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POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE FRENCH NOBILITY,
1750–1789*John Shovlin*

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period when a new consciousness of, and attention to, economic affairs spread across Enlightenment Europe. France was no exception to the trend. Between 1750 and 1789 the French public showed a striking and sustained interest in economic matters, an appetite fed by hundreds of writers who penned works on agriculture, commerce, finance, taxation, banking, and public credit. According to Jean-Claude Perrot, who has inventoried this publishing boom, a total of 2,869 new political economic titles were published in France between the middle of the seventeenth century and the Revolution, about 80 percent of them between 1750 and 1789.¹ A second estimate, elaborated by Christine Théré, yields even larger aggregates. According to Théré, 391 political economic titles were produced for the French market in the 1750s, 613 in the 1760s, 668 in the 1770s, and 756 between 1780 and 1788.² Both sets of figures suggest that the 1750s constituted a significant turning point, with production of new titles more than quadrupling from the previous decade.

1. Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique: XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992), 75.

2. Christine Théré, "Economic Publishing and Authors, 1566–1789," *Studies in the History of French Political Economy: From Bodin to Walras*, ed. Gilbert Faccarello (New York, 1998). Théré and Perrot use different criteria in classifying political economic texts. Perrot counts all texts that include in their titles such terms as *richesses*, *commerce*, *finances*, *impôts*, *crédit*, and *population*. Such an approach is open to error and especially to undercounting. Théré models her conception of political economy on the classification elaborated by the abbé André Morellet in his "Catalogue

By the 1760s, new works of an economic character were being produced at the rate of more than one title per week, outpacing the production of new novels.³ Some of the great best sellers of the eighteenth century, moreover, were works of political economy. The marquis de Mirabeau's *L'ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* (1756) went through forty editions before the end of the century. The former controller general, Jacques Necker, published *De l'administration des finances de la France* (1784), a three-volume account of his economic philosophy and an implicit defense of his record as minister of finance; it is reputed to have sold 80,000 copies, making it one of the great best sellers of the age.⁴

Several factors converged in eighteenth-century France to stimulate public interest in political economy. The eighteenth century was a period when, across Europe, writers and intellectuals were elaborating new languages for the description of large human communities. Organizing concepts, such as *patrie* (fatherland), society, manners, civilization, people, public, and public opinion, were all emerging in eighteenth-century France as new ways to apprehend human relations.⁵ Political economy, then, was just one of several new social vocabularies that emerged to prominence in this period. The need for an idiom to make sense of changes in the material realm was pressing, given the increase in the relative importance of commerce and manufactures in

d'une bibliothèque d'économie politique," an appendix to his *Prospectus d'un nouveau dictionnaire de commerce* (1769). She bases her enumeration on an annotated bibliography of approximately 5,000 works dealing with "economy and population" compiled by Jacqueline Hecht and Claude Lévy at the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques in the 1950s. (*Economie et population: les doctrines françaises avant 1800*, ed. Alfred Sauvy [Paris, 1956].) This bibliography is based on a reading of content rather than titles, and Théré supplements it by drawing on major British and American catalogues of economic literature.

3. Based on a comparison with the figures in Angus Martin, Vivienne G. Mylne, and Richard Frautschi, *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français, 1751-1800* (London, 1977). Economic publishing expanded much faster than publishing in general in the 1750s and 1760s. The increase in the total number of new titles produced for the French market from the 1740s to the 1750s was of the order of 30 percent. See, Pierre M. Conlon, *Le siècle des lumières: bibliographie chronologique*, 18 vols. (Paris, 1983-98).

4. Kenneth E. Carpenter, *The Economic Bestsellers Before 1850: A Catalogue of an Exhibition Prepared for the History of Economics Society Meeting, May 21-24, 1975, at Baker Library*, bulletin no. 11 of the Kress Library of Business and Economics (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

5. Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam, 1994); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, 1994); Robert Romani, "All Montesquieu's Sons: The Place of *esprit général*, *caractère national*, and *moeurs* in French Political Philosophy, 1748-1789," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 362 (1998): 189-235.

national life, along with marked changes in consumption in the eighteenth century. 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.⁶ The expansion of the commercial economy was accompanied by something of a consumer revolution in urban France.⁷ More directly, however, than any of these general factors, the rise of public interest in political economy was a response to the French military struggle with an economically and militarily successful Great Britain. The entire century was marked by conflict between Britain and France, a struggle renewed in the War of Austrian Succession (1741–48) and continued—disastrously for France—during the Seven Years' War (1756–63). As a body of texts that claimed to guide the statesman in increasing the wealth and power of states, political economy was of obvious value and interest in an age of international diplomatic and military conflict.

Any presupposition that political economy was a characteristically bourgeois idiom must be abandoned in face of the statistics on economic authorship offered by Théré and Perrot. The political economic debates of the second half of the eighteenth century engaged the French nobility deeply. Between one-third and two-fifths of the identifiable authors of eighteenth-century political economic tracts were nobles (nobles, by contrast, made up only 15 percent of authors writing in the genre of *belles lettres*).⁸ Only 7–8 percent of the identifiable political economic authors were merchants or entrepreneurs.⁹ Moreover, the proportion of noble authors of economic works was increasing in the second half of the century. Nobles were drawn into economic debate, I suggest, because, from the 1750s, the language of political economy became a critical site for debate on the place of the Second Estate in national life.

In the early 1750s, the dominant perspective within French political economy was antagonistic toward traditional noble values. Writers associated

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

7. 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); Annik Pardaillé-Galabrun, *La naissance de l'intime: 3000 foyers parisiens, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1988); Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987); Roche, *La culture des apparences: une histoire du vêtement (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1989); Roche, "Between a 'Moral Economy' and a 'Consumer Economy': Clothes and Their Function in the 17th and 18th Centuries," *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris*, ed. Robert Fox and Anthony Turner (Aldershot, Hampshire, 1998).

8. Perrot, *Histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique*, 78.

9. Théré, "Economic Publishing and Authors."

with the reforming *intendant* of commerce, J.-C.-M. Vincent de Gournay, argued that nobles made little contribution to the prosperity and power of the state and that aristocratic honor, in particular, was an impediment to economic development. In the late 1750s and 1760s, however, the marquis de Mirabeau initiated a countertendency in political economy calculated to forge for the nobility a new place in the life of the nation. Mirabeau's impassioned attack on luxury and his claim that agriculture rather than commerce was the foundation of long-term prosperity and power resonated with the ethic of the provincial nobility of which the marquis was himself a representative. Mirabeau's political economy equated the economic interests of provincial nobles with the national interest and elevated their economic values to the status of a patriotic ethic. Mirabeau carried a preoccupation with renovating the nobility into physiocracy, which he and François Quesnay founded in the late 1750s. Ultimately, however, physiocracy offered the nobility the prospect of renewal not as a distinctive class with its own corporate ethos but only as owners of land. Ironically, in the 1770s and 1780s, the political economic critique of luxury became a stick that critics used to beat the nobility; this was particularly the case during the prerevolutionary crisis. I suggest that antipathy to the court nobility, and especially the charge that *les grands* were guilty of luxury, spilled over into criticism of the nobility as a whole.

