coat, unbuttoned shirt collar, and shoes tied with string.[89]

Of course, the attempt to use magnificent appearances as a form of power did not simply disappear with the Revolution. Just as the Napoleonic and Restoration regimes tried to restore aspects of the old political system, so they set about reinstating pomp and magnificence at court.[90] But this return to the sartorial flourish of the Old Regime does not seem to have affected fashion trends in society as a whole. Dark, sober, and simple dress, with pants rather than breeches, and short unpowdered hair remained standard for men in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Needless to say, under the Empire and the Restoration, as today, expensive clothing marked social status. But whereas in the eighteenth century expensive clothing was dazzling, brilliant, and spectacular, in the nineteenth it was much plainer, more muted, and less ostentatious. As the early-nineteenth-century English leader of fashion Beau Brummell put it, "If John Bull turns round to look at you, you are not well dressed, but either too stiff, too tight, or too fashionable."[91]

Commerce, Luxury, and the French Revolution

The significance of the new luxury critique does not, however, lie in the way it transformed male fashions. The revolutionary abandonment of *représentation* was symptomatic of more fundamental changes. It betokens a collapse, or transformation, of one of the structuring languages of social order in the Old Regime—the traditional antiluxury discourse. Long used to denounce the usurping consumption of the lowborn, the term *luxury* came to be employed in the latter decades of the eighteenth

89 Ribeiro, *Art of Dress*, 85. Men's fashions did not change as a consequence of any deliberate revolutionary policy; although it became politically suspect to be elegantly attired during the Terror, there was no official policy on dress. Revolutionary regimes passed various laws concerning dress, but at no point did any revolutionary government forbid men to wear magnificent clothing. The most significant revolutionary ordinance on dress was that declaring that no person could force another to wear any particular attire whatever on pain of being considered a suspect (Decree of 8 Brumaire an II [29 October, 1793]). Other revolutionary sartorial legislation included the abolition of liveries, the abrogation of royal edicts regulating the clothes that deputies to the National Assembly were permitted to wear, a law compelling men to wear the tricolor cockade, another a year later compelling women to do the same, and a decree making it illegal for women to wear pants (the latter, as Philippe Perrot points out, was never abrogated). See Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, 20.

90 On the use of magnificence by the Napoleonic regime, see Henri Bouchot, *Le Luxe français—L'Empire* (Paris, n.d.).

91 Quoted in Ribeiro, *Art of Dress*, 100. The quotation from Brummell suggests that the cultural transformation described in this essay was not a local French phenomenon but may have had a European dimension. Considerations of length, however, do not permit an exploration of that dimension here.

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century to denounce all uses of pomp to constitute political authority and social rank. The older language of luxury had articulated a definition of social reality in which the most fundamental line of diffraction set nobles off from nonnobles. This older language of social order enjoyed paradigmatic status in the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. The new critique of luxury that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century highlighted social distinctions that the older language had elided. Not only did the traditional luxury critique lose its authority to order social reality, it was replaced by a new representation that posited very different axes of social identity and social difference.

The crucial context in which to make sense of this sociocultural transformation is the burgeoning commercial prosperity of the eighteenth century. The transformation of the commercial economy and the consumer revolution that followed in its train destabilized the practice of *représentation*. The symbolic economy of Old Regime consumption collapsed in the face of a crisis of representation. The move away from a distinctively early modern practice of representation was mediated by sensationalism—the latest in a long line of attacks on the participation of the sign in the signified.

The thesis elaborated here suggests a final, broader, and more speculative conclusion. It argues for a reconsideration of the relationship between eighteenth-century economic development and the French Revolution. A generation ago, most historians believed that an "eighteenth-century crisis" paved the way for 1789. They held that this crisis expressed tensions generated by the development of a modern economic system within the straitjacket of a traditional social order. They assumed that the French Revolution, in resolving this tension, became a pivotal moment in the emergence of a capitalist economic and social order in France. Since then, these assumptions have been superseded by a revisionist perspective that either jettisons entirely the notion of an eighteenth-century crisis or characterizes this crisis in exclusively political terms. Revisionism effectively disarticulates the events of 1789–99 from narratives of economic and social transformation.

However, recast in the idiom of a cultural history, the idea of an eighteenth-century crisis connected to economic development may provide an insight into the origins of the French Revolution that has been lost in the revisionist perspective. A cultural crisis hinging on problems of representation and luxury played a crucial role in destabilizing and delegitimizing the social order of the Old Regime. This crisis was an expression of stresses that developed between a rapidly expand-

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ing commercial economy and a practice of *représentation* grounded in the more restricted consumption patterns of an earlier age. The new luxury critique was the source of a radical and corrosive critique of the society of the Old Regime—a critique that characterized "aristocratic" society as both corrupt and unreal. This social critique was central to the political culture that made possible the radicalism of the Revolution. As historians, we need to move beyond an intellectual horizon in which economic processes are represented as significant sources of revolutionary radicalism only in terms of their supposed relationship to class struggle or the rise of a revolutionary bourgeoisie. The economic dimension of eighteenth-century life must be reintegrated into the narrative of revolutionary origins, and this project must be effected within the terms of a cultural history.

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