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JOHN SHOVLIN

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## EMULATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH ECONOMIC THOUGHT

It has been twenty-five years since the appearance of Albert Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*, a seminal analysis of the Enlightenment social and economic imaginary.<sup>1</sup> Hirschman argued that moralists who believed the passions might be kept in check by using one passion to restrain another came to the conclusion in the eighteenth century that the role of "balancing" passion could best be played by *interest*—the passion for wealth. Interest was suitable for this role, Hirschman suggested, because it was regarded as a calm and regular passion, one that, if not exactly laudable, was at least rational and predictable. Construed as a check on humankind's more destructive urges, he claimed, interest began a slow transition that transformed it from a vice into a quasi-virtuous disposition, a transition signaled in his view by the emergence of representations that cast trade as a gentle, civilizing force—*le doux commerce*. With acquisitive drives represented in such a positive light, Hirschman argued, the way was open to imagining a social order based on exchange relations that would be conjunctive rather than disjunctive. The remaking of interest as a check on the passions was central to the development of a moral language that would legitimate an emerging commercial society.

In light of Hirschman's conclusions, it is jarring to read Abbé Sieyès's *Essai sur les privilèges* (1788), published on the eve of the Revolution. Sieyès claimed that there were two dominant human passions: the desire for money and the desire for honor. The desire for honor naturally led people to perform actions that benefit society, Sieyès argued, because in return for such actions they received the approbation and esteem of others. He represented the desire for money, however, as an antisocial force that the passion for honor could be used to tame. According to Sieyès, "The desire to merit the public esteem . . . is a necessary brake on the passion for riches."<sup>2</sup> Sieyès's views were not idiosyncratic. Most commentators in the late eighteenth century continued to evince a distinct suspicion of the profit motive; many believed that it was precisely the passion for wealth that most needed to be inhibited. There was some consensus that a drive well suited to checking selfish acquisitive instincts was the passion for honor, an impulse usually characterized as "emulation." Emulation is, literally, an impulse to imitate or surpass others in virtue or merit, but moralists assumed that such striving was prompted by a hunger for honor. That emulation was prompted by the lure of honor, rather than more tangible rewards, is illustrated in a piece of advice attributed to the father of the economist François Quesnay. The elder Quesnay told his son that "the temple of virtue is supported by four columns, honor, reward, shame, and punishment." He suggested that François choose one of these columns as the basis of his own virtue "because it is necessary to choose to do good through emulation, through interest, through decency, or through fear."<sup>3</sup> As reward was aligned with interest, and punishment with fear, so honor was linked with emulation.

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Reservations about interest and enthusiasm for emulation developed in the 1750s and 1760s as patriotism became an increasingly dominant feature of the French cultural landscape.<sup>4</sup> Many patriotic publicists manifested a deep ambivalence toward commerce. Patriots acknowledged that all of France's economic resources would have to be mobilized if the nation was to be regenerated in the aftermath of the disastrous Seven Years' War. On the other hand, among the central lessons French patriots derived from that struggle was that Britain owed its military supremacy as much to its successful cultivation of public spirit as to its naval power or commercial preeminence.<sup>5</sup> If France was to compete, it would have to animate its own citizens with a similar zeal for the public good. However, most social commentators assumed that commercial activity created a personality type driven by interest and incapable of subordinating the profit motive to the general good. As one commentator observed, "The spirit of commerce accustoms one to a calculated exercise of duties. One keeps a book of debits and credits, and one tacitly balances what one will give to . . . one's fellow citizens, [against] what one will receive from them. This mercantile calculation accustoms one to a sentiment of exact justice, but it draws one away from those generous virtues that sacrifice self-interest to the interest of the public."<sup>6</sup> Many patriots feared that the spread of such a commercial "spirit" in society would destroy disinterestedness and undermine the regeneration of public virtue, a concern highlighted in the 1750s by the chevalier d'Arcq in his criticisms of Abbé Coyer's *La Noblesse commerçante*.<sup>7</sup>