Much recent work on the nobility has emphasized the ways in which nobles might have unwittingly hastened the demise of their own order by adopting ideological perspectives that could readily be used against them. David Bien and his students have demonstrated that military nobles adopted a language advocating merit as the basis for professional advancement.¹⁰ Nobles appear to have been blind to the possibility that this language might ultimately be used against them. Jay Smith has discerned a similar pattern in the noble engagement with the language of patriotism.¹¹ The noble adoption of patriotism as a value promised the nobility an avenue to regenerate the whole order by claiming love of country rather than hereditary privilege as

10. David D. Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée," *Annales: E.S.C.* 29 (1974): 23–48, 505–34; Bien, "The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution," *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 68–98; Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, 1996); Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750–1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester, 2002).

11. Jay M. Smith, "Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over *Noblesse Commercante*," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 339–74.

the defining feature of the Second Estate. But the paradigm of patriotism also problematized the whole social order of separate estates. The relation of the nobility to political economy seems to have worked in a similar fashion. Nobles perceived in the idiom a way to make a new place for themselves in national life and to identify some of their characteristic values with the welfare of the state. But political economy ultimately proved a rich resource for critics of the nobility. The noble engagement with political economy bears similarities to these other idioms but suggests that, in this case at least, nobles were quite conscious of the negative possibilities inherent in the new language and quite deliberately produced a counteridiom to try to “turn” the new discourse—and they did this with considerable success over several decades.

Political Economists Problematize Nobility

The lackluster French performance in the War of the Austrian Succession, together with the conviction that further war with Great Britain could not be long averted, prompted renewed attention after 1748 to the sources of Britain’s economic and military success. Political economic works taking the measure of the English enemy proliferated in the early 1750s. A furor was created in 1754 by the *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne*, the anonymous work of a thirty-two-year-old official in the Chambre des comptes, Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul.¹² Dangeul was one of a group of young publicists associated with the progressive *intendant* of commerce, Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay, who were interested in initiating the French public into the mysteries of political economy.¹³ Assuming the identity of an English gentleman, Dangeul drew up a balance sheet of relative British and French strengths and weaknesses. The *Remarques* quickly became the talk of Paris, went into a second edition within a fortnight and two more editions before the end of the year.¹⁴ The

12. Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul, *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. Traduction de l’anglais du Chevalier John Nickolls* (Leiden, 1754).

13. On Vincent de Gournay and the intellectual circle associated with him, see Simone Meyssonnier, *La balance et l’horloge: la genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil, 1989); Antoin E. Murphy, “Le développement des idées économiques en France (1750–1756),” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 33 (1986): 521–41; Gustave Schelle, *Vincent de Gournay* (Geneva and Paris, 1984; orig. pub. 1897).

14. David T. Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime, 1500–1791* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 204.

press excerpted and commented extensively on the book, and even the king claimed to be reading it.¹⁵

The *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne* was very critical of the French nobility. Dangeul argued that France was handicapped by an excessive number of unproductive citizens who contributed to society neither through their industry, nor their consumption. He pointed out that the French nobility was numerous and poor, that noble families condemned their daughters to the convent and their sons to the church or the army for want of resources to perpetuate more than a single branch of the family. This destructive trend spread to other families through ennoblement.¹⁶ He 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,” he claimed, “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.”¹⁷ England, by contrast, honored merchants, and commerce prospered there.

A critical paradigm that shaped the attitude of Dangeul, and the rest of Vincent de Gournay’s circle, toward the nobility was the Enlightenment discourse on commerce exemplified in Voltaire’s representation of England in the *Lettres philosophiques* (1734). In the *Lettres*, Voltaire implicitly contrasted English institutions with French ones and identified the vestiges of feudal attitudes and structures in French society as a hindrance to the development of commerce and thus national power. In England, commerce was honorable, Voltaire argued—“the younger brother of a peer of the realm does not scorn to enter into trade”—and this superior prestige of commerce was one of the keys to English success. Voltaire drew an invidious contrast between the useful English merchant and the parasitic French courtier. A merchant “who enriches his country . . . and contributes to the well-being of the world,” Voltaire declared, is more useful to his country than a “well-powdered lord . . . who gives himself airs of grandeur while playing the role of a slave in a minister’s antechamber.”¹⁸

The perception that aristocratic conceptions of honor were a hindrance to the development of commerce was quite widespread in eighteenth-century

15. Antoin E. Murphy, *Richard Cantillon: Entrepreneur and Economist* (Oxford, 1986), 310.

16. Plumard de Dangeul, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages*, 16–17.

17. *Ibid.*, 31.

18. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, trans. Ernest Dilworth (Indianapolis, 1961), 39–40.

Europe. David Hume made the same argument in his essay “Of Liberty and Despotism,” first published in 1741. Hume concurred with Voltaire, suggesting that the aristocratic character of French society made France less congenial to commercial activity. “In my opinion,” Hume wrote, commerce “is apt to decay in absolute governments, not because it is there less secure, but because it is less honourable. A subordination of ranks is absolutely necessary to the support of monarchy. Births, titles, and place, must be honoured above industry and riches. And while these notions prevail, all the considerable traders will be tempted to throw up their commerce, in order to purchase some of these employments, to which privileges and honours are annexed.”¹⁹

The full implications of this perspective were spelled out in Gabriel-François Coyer’s *La noblesse commerçante* (1756).²⁰ Coyer implied that France ought to become a commercial society. The culture and corporate identity of the nobility was an obstacle to this development; therefore the nobility ought to abandon this identity and merge itself into the body of the commercial nation. Ostensibly, in *La noblesse commerçante*, Coyer was offering an impoverished element of the nobility a means to regenerate itself, but this intention is belied by the hostile remarks Coyer makes about the nobility throughout the text. In the barbaric era of feudal government, he argues, nobles held half of France in servitude, and this domineering spirit could still be found among the impoverished provincial nobility, leading country nobles to be quarrelsome, abusive to peasants, and to confuse might with right.²¹ In fact, Coyer’s principal concern was to destroy the last vestiges of “Gothic” attitudes toward trade by borrowing the luster of the nobility for commerce.²² Coyer mobilized Plumard de Dangeul’s argument that commerce in France was retarded by the dishonor under which it labored. Like Dangeul, he drew upon Voltaire’s account of England to suggest that commerce

19. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), 93. Hume changed the title of the essay to “Of Civil Liberty” in 1758.

20. Gabriel-François Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante* (London, 1756). The best account of the *Noblesse commerçante* controversy is Smith’s “Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution.” Also useful are J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on “Feudalism” in Eighteenth-Century France* (London, 1973), chap. 4; and Leonard Adams, *Coyer and the Enlightenment, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 123 (1974): 60ff.

21. Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante*, 7, 14–15. A number of the writers who supported Coyer in the subsequent controversy took positions critical of the nobility. See, for instance, J. H. Marchand, *La noblesse commerçante ou ubiquiste* (Amsterdam, 1756); M. A. Rochon de Chabannes, *La noblesse oisive* (n.p., 1756).

22. Coyer sees the perspective he is struggling against—that commerce is dishonorable—as a vestige of the “Gothic spirit,” a cultural remnant as irrational and baneful as trial by ordeal. Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante*, 7–8, 112–13, 168.

flourished there because it was honored.²³ According to Coyer, it is essential that the French prejudice against trade be destroyed because, while other nations may be contented with enriching themselves, “the Frenchman wants glory.”²⁴ The essence of his argument was that the very existence of the nobility as a corporate body with its own distinct pride and sense of self was inimical to the national welfare in an age when commercial wealth was the linchpin of power in the international system.

The hostile response that Coyer’s *Noblesse commerçante* provoked in some quarters, and especially the chevalier d’Arcq’s riposte to Coyer—*La noblesse militaire*—mark the origins of a counter idiom to the claims of the Gournay circle.²⁵ D’Arcq’s position was that although commerce may be a good thing in itself, commercial *société*—which he represents as a venal order in which money has replaced honor and merit—would be disastrous. According to d’Arcq, the mischievous consequences of an order dominated by money are already apparent in the army, where wealth rather than merit attracts consideration and ensures promotion.²⁶ D’Arcq rejected commercial society because, he argued, if the “spirit of commerce” were infused into all social institutions, the results would be disastrous. The first casualty of such a commercialization would be the country’s military prowess. Brave officers are animated by a sense of honor, a passion for glory, d’Arcq argues. Once a soldier begins to calculate and weigh his interest against his desire for glory he will become incapable of the kind of valor and self-sacrifice required on the battlefield. Without a group in society fiercely conscious of personal and familial honor and willing to make sacrifices to maintain it, he suggests, the country cannot remain well defended.

According to d’Arcq, the spread of mercantile values would also be disastrous in the political realm. Drawing on Montesquieu’s analytical framework, the chevalier argues that the noble pride criticized by Coyer was crucial in preventing the political degeneration of the French monarchy. According to Montesquieu, honor not only animates monarchies but acts as a brake preventing monarchy from degenerating into despotism. “In monarchical and moderate states,” Montesquieu argues, “power is limited by that which

23. In what is almost a direct quotation from the *Lettres philosophiques*, Coyer notes that while Lord Oxford governed England he had a brother who was a merchant in Aleppo. Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante*, 3.

24. *Ibid.*, 192.

25. Philippe Auguste de Sainte-Foix, chevalier d’Arcq, *La noblesse militaire, ou le patriote françois* (n.p., 1756).

26. *Ibid.*, 89.

is its spring; I mean honor, which reigns like a monarch over the prince and the people.”²⁷ The same sense of honor that makes nobles effective military officers also makes them a powerful bulwark against despotism. Montesquieu denounced the idea of a commercial nobility unequivocally in *De l'esprit des lois*, arguing that it is contrary to the “spirit of monarchy” for nobles to engage in trade.²⁸ According to d’Arcq, the problem with allowing nobles to enter into trade is that this sense of honor would be jeopardized—nobles would become “calculators” who would no longer care enough about their honor to resist a despot. D’Arcq insinuated that Coyer’s scheme of effacing the distinctions between the nobility and the trading classes would precipitate a “revolution” that would threaten the existing form of government and allow France to drift toward despotism.²⁹ In the chevalier’s view, a healthy monarchy could be preserved only within the confines of a social order where there was minimal movement between estates, because only in such a society was it likely that nobles would preserve their sense of honor. “The state does not begin . . . to falter,” d’Arcq held, “until the moment when ranks cease to be distinct one from another, until they are mixed, until they are confounded, until they mutually absorb one another.”³⁰ D’Arcq’s *La noblesse militaire* was an assertion of the continuing relevance of the nobility and of a social order defined on the basis of distinctions of rank.

Political Economy and the Regeneration of the Nobility

A perspective strikingly similar to d’Arcq’s was offered by the marquis de Mirabeau in his *L’ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* (1756).³¹ Mirabeau did not publish *L’ami des hommes* as a direct riposte to Coyer—the marquis had been working on his lengthy opus for several years before the appearance

27. Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1989; orig. pub. 1748), 30 [bk. 3, chap. 10].

28. *Ibid.*, 350 [bk. 20, chap. 21]. A trading nobility, he observes, would be “the means to destroy the nobility, without being of any utility to commerce.” For Montesquieu, the fact that in England nobles are permitted to engage in commerce is a factor that has contributed to weakening monarchical government there (p. 350).

29. D’Arcq, *La noblesse militaire*, iii, 6, 45.

30. *Ibid.*, 31.

31. Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *L’ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* (Avignon, 1756). Although the first edition carries a 1756 date of imprint, the work was almost certainly not published until 1757 and did not become a subject of conversation until the late spring or early summer of that year.

of *La noblesse commerçante*. But some of Mirabeau's themes resonated closely with the chevalier d'Arcq's perspective, and at points in the book Mirabeau alluded directly to the debate on the commercial nobility. Like d'Arcq, Mirabeau argued that patriotic virtue could be fostered only in a revived society of orders with the nobility dominating its upper reaches. According to Mirabeau, the class of Frenchmen preeminently animated by honor—the nobility—must be reinvigorated: “The prejudices that constitute honor make up a real part of the treasure of the state,” he argued. “It is thus important to preserve . . . to the greatest extent possible that portion of the people among whom this money has the greatest currency, that is, the nobility.”³² Like d'Arcq, Mirabeau rejected a social order in which status was determined by wealth. If men were valued according to how much money they possessed, he pointed out, the lackey might well be prized over the soldier and the *valet de chambre* over the officer.³³ In such a world, men would be diverted systematically from public service toward corrupt and slavish activities.

Mirabeau had been preoccupied for at least a decade by problems of noble decline. He grappled with the issue in his first written work, a *Testament politique*, produced in 1747 for an as yet unborn heir. The primary theme of the *Testament*, as Gino Longhitano points out, is the emphasis it placed on regenerating seigneurial power via-à-vis the administrative monarchy.³⁴ In the *Testament*, Mirabeau described the representatives of the absolute monarchy in the provinces, the *intendants*, as “a sort of magistracy, shapeless and monstrous . . . against which it would be useless and harmful to struggle [*se raidir*] directly.” Instead, he advises his heir to bolster his seigneurial authority in the local community and to try to neutralize appeals to higher tribunals of justice. Mirabeau pursued this theme further in his first public foray into the literary world, his *Mémoire concernant l'utilité des états provinciaux* (1750), where he called for the establishment of provincial estates in the *pays d'élections*, claiming that administration by estates was less fiscally oppressive than rule by *intendants*, and that the estates were better stewards of rural prosperity.³⁵ He also argued that the fundamental law of the French

32. *Ibid.*, 3:180.