This antinomy in patriot thinking created an acute need for representations of commercial activity that downplayed the profit motive and highlighted less egoistic drives. One of the representations that patriots eventually fixed upon construed commerce primarily as a quest for honor rather than a pursuit of profit. Merchants and entrepreneurs, previously supposed to lack an aptitude for public spirit, were reimagined as emulators, and thus as potential patriots. Patriots regarded emulation as a generous disposition, a spur to public-spirited behavior. The emulator, they argued, could not win the distinction he prized without performing actions beneficial to the public. Moreover, moralists such as Archbishop Fénelon had argued for a close association between virtue and the pursuit of honor. "As for virtue," Fénelon observed, "it will be adequately excited and people will be eager enough to serve the state provided that you bestow crowns and statues on fine actions."<sup>8</sup> If the impulse to pursue honor was clearly inferior to civic virtue itself, it might at least restrain the more sordid passions. An anonymous pamphleteer writing in the context of the tax debate of 1763 made a tripartite distinction of interest, emulation, and virtue: "The vile and mercenary soul conducts itself only according to interest; a vain fume of honor recompenses the Poet; the love of the public welfare determines the Citizen."<sup>9</sup> But the same author affirmed that the prospect of honor makes men give up the pursuit of their interests: "[L]et them be given a grain of incense; no more is needed to pique the honor of a Frenchman. The love of glory makes him face dangers, [induces him] to expose his life: will it not make him sacrifice his interests?" Patriots set out to animate the disposition to emulation as an instrument in their program to regenerate public spirit in France. If the propensity toward emulation could be maintained and strengthened, they argued, then the steady march of the commercial personality—the "calculator"—might be halted. In his *Entretiens de Phocion* (1763), Mably suggested that the best way to stem the process of corruption in a society where egoism had banished love of the public welfare was to "[t]ry to revive in hearts some spark of the love of glory. . . . the only one of all the virtues which, with the assistance of vanity, can show itself in the midst of an extreme corruption."<sup>10</sup>

But where did the idea come from that economic actors were at all sensitive to honorific rewards, that merchants, manufacturers, and farmers were emulators rather than calculators? I suggest that the notion originated with a political economic discourse pioneered in the 1750s by a group of writers associated with the progressive Intendant of Commerce, Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay. Publicists such as François Véron de Forbonnais, Gabriel-François Coyer, and Louis-Joseph Plumard de Danguel argued that commerce and agriculture were languishing in France because of the contempt in which merchants and farmers were held. "In a Nation where everything operates by honor or vanity," argued Plumard de Danguel, "the most useful professions to the State: artisans, manufacturers, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, sea-going merchants, all those classes comprised under the name of traders, are neither distinguished, nor considered."<sup>11</sup> In England, by contrast, lords take pride in having merchants among their ancestors, and their sons work in the city. The standard solution to what was widely recognized as a major problem for the French economy was that useful professions be honored.<sup>12</sup> The argument that emulation ought to be tapped to stimulate economic activity enjoyed an astonishing popularity in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Such views played a central role in the network of agricultural societies established in the 1760s. One of the principal activities of agricultural societies was to offer medals and other prizes to encourage useful agronomic innovations.<sup>13</sup> The secretary of the Brive bureau of the Limoges Agricultural Society suggested in 1763 that the way to persuade the peasant to try new agronomic techniques was to "pique his emulation with the bait of a prize."<sup>14</sup> He praised as "truly patriotic" the initiative of a local seigneur to offer such a prize to the cultivators of his parish. The same viewpoint animated the sponsors of the *Société libre d'émulation* founded in Paris in 1776 to promote inventions useful to agriculture, commerce, and manufactures. The central logic of the society was that the lure of prizes might animate the emulation of potential inventors.<sup>15</sup> The anonymous author of the *Merchant Citizen* (1764) argued that the administration should "take notice" of the merchants who were most enlightened and who distinguished themselves through zeal for the *patrie*.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in a tract published in 1777, a certain Dudevant de Bordeaux pointed out that while among nobles the love of glory drew a man from a quiet country life and threw him into wars and battles, among merchants this same impulse drew men out of commerce. As a remedy, Dudevant proposed that wholesale merchant families who maintained an honorable commerce through three generations be ennobled, so long as the ennobled generation agreed to remain in trade.<sup>17</sup> If merchants were given a chance to win honor in their profession, Dudevant noted, "[c]ommerce will no longer be guided by the sordid spirit of interest . . . it will be jealous to acquire a true glory" (52).