33. *Ibid.*, 2:84.

34. Gino Longhitano, “La monarchie française entre société d'ordres et marché: Mirabeau, Quesnay et le *Traité de la monarchie, 1757–1759*,” in *Marquis de Mirabeau & François Quesnay, Traité de la monarchie (1757–1759)*, ed. Gino Longhitano (Paris, 1999), x.

35. Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *Mémoire concernant l'utilité des états provinciaux* (Rome, 1750).

monarchy called on the king to respect the privileges of the nobility and other traditional *corps*.

In *L'ami des hommes*, Mirabeau framed his call for the reinvigoration of a society of orders within a political economy denouncing “luxury” and representing agriculture as the linchpin of national prosperity. Countering Coyer, Mirabeau noted that the nobility must be prevented from degenerating not by asking them to enter another estate, but by giving them the means to thrive in their own.³⁶ A regenerated agriculture might offer such a means, creating the economic basis for a reinvigorated nobility. The marquis argued that it was not primarily commerce—and certainly not luxury—that was the basis of the prosperity and power of states. As he stated in the foreword, “I am going to finally prove, yes, demonstrate that luxury is . . . the ruin of a large state even more so than of a small one.”³⁷ The central economic program advanced in *L'ami des hommes* was for the renewal of small-scale peasant cultivation and estate management by noble proprietors rather than agents or farmers. Mirabeau criticized the fact that land was engrossed into great estates where it was poorly cultivated by agents. He complained that land was misused for luxurious display; parks, avenues, and gardens, which produced nothing, had been substituted for productive land use. Agriculture was neglected also because there was too much greed for quick and easy wealth. False ideas of urbanity and politeness had made agriculture seem contemptible. As a result, the villager migrated to the town and the townsman gravitated toward the capital.

In making the claim that “luxury is . . . the ruin of a large state even more so than of a small one,” Mirabeau was drawing upon a critique of luxury that had flourished in the ancient world and that enjoyed considerable popularity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe also.³⁸ Luxury was the ailment that classical moralists and historians claimed had destroyed the Roman Republic and subsequently also undermined the Roman Empire. A state of luxury was supposed to exist when the taste for wealth, or indulgence in consumption, diverted the rulers, or the citizens, of a state from the public good or sapped their capacity to defend their liberty. In the seventeenth century, French moralists used the anti-luxury tradition to try to preserve,

36. Mirabeau, *L'ami des hommes*, 3:179–80.

37. *Ibid.*, 1:iv.

38. The fullest accounts of the development of the concept from classical antiquity to the eighteenth century are to be found in John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, 1977), and Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994).

or restore, a noble monopoly on office or honor and to criticize the upward social mobility conferred by money.³⁹ They denounced as luxury the usurpation by non-nobles of clothing or other commodities appropriate only to their betters, a usurpation that “confounded ranks” and dissolved the symbolic boundaries that ought to distinguish one order from another. Under conditions of luxury, authority was vested in men of no merit or virtue whose only title to power was money. Moralists sympathetic to the nobility reserved their sharpest criticism for financiers, entrepreneurs who handled most of the financial business of the royal administration—from collecting taxes, to paying troops, to managing public services—in return for an opportunity to make a profit. Financiers, preeminently, had the money to buy venal offices or to vie with the nobility in the magnificence of their clothing and houses.

In addition to its continuing moral and political significance, in the eighteenth century luxury increasingly took on economic connotations. There was little agreement among political economists on precisely what luxury was in economic terms, and depending on the writer’s conception of luxury, the category might be given either a positive or a negative slant. There was an important current within French political economy running from Boisguilbert in the 1690s to Vincent de Gournay in the 1750s that identified high consumption by the mass of the population as a critical factor in generating prosperity.⁴⁰ Some political economic writers—notably Jean-François Melon and members of Gournay’s circle—used the term “luxury” to describe such consumption, conferring a positive connotation on *luxure*. The writers around Gournay, however, also used the term in a second and negative sense. Plumard de Dangeul identified as a destructive luxury an inequality of wealth so great that it decreased the capacity of ordinary people to consume. “Well-ordered luxury consumes,” Dangeul remarked, while “excessive luxury abuses and destroys.”⁴¹ He attributed the second variety of luxury to fiscal institutions that enriched the few while impoverishing the many. François Véron de

39. Renato Galliani, for instance, sees the early modern anti-luxury discourse as the expression of a “noble ideology” aimed at reversing the process whereby a class of parvenus had come to compete with the ancient nobility for office and honor. Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire: étude socio-historique, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 268 (1989). The critics of luxury that Carolyn Lougee analyzes in her study of seventeenth-century polite culture and its detractors also sought to keep the merely wealthy out of the governing class. Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1976).

40. The key study of this current is Meyssonier’s *La balance et l’horloge*.

41. Plumard de Dangeul, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages*, 65.

Forbonnais also noted the existence of a pernicious variety of luxury. "If luxury is not general, if it is not the fruit of national affluence," he observes, "one will see arise at the same time as it disorders capable of destroying the political body."⁴² A different, but also negative, connotation was given to the word "luxury" by François Quesnay in his economic writings of the 1750s. In the articles he published for the *Encyclopédie*, particularly "Grains," Quesnay highlighted the role of Colbertist policies in generating "luxury." "For a long time luxury manufactures have seduced the nation," Quesnay argued. "We have given ourselves over to an industry that was alien to us; and a multitude of men have been employed in it at a time when the kingdom was being depopulated and the countryside was becoming a desert." "These manufactures," he warned, "have plunged us into a disordered luxury."⁴³

The economic perspective most influential for Mirabeau when he wrote *L'ami des hommes* was that articulated by Richard Cantillon in his *Essay de la nature du commerce en général*. The first draft of *L'ami des hommes* preserved among Mirabeau's papers constitute a paragraph by paragraph commentary on Cantillon's *Essay*.⁴⁴ Cantillon argued that the successful pursuit of commercial prosperity initially had very positive effects on the power of states, but that in the long run, pursuing commercial development could leave a state weak and vulnerable. The increase in the money supply brought by trade would cause prices and wages to rise, Cantillon argued, undercutting the competitiveness of the affected country in the international marketplace. Eventually it would be undersold by neighboring lands where a shortage of money limited both wages and prices. At a certain point, the nation previously rich and powerful would decline into poverty and weakness. As Cantillon put it, "The too great abundance of money which, while it lasts, makes states powerful, throws them insensibly, but naturally, into poverty."⁴⁵ According to Cantillon, the Roman Empire was destroyed as a consequence of the specie-flow mechanism he analyzed. Cantillon's theory of history also explained the decadence of Spanish power since its apogee in the sixteenth century and the more recent decline of the Dutch Republic.

42. François Véron de Forbonnais, *Elémens du commerce* (Leiden, 1754), 2:308.

43. François Quesnay, "Grains," in *François Quesnay et la physiocratie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1958), 2:459–60.

44. Georges Weulersse, ed., *Les manuscrits économiques de François Quesnay et du marquis de Mirabeau aux Archives Nationales (M. 778 à M. 785)* (Paris, 1910).

45. Richard Cantillon, *Essay de la nature du commerce en général*, ed. Takumi Tsuda (Tokyo, 1979), 231.

Mirabeau's conception of luxury confounded economic meanings of the term with older political and moral senses. There are at least three different meanings of luxury in play in *L'ami des hommes*. Mirabeau condemned luxury as an "ambitious" kind of consumption adopted by the consumer in order to attract the attention and respect due only to members of a more exalted social class. He also used the term in the classical sense of a corrupting venality inimical to patriotism and public virtue, commenting that France would go the same way as ancient Rome if it allowed luxury to continue to flourish. Finally, for Mirabeau, luxury was an economic order in which there was excessive attention to commerce and to the acquisition of mobile wealth and not enough attention to agriculture, which he regarded as the true basis of national prosperity and power.

This celebration of agriculture, and attack on luxury as the wellspring of corruption and national decline, resonated powerfully with the life experiences and prejudices of provincial nobles. In his pioneering study of the nobility of Toulouse, Robert Forster showed noble landowners to have been active and able estate managers.⁴⁶ An economic philosophy that identified the success of agriculture with the well-being of the state exalted their role as stewards of rural prosperity. Mirabeau's criticisms of luxury also echoed the values of provincial nobles. The provincial nobility lived according to an ethic of economic discipline and antipathy to frivolous expenditure. As Forster has shown, they engaged in consumption necessary to mark their status in provincial society but eschewed the prodigal expenditure on clothing and equipages in which the court nobility and financiers indulged. "Family and friends usually intervened as a corrective to the dangerous spending habits of a wayward squire," Forster notes; "sobriety, not profligacy, was the dominant note in the provincial noble family."⁴⁷ The use of wealth by non-nobles to acquire prestige and access to honors represented a profound threat to the social status and identity of middling nobles. It seemed to many nobles that such "luxury" was the principal obstacle preventing them from serving the king in the army or the magistracy. Within the military itself, noble officers complained that wealth rather than virtue was the principal channel to promotion, and they castigated this state of affairs as luxury also.⁴⁸

46. Robert Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1960), esp. 61–63.

47. Robert Forster, "The Provincial Noble: A Reappraisal," *American Historical Review* 68:3 (1963): 689.

48. Bien, "Army in the French Enlightenment."

Mirabeau's political economy offered the nobility a very modern language in which to condemn luxury, a language that appeared to align their interests with the national interest. Provincial nobles adopted political economy as a language of noble regeneration because it equated their values, values emphasizing careful estate management and a relatively ascetic attitude toward consumption, with the national welfare while condemning the luxury that made the maintenance of their social position so difficult. These powerful ideological implications of Mirabeau's *L'ami des hommes* explain, perhaps, why it was such an extraordinarily successful work. In the three years following its initial publication, the book appeared in twenty editions, and over the rest of the century seems to have enjoyed twenty more.⁴⁹ It appeared in nearly one in four of the five hundred private libraries from the period between 1750 and 1780 inventoried by Daniel Mornet, suggesting that it was among the most widely disseminated books of the century.⁵⁰ At court it was rumored that the dauphin wanted Mirabeau appointed preceptor to his son, while from St-Malo in Brittany, Mirabeau's brother reported that he was basking in the reflected glory of the "friend of mankind."⁵¹

The principal themes of Mirabeau's political economy were widely echoed and indeed amplified in the vigorous literature on agriculture that blossomed in the 1760s. The keynotes of this literature were the centrality of agriculture to the wealth, power, and stability of states, and the destructive effects of luxury on agriculture. Exemplary in this respect is Jean-Baptiste Dupuy Dempportes's *Le gentilhomme cultivateur* (1761–63), one of the most widely read works of the 1760s advocating agricultural improvement.⁵² In language charged with references to patriotism, Dupuy Dempportes calls for the regeneration of agriculture in order to bolster the power of the state and the virtue of its population. He invokes the history of Rome as a cautionary example for France. "How can it be," he asks, "that the example of Rome

49. Gilles Henry, *Mirabeau père: 5 octobre 1715–11 juillet 1789* (Paris, 1989), 8; Carpenter, *Economic Bestsellers Before 1850*. Mirabeau later remarked to his confidant the marquis de Longo that the book had, by their own account, made its publishers a clear profit of 86,000 *livres*. Louis de Loménie, *Les Mirabeau: nouvelles études sur la société française au XVIIIe siècle*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1889), 2:141.

50. Daniel Mornet, "Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées, 1750–1780," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 17 (1910): 449–96.

51. Humbert de Montlaur, *Mirabeau: L'ami des hommes* (Paris, 1992), 183–84; Loménie, *Les Mirabeau*, 2:169.

52. Jean-Baptiste Dupuy Dempportes, *Le gentilhomme cultivateur, ou corps complet d'agriculture, traduit de l'anglois de M. Hale* (Paris, 1761–63). On the popularity and wide dissemination of *Le Gentilhomme cultivateur*, see André Bourde, *The Influence of England on the French Agronomes, 1750–1789* (Cambridge, 1953), 65–66.

has had so little ascendancy over enlightened minds?" The military power of Rome was based on the land, he argues: "Nobody is unaware that in its rustic but happy simplicity it owed the extent and the solidity of its power only to agriculture." Rome's troubles began, Dupuy Demportes argues, when it exchanged a form of wealth that was healthy and solid for a form that was corrupting and illusory. "The Citizen, led on by love of an imaginary good, refused his care and attention to the land." Dupuy Demportes moves from this discussion of luxury in the abstract to a contemplation of contemporary France. He implies that great military exploits are not to be expected in a polity in which agriculture has been systematically neglected and disdained—a pointed comment in light of the military disasters of the ongoing Seven Years' War. Dupuy Demportes places the blame for this state of affairs on Colbert, complaining that Colbert gave too much attention to "luxury arts" at the expense of agriculture.⁵³

Physiocracy: A Language of Noble Regeneration?

In the 1760s and 1770s, the most prominent version of a political economy that criticized luxury and founded national prosperity on agriculture was physiocracy. Mirabeau himself was one of the founders of this new school of political economy. In the summer of 1757, at the height of his literary fame, he met François Quesnay, the author of two obscure political economic articles in the *Encyclopédie*. Quesnay persuaded Mirabeau that the political economy he had articulated in *L'ami des hommes* was untenable, and an intellectual relationship began between the two men that eventually led Mirabeau to abandon or modify some of his original commitments. Mirabeau, however, did not forsake his interest in the welfare of the nobility, an interest that Quesnay was willing to accommodate. Physiocracy offered to nobles a means to reinsert themselves into the life of the modern nation in their capacity as landowners and custodians of rural prosperity. But physiocracy diverged sharply from Mirabeau's initial convictions in its refusal to countenance the reinvigoration of a society of orders. In this respect at least, Quesnay's views came to predominate over Mirabeau's.