Some sense of how economic activity, including commerce and manufactures, could be reimagined as a patriotic endeavor once the interest motive was replaced by emulative impulses can be discerned in an anonymous pamphlet published in 1765, entitled *Idée d'une souscription patriotique, en faveur de l'agriculture, du commerce, et des arts*. This work, attributed to Abbé Baudeau, envisioned an alternative economic order, an order harnessed to the needs of patriotism, of which emulation rather than interest would be the mainspring. Writing in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, Baudeau proposed that wealthy individuals buy shares in a national fund that would be used to invest in agriculture and commerce. He represented such investment as a form of patriotism, arguing that it was agriculture and commerce for which "the zeal of whoever loves

his prince and his *patrie* ought today to be enflamed.” However, Baudeau was convinced that the profit motive would not induce investors to buy the necessary shares in his patriotic subscription; individual interest was too calculating, too limited. Only patriotism was expansive enough to engage the investor to take the requisite risks: “Personal interest is a resource ever slow, always limited, always uncertain. . . . Cupidity, which calculates only for itself, abstains from great enterprises . . . it wishes that its profit be assured, that it be prompt, that it be considerable. The patriotic spirit, on the other hand, which looks only to the good of the state, counts expense at nothing.”<sup>18</sup> But if patriotism was supposed to be the impulse for investment in the national economy, it was to emulation that Baudeau looked to supply a spur to such patriotism. He suggested that a list of subscribers to the patriotic fund be placed before the King and made public each month, stating that “[i]t is to French honor . . . that I wish to address myself, to obtain, in the interest of agriculture, commerce, and the arts, the necessary assistance which personal interest refuses them out of an excess of cupidity” (8, 16).

That the competition for honors offered by the state, or for the accolades of the public, could be imagined as an alternative economic order to the commercial economy of the Old Regime is suggested by the frequency with which honor was compared to money, and the economy of honor represented as a kind of market. Such metaphors were ubiquitous in Old Regime treatments of the topic of emulation. In his *De l'Esprit*, for example, Helvétius claimed that “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 supporting their value.”<sup>19</sup> In his *L'Ami des hommes*, Mirabeau suggested that “the prejudices that constitute honor make up a real part of the treasure of the state. . . . It is thus important to preserve . . . to the greatest extent possible that portion of the people among whom this money has the greatest currency.”<sup>20</sup> “The coin of honor is inexhaustible,” according to Beccaria, “and is abundantly fruitful in the hands of a prince who distributes it wisely.”<sup>21</sup> In his *Essai sur les privilèges*, Sieyès referred to public esteem as a “moral money.”<sup>22</sup> The Abbé’s metaphor was echoed in an article addressing former nobles that appeared in *La Feuille villageoise* following the abolition of nobility. The editors of the paper noted that “the vain merit of an extraction claimed to be illustrious . . . was for you a current money, which enjoyed among the multitude a dangerous credit, since in exchange it prostituted its homage and its respect. Would you wish then that the law allow a false money . . . to circulate with impunity?”<sup>23</sup> This honor-as-money motif continued to be used in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In an exposé of the motives behind the establishment of the *Légion d'honneur* read to the Corps Législatif in 1802, Pierre-Louis Roederer described the establishment of the Legion as “the creation of a new currency,” a money whose source lay in the French sense of honor.<sup>24</sup>

As the last quotations suggest, emulation remained a crucial feature of patriot discourse in the 1790s. During the Revolutionary years, efforts continued to animate economic activity using the stimulus of honor. In a memoir presented to the National Assembly by the *Société royale d'agriculture* in October of 1789, the centrality of emulation to the encouragement of agriculture was underlined. “The sentiment of honor is a motive which in all the arts and in all professions achieves remarkable feats,” the memoir stated. “The love of glory has alone formed our heroes, our savants and our artists; it can equally form celebrated cultivators.”<sup>25</sup> The idea that agricultural productivity could be increased if agriculture was honored was voiced repeatedly in the Revolutionary legislatures. In a report

delivered to the Convention in April 1794, the Agricultural Committee recommended that a plow and the principal tools of the farmer be suspended from the vault of the Convention hall in order to honor agriculture.<sup>26</sup> The Revolutionaries drew a clear distinction between aristocratic honor and the sense of honor that prompted emulation. The Jacobins assumed that the sense of honor that disposed a person to emulation was closely related to patriotism. When Saint-Just denounced Danton, one of the accusations leveled against the latter was that he had derided honor as “ridiculous” and posthumous glory as “an absurdity.” Such maxims, Saint-Just observed in a supremely ironic moment, were “fit only for aristocrats.”<sup>27</sup> The more moderate republicans of the *Décade philosophique* distinguished clearly in 1794 between the “vain” honor of the duelist and “republican honor,” which produced actions “useful to the *patrie*.”<sup>28</sup>