Traditional scholarship on physiocracy assumes that the relationship between Quesnay and Mirabeau was a one-way street, with the doctor acting as theorist and the marquis as popularizer and publicist. But Elizabeth Fox-

53. Dupuy Demportes, *Le gentilhomme cultivateur*, i–v.

Genovese's work on the origins of physiocracy suggests that Mirabeau played a more active role.⁵⁴ One of his contributions to physiocracy, at least in its initial stages, was a concern to offer the nobility a way to restore its relevance in national life. The central argument of the physiocrats—that agriculture is the sole true source of wealth and, as such, the basis of national prosperity and power—offered a critical role in national life to the owners of land. The physiocratic call for provincial assemblies made up of landed proprietors to replace the administrative apparatus of royal *intendants* is reminiscent of Mirabeau's scheme of 1750 to reinvigorate provincial estates. It has been argued that this positive relationship to the nobility certainly could not have come from Quesnay's social thought, which derives from the Enlightenment, antifeudal tradition within which Coyer framed his *Noblesse commerçante*.⁵⁵

But Quesnay may not have been so completely outside the current of thought represented by the pre-physiocratic Mirabeau or the chevalier d'Arcq. The central thrust of his advice to Mirabeau on how to present the nobility in the *Traité de la monarchie*, which the latter was writing in the late 1750s, was to play down noble privileges and redefine the noble as a patriot. "Do you wish to render [the nobility] honorable?" Quesnay writes. "Speak only of its duties, not of its status and its rights. . . . The general virtue of the noble is patriotic zeal of every sort."⁵⁶ The doctor was also sympathetic to the traditional noble critique of the luxury of financiers: he condemned such wealth as "base" and complained that it blurred social distinctions and eclipsed the nobility. Moreover, he argued that the fortunes of the nobility, those of agriculture, and those of morals were fundamentally linked, the enemy of all three being finance. He describes financiers as "those who form an order of base rich people, whose riches obscure by themselves and by misalliances all the luster of the nobility itself." "You cannot seriously talk of the nobility and of its dignity vis-à-vis a monarchical government," he warns Mirabeau, "where the destructive *état* of the *traitants* [financiers] becomes dominant. There nobility will be a chimera. The nobility as well as monarchy and *moeurs* can subsist only by plowing."⁵⁷

54. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1976).

55. Gino Longhitano argues that, in his basic intellectual sensibility, Quesnay was hostile to the pretensions of the nobility and strongly favored a commercial society. For Quesnay, Longhitano maintains, nobles were nothing but Franks who had usurped regalian rights and transformed monarchical government into a "confederation of despotic states." Longhitano, "La monarchie française entre société d'ordres et marché," lix.

56. Weulersse, ed., *Manuscrits économiques*, 25.

57. *Ibid.*, 28.

One might argue that Quesnay takes such positions in deference to Mirabeau's feelings. But as early as 1756, Quesnay seems to have been aware that the political economy he was elaborating had regenerative implications for the nobility. If Quesnay favored a commercial and defeudalized society, he certainly did not want one on the model of the abbé Coyer's *Noblesse commerçante*. He was critical of Coyer's scheme to involve nobles in commercial activities, suggesting a route to noble regeneration through commercial agriculture instead. In his 1756 *Encyclopédie* essay "Grains," he noted that it would be far better, both for the nobility and for the country, if gentlemen were to lease farms of land rather than going into trade (assuming they would pay tax like anyone else on the profits of those farms). "This occupation is more appropriate to their condition," according to Quesnay, "than the *état* of retail trader in the towns, that some wish to assign to them."⁵⁸ Here, perhaps, there is even a suggestion that Quesnay is concerned with maintaining the dignity of the nobility as a class, along with stimulating agriculture. The comment is brief and made only in passing, but it indicates that, in the context of the *Noblesse commerçante* debate, Quesnay had begun to link the idea of agricultural regeneration with the notion of a renewal of the nobility.

In their pronouncements on luxury, the physiocrats implicitly validated the value system of the provincial nobility. Quesnay insisted that a fundamental cleavage existed in the Second Estate, a division between court nobles, whom he despised, and the remainder of the nobility, whom he characterized in very positive terms. "The nobility is divided into two classes: into courtiers and citizens," Quesnay observed in comments on Mirabeau's *Traité de la monarchie*. "The former are amused with candies that they are made to purchase with much baseness."⁵⁹ The role of landed proprietors in the physiocratic system—and it was a critical role—was to practice appropriate consumption habits, not to spend too much of the rents they received on luxuries but to plow back a considerable portion of their income into agricultural improvements. The most explicit physiocratic treatment of luxury is to be found in the abbé Nicolas Baudeau's *Principes de la science morale et politique sur le luxe et les loix somptuaires* (1767). Here Baudeau explained that the key to agricultural prosperity was for the proprietor to spend his money wisely; if he wasted too much on unproductive luxury, then the land would yield less the following year.⁶⁰

58. Quesnay, "Grains," 491.

59. Weulersse, ed., *Manuscrits économiques*, 26.

60. Nicolas Baudeau, *Principes de la science morale et politique sur le luxe et les loix somptuaires* (Paris, 1767).

Where physiocracy is significantly at odds with the perspective of d'Arcq or the Mirabeau of *L'ami des hommes* is in its rejection of the idea that regeneration of the nobility meant the reinvigoration of a caste separate in principle from the rest of society. The nobility might be the leader of national life, the guardian of national prosperity and power, perhaps even the linchpin of patriotic virtue, but they would be such not qua nobles, but simply as owners of land. Mature physiocratic works, such as Mirabeau and Quesnay's *Philosophie rurale* (1763), or Le Mercier de la Rivière's *L'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1767), are written in an abstract language that eschews the categories of the society of orders. Membership in the physiocratic provincial assemblies was to be based not on dignity but on land holding. Mirabeau deplored the assemblies established by Necker in Berry and the Haute Guyenne in 1778 and 1779, respectively, in part no doubt to spite Necker, but also because they were based on the categories of the society of privilege.⁶¹ In the *Philosophie rurale*, Mirabeau jettisoned a vision of social order based on rank and estate, stating that "Persons, dignities, superiority, inferiority count for nothing . . . it is the physical essence of things which alone we will consider."⁶² In his later *Lettres sur la législation* (1775), he asked his readers if they ought really object to the abolition of such categories "in order to recognize no constitution but property, unassailable and sacred property."⁶³ Instead of using a language of hereditary and honorific distinctions, Mirabeau referred to "classes" of individuals based on their economic function: landowners, farmers, manufacturers, merchants. These classes were the basic units of society, he maintained, and the person who did not fit into any of them could be regarded as an "extrasocial being."⁶⁴ Such statements seem to foreshadow the social order of the nineteenth century; physiocracy heralded the transformation of noble into *notable*.