Emulation became even more central to representations of economic agency in the latter half of the 1790s. As James Livesey has argued, republicans struggled after the fall of Robespierre to defend the republic from the charge that patriotic virtue was incommensurable with commercial modernity and that the Jacobin pursuit of this Spartan ideal had led to the Terror.<sup>29</sup> I suggest that republicans seized upon an emulative model of economic agency after 1794 because, in the person of the disinterested economic actor, it offered to resolve the contradiction between political liberty and civil liberty, virtue and interest. Increasingly after Thermidor, the central government and departmental administrations pursued a policy of encouraging agriculture, commerce, and the arts by awarding prizes to encourage emulation. An edict awarding prizes to cultivators in the Seine-Inférieure in 1795 noted that “[g]lory, like attraction, is the conserving force of every political body, which particular interest, a veritable centrifugal force, tends constantly to dissolve. Our legislators, convinced of this truth, have already on several occasions distributed honors and recompenses to great men who have made themselves useful to their country through their work and discoveries in the sciences, letters, and the arts.”<sup>30</sup> The administrators of the Seine-Inférieure explicitly rejected interest as a possible basis for society, observing that “[t]he republic ought not to seek to favor or excite particular interest . . . particular interest has need rather of a brake than a spur.”

A host of societies of agriculture and commerce were formed between 1795 and 1810 with the assistance and encouragement of departmental administrations and the Ministry of the Interior. Emulation was central to the representation of economic agency articulated by these associations; indeed, many incorporated the word “emulation” into their titles.<sup>31</sup> The Society of Agriculture and Commerce of Caen, for instance, organized an exhibition of local manufactures in April 1803, the goal of which was to “excite that noble emulation which develops talents.”<sup>32</sup> “Considering that it is particularly by honoring the manufacturers that one can succeed in improving the manufactories,” the report of the Society read, “on April 26 the Society will hold a public session at which nine silver medals will be distributed to manufacturers who will be judged the most worthy.” The Mayor of Caen, who presided at the prize-giving ceremony, opened the meeting with a discourse in which he “made sensible the power of emulation over men.” The citation delivered with the presentation of one of the medals suggests how completely the representation of the businessman had changed since the 1750s. The winners, a group of investors who had established a porcelain factory in Caen in 1797, were described as “[s]everal individuals, directed less by personal interest than by love of their country.” The profit motive had disappeared and the entrepreneur had been remade as a patriot.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, French commentators were still far from endorsing the view that interest could be used to counterbalance other more destructive passions. Rather, interest was itself represented as a socially disjunctive force. An alternative economic order based on the pursuit of honor and distinction, harnessed to patriotic ends, was represented to the public as a viable substitute for possessive individualism. Employed in this fashion, the concept of emulation played a significant role in mediating the development of a commercial society in France. To characterize a society as “commercial,” it is not sufficient that the social order in question boast of a highly developed commercial economy. A commercial society is one in which exchange relations have become a structuring matrix for social order, in which the commercial economy, in all its complex physicality, has been recruited as a constitutive symbol of the social. Commerce in the Old Regime was embedded in representations that precluded its exploitation as a basis for social order. Under the Old Regime the activities of merchants and entrepreneurs were routinely construed as a threat to social order. During the closing decades of the eighteenth century, however, a new conception of the relationship between the social and the economic became available—a vision in which the economy was figured not as the undoing of social order but as its foundation. The moral valence of most economic activity was transformed between the 1750s and the 1790s. Commercial and entrepreneurial activity came to be valorized in France, and the economic recruited as a symbolic basis for the social, when the activities of economic agents were reconfigured as a form of emulation.

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NOTES

1. Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977).

2. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788), 31.

3. Jacqueline Hecht, “La vie de François Quesnay,” *François Quesnay et la physiocratie* (Paris: Institut National d’Études Démographiques, 1958), 1:213–4.