Luxury and the Rise of Antipathy to the Court Nobility

The attack on luxury articulated in French political economy of the 1760s proved a double-edged sword for nobles. By the 1770s, criticisms of luxury

61. Henri Ripert, *Le marquis de Mirabeau (L'ami des hommes): ses théories politique et économiques* (thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Paris—Faculté de Droit, Paris, 1901), 438.

62. Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *Philosophie rurale, ou économie générale et politique de l'agriculture* (Amsterdam, 1763), 1:193.

63. Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *Lettres sur la législation, ou l'ordre légal, dépravé, rétabli et perpétué* (Berne, 1775), 1:202.

64. *Ibid.*, xlvii.

were increasingly being directed against a part of the Second Estate itself: the court nobility.⁶⁵ I have already noted François Quesnay's harsh censure of court nobles for their frivolity and intrigue. Such criticisms became more widespread and more public in the 1770s as competing cliques at court used the gutter press to attack and vilify one another. The 1770s and 1780s saw a tide of anti-aristocratic criticism, much of it originating from Versailles, accusing court nobles of corruption, degeneration, and luxury. Even without this political infighting, however, it was probably inevitable that, in an intellectual climate increasingly hostile to luxury, the court nobility would eventually come in for criticism. More than any other social group they were associated with spectacular consumption and luxurious self-indulgence. Moreover, since the early decades of the eighteenth century, they had established increasingly close links with financiers—the traditional butt of the anti-luxury critique. So close had these links become by the last third of the century, that one could legitimately speak of the emergence of a hybrid plutocratic elite. Ultimately, the anti-aristocratic sentiment directed at the court nobility, including accusations of luxury, seems to have smeared the provincial nobility to some extent also.

Robert Darnton and Jeffrey Merrick have both pointed to the torrent of anti-aristocratic writing that inundated the public sphere in the 1770s and 1780s, much of it sexual in nature. In Darnton's words, "This sexual sensationalism conveyed a social message: . . . the great nobles were either impotent or deviant . . . everywhere among *les grands* incest and venereal disease had extinguished the last sparks of humanity."⁶⁶ One reason that courtiers were increasingly seen in such negative terms is that court politics was spilling over into the public sphere to a new extent in the last decades of the eighteenth century. As Jeremy Popkin has shown, cabals of courtiers commissioned scurrilous attacks on one another from Grub Street journalists and had these damaging representations hawked about the streets of Paris.⁶⁷ Conflicts in the law courts also found their way into the public sphere through

65. The opening line of a short poem on the "inconveniences of luxury" published in the *Mercure de France* in 1771 describes luxury as a "dazzling phantom, revered at the Court." M. Symon, "Les inconvénients du luxe," *Mercure de France* (June 1771), 39–43.

66. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 30. See also Jeffrey Merrick, "Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century France: The *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:1 (1990): 68–84.

67. Jeremy Popkin, "Pamphlet Journalism at the End of the Old Regime," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22:3 (1989): 351–67.

judicial briefs published by lawyers who sought to influence public opinion in favor of their clients. Sarah Maza has traced a series of dramatic cases in the 1770s and 1780s in which lawyers represented their clients as innocent victims of oppression by arrogant *grands*.⁶⁸ The accusation that aristocrats were guilty of a luxury that enfeebled and impoverished the country was easy to make. Durand Echeverria has identified a strain in patriot discourse in the early 1770s critical of the luxury of the rich and their apparent indifference to the fate of the poor.⁶⁹ In his *Journal historique de la révolution opérée dans la constitution de la monarchie française par M. de Maupeou*, Pidansat de Mairobert complained that “on one hand the provinces are despoiled to provide tribute to the luxury and ostentation of a few families, as contemptible in their origins as in their behavior, who cannot see anything superfluous in their opulence; while in the other class millions of families, earning scarcely enough from their miserable toil to stay alive, seem a living reproach to providence for this humiliating inequality.”⁷⁰

Accusations of luxury against court nobles were especially plausible in the late eighteenth century because the court nobility had, to a certain extent, merged with *la finance* to form a single plutocratic elite. Since the latter part of the previous century, the sons and daughters of financiers had been intermarrying with *les grands*, a trend that continued and augmented in the eighteenth century.⁷¹ As Charles Pinot Duclos noted, as early as 1750, “people of condition have already lost the right to despise finance, since there are few who are not allied to it by blood.”⁷² In addition to marriage ties, the court nobility and financiers were increasingly linked by common investments in tax farms and in monopoly trading and manufacturing companies. For example, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the court nobility began to figure among the stakeholders of the great Saint-Gobain glass manufacture, a firm traditionally dominated by financier capital. Between

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

69. Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism. France, 1770–1774* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 51.

70. *Journal historique de la révolution opérée dans la constitution de la monarchie française par M. de Maupeou, Chancelier de France*, 6 (20 September 1774), 207–8.

71. Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle (Cambridge, 1985), 115; Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1970), 250.

72. Charles Pinot-Duclos, *Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle*, ed. F. C. Green (Cambridge, 1939), 125.

1750 and the 1780s, board members included Anne de Montmorency, the vicomte de Ségur, the comte de Jaucourt, and the marquis de la Ferté-Imbault.⁷³ In addition, a portion of the revenues of tax farming passed into a complex network of aristocratic creditors and courtly pensioners. Most tax farmers owed a share of their profits to *croupiers*, sleeping partners who put up a portion of the purchase capital of a share. In 1774, nearly two-thirds of the places in the Company of the Farmers General were so divided, and often the *croupiers* were members of the court nobility.⁷⁴ Courtly investment in tax farming, it was widely believed, was an impediment to reform of the fiscal system. In October 1775, the Italian *Gazetta universale* reported that the controller general, Turgot, had presented the king with a plan to abolish the tax farms, a program that would not be easy to implement because “the greatest lords have interests in the finances.”⁷⁵ The benefits the court nobility derived from tax farming were publicized in 1776 when, in the context of an attack on the administration of the abbé Terray, a list of the *croupes* attached to the General Farm was published.⁷⁶

The claim was made increasingly in the 1770s that aristocracy was the principal source of luxury. This was one of the theses of Alexandre Deleyre’s *Tableau de l’Europe* (1774), an assessment of the effects of colonial commerce on European life since the discovery of the New World. Deleyre offers a powerful defense of the benefits of commerce while suggesting that luxury is a consequence not of economic modernity but of social institutions that siphon the profits of commerce into the hands of a rent-seeking aristocracy. For Deleyre, the luxury that comes of commerce and manufactures is unambiguously a social good. The taste for luxury and comforts, he argues, creates an appetite for work that constitutes the principal strength of European states. The influx of money from international trade is a stimulus

73. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 102–3; Warren C. Scoville, *Capitalism and French Glassmaking, 1640–1789* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950).