4. On the emergence of patriotism, see David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), and Edmond Dziembowski, *Un Nouveau Patriotisme français, 1750–1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l’époque de la guerre de Sept Ans, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 365 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

5. Dziembowski, *Un Nouveau Patriotisme français*, 307.

6. Baron de Haller, “Du commerce et du luxe,” in *Dictionnaire universel des sciences morale, économique, politique, et diplomatique; ou Bibliothèque de l’homme-d’état et du citoyen*, ed. Jean-Baptiste-René Robinet (London: Libraires associés, 1777–83), 12:555.

7. Philippe Auguste de Sainte-Foix, chevalier d’Arcq, *La Noblesse militaire, ou le patriote français* (n.p., 1756). On the *Noblesse commerçante* debate, see John Shovlin, “Towards a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Anti-Nobility: The Political Economy of Honor in the Old Regime,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000): 35–66, and Jay M. Smith, “Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over *Noblesse Commerçante*,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (June 2000), 339–74.

8. François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, ed. Jacques Le Brun (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 218.

9. *La Balance égale, ou La juste imposition des droits du roi* (n.p., n.d.).

10. Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Entretiens de Phocion, sur le rapport de la morale avec la politique* (Paris: Favre, 1794), 2:144.

11. [Louis-Joseph Plumard de Danguel,] *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne, par rapport au commerce, & aux autres sources de la puissance des États*, 2d ed. (Leyde, 1754), 31.
12. See Shovlin, "Towards a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Anti-Nobility," 50-54.
13. See André J. Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1967), 1060-1; Emile Justin, *Les Sociétés royales d'agriculture au XVIIIe siècle (1757-1793)* (Saint-Lô: Imprimerie Barbaroux, 1935), 130-3.
14. *Discours et mémoire relatifs à l'agriculture* (Paris: Imprimerie de Moreau, 1763), 29-33.
15. *Reglements de la Société libre d'émulation, établie à Paris en 1776 pour l'encouragement des inventions qui tendent à perfectionner la pratique des arts et métiers utiles* (n.p., 1780).
16. *Le Négociant citoyen, ou Essai sur la recherche des moyens d'augmenter les lumières de la nation sur le commerce et l'agriculture* (Amsterdam: Duchesne, 1764), 10.
17. Louis-Hyacinthe Dudevant, *L'Apologie du commerce, essai philosophique et politique* (Genève, 1777), 47-9.
18. [Nicolas Baudeau,] *Idée d'une souscription patriotique, en faveur de l'agriculture, du commerce, et des arts* (Amsterdam: Hochereau le jeune, 1765), 4-5.
19. Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'Esprit* (Verviers, Belgium: Gérard, 1973), essay 3, chap. 24.
20. [Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau,] *L'Ami des hommes, ou Traité de la population* (Avignon, 1756), 3:180.
21. Cesare Bonesana, marquis de Beccaria, *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments*, 3d ed. (London: F. Newberry, 1770), 174.
22. Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges*, 10.
23. "Suppression de la noblesse, des titres, armoiries, etc.," *La Feuille villageoise*, no. 18, 26 January 1792.
24. Quoted in Jean Daniel, *La Légion d'honneur* (Paris: A. Bonne, 1957), 24.
25. *Mémoire présenté par la société royale d'agriculture à l'Assemblée nationale, le 24 octobre 1789, Sur les abus qui s'opposent aux progrès de l'agriculture, & sur les encouragemens qu'il est nécessaire d'accorder à ce premier des Arts* (Paris: Imprimerie Baudoin, 1789), 137.
26. "Analyse du rapport fait au nom du comité d'agriculture, par Eschassériaux," *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique; par une société de républicains* 1 (1794).
27. J. M. Thompson, *Leaders of the French Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 203. See also Robespierre's "Rapports sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention" (5 February 1794), in which he calls for a republican order in which "ambition is the desire to merit glory and to serve the patrie."
28. "Dialogue entre Epaminondas et un petit-maître assyrien," *La Décade philosophique, littéraire, et politique* 2 (1794).
29. James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 61.
30. *Prix nationaux d'agriculture, dans le département de la Seine Inférieure* (Rouen: Imprimerie du Journal du département de la Seine-Inférieure, 1795).
31. On the proliferation of societies of emulation in early-nineteenth-century France, see Carol E. Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).
32. Pierre-Aimé Lair, *Précis des travaux de la société royale d'agriculture et de commerce de Caen, depuis son rétablissement en 1801 jusqu'en 1810* (Caen: F. Poisson, 1827), 183-7.