74. George T. Matthews, *The Royal General Farms in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, 1958), 235–37.

75. *Gazetta universale*, no. 82 (14 October 1775), 650. Quoted in Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768–1776: The First Crisis*, trans. R. Burr Litchfield (Princeton, 1989), 371.

76. Jean-Baptiste-Louis Coquereau, *Mémoires concernant l’administration des finances sous le ministère de M. l’abbé Terrai, contrôleur général* (London, 1776), 233–40; another edition of the same work also published in 1776 carries the title *Mémoires de l’abbé Terrai, contrôleur général, concernant sa vie, son administration, ses intrigues & sa chute; avec une relation de l’émeute arrivée à Paris en 1775* (London, 1776). Robert Darnton lists it among the top ten illegal best-sellers of the eighteenth century. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995), 138.

to agriculture and domestic manufactures, and these manufactures lead to a more even distribution of wealth.⁷⁷ Often, however, when a nation grows rich through trade, Deleyre argues, those who hold the reigns of power manage to appropriate a considerable share of the benefits for themselves. It was not the economically active who were corrupted by the influx of mobile wealth from the New World, but the idle classes. Deleyre had the court nobility particularly in mind, observing that the idle rich gave themselves over to “luxury,” “intrigue,” and a “baseness that is called grandeur.”⁷⁸ He condemned nobility when it served no useful social function: “Nobility is nothing but an odious distinction, when it is not founded on real services, truly useful to the state, such as defending the nation against invasions and conquest, and against the undertakings of despotism. It is only a precarious and often ruinous assistance when, after leading a soft and licentious life in the cities, it goes to lend a feeble defense to the country in the fleet or in the army, and returns to the court to beg for recompense for its cowardliness, places and honors outrageous and onerous for the People.”⁷⁹

Although it is clear that Deleyre has the court nobility in mind here, at other points in his argument his antipathy appears to extend toward the nobility in general. He makes some pointedly critical comments about provincial nobles in the course of his defense of manufactures and commerce. “A rich manufactory brings more comfort to a village,” he observes, “than twenty *châteaux* of old hunting or fighting barons bring to a province.”⁸⁰ Here Deleyre seems to echo the anti-noble remarks of Coyer or Plumard de Dangeul. But Deleyre could also sound like the marquis de Mirabeau. He insists on the primacy of agriculture in the national economy and demands a reform of the tax system to favor agriculture, along with the establishment of complete freedom of the grain trade.⁸¹

Deleyre’s *Tableau de l’Europe* was not the only instance of anticourt sentiment spilling over into a criticism of the nobility as a whole. In an extended poem titled *Le luxe*, published in 1773, the chevalier Du Coudray, a minor man of letters, denounced the institution of nobility as an instrument of luxury:

77. Alexandre Deleyre, *Tableau de l’Europe, pour servir de supplément à l’Histoire philosophique & politique des établissements & du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Maastricht, 1774), 80, 89, 99.

78. *Ibid.*, 80.

79. *Ibid.*, 92.

80. *Ibid.*, 101.

81. *Ibid.*, 88, 93–94.

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.⁸²

Du Coudray claims that he would esteem the nobility 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.” 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, sont les vrais citoyens,
 Et non pas ces frélons qui, dans leur indolence,
 De la soigneuse abeille usurpent la substance.⁸³

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

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.⁸⁴

I suggest that Du Coudray's text is more anti-aristocratic than anti-noble. He 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.”⁸⁵ His antipathy is directed not principally at the provincial nobility, who can be fitted without 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,”

82. Alexandre-Jacques, chevalier Du Coudray, *Le luxe, poème en six chants; orné de gravures, avec des notes historiques et critiques, suivi de poésies diverses* (Paris, 1773), 29–30.

83. *Ibid.*, 30.

84. *Ibid.*, 21.

85. *Ibid.*, 132.

that he condemns. He singles out the marquis de Mirabeau as an example of the kind of noble he wishes was more typical of the order as a whole:

ILLUSTRE MIRABEAU, citoyen vertueux,
Toi, dont le sang répond au sang de tes aïeux;
Politique éclairé, calculateur habile,
Organe de Cérès, économiste utile.⁸⁶

It is nevertheless significant that Du Coudray extends his criticisms to the nobility as a whole. In this respect, *Le luxe* was a harbinger of things to come.

Luxury, Political Economy, and the Prerevolutionary Crisis

In the course of the prerevolutionary crisis, the language of political economy proved an important resource for critics of the nobility. The abbé Sieyès and other champions of the political rights of the Third Estate found in political economic categories a ready and potent means to characterize the nobility as an alien and parasitic excrescence on society. In so doing, these critics drew upon both the anti-noble strain of political economy articulated by the Gournay circle in the 1750s and the idiom which flourished in the 1770s identifying court nobles as vectors of luxury. The attack on aristocracy unleashed in 1789 made little distinction between the thrifty provincial noble living on his estate and the courtly grandee wallowing in luxury. The old language of orders and estates lumped all nobles together as the Second Estate, and this idiom acquired renewed relevance when it came to be used to apportion political representation in 1788.⁸⁷ Moreover, when pamphleteers projected a rigid noble/non-noble distinction onto the language of political economy, a language in which luxury/agriculture had become a central duality, they inevitably mapped noble onto luxury and non-noble onto agriculture. One could hardly deny that agriculture was principally the business of peasants. The anonymous author of *Le dernier mot du tiers-état à la noblesse de France*, dated 23 December 1788, identified the Third Estate with the “farmers” and the “merchants” who created all the wealth of the kingdom, and counterposed them to nobles who did no work but nevertheless reaped the

86. *Ibid.*, 35. The third part of the poem is dedicated to Mirabeau.

87. Colin Lucas, “Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *Past and Present* 60 (1973): 84–126.

treasure of the state.⁸⁸ The provincial nobility was pushed back into the same category as the court nobility—all parts of a group that consumed but did not work.

The same contrast was central to the comte de Volney's *Sentinelles du peuple*, a radical newspaper that pioneered criticism of nobles in the stormy waters of Breton politics. Volney used the traditional contrast between nobles who fight and commoners who work to establish an invidious distinction between the two estates. All of the arts useful and necessary for life are concentrated among the Third Estate while the nobles know nothing of them, Volney argued; nobles fight, but to defend their own privileges rather than for the sake of the *patrie*. He blamed the nobility for exclusive economic privileges and intrusive industrial regulations: is it not the gentlemen, by exclusions of all kinds, who chain our industry, he asked? He went on in the following issue to attack the "vicious inequality of wealth," blaming wealth for the intolerable pride of the nobility. He also turned his pen against financiers, advising his readers to "attack those rich commoners who aspire only to betray their Order: dismiss those corrupted men, who make of honor a price of finance." Volney turned traditional pro-noble ideology on its head, accusing nobles of excessive interest in money and insufficient attachment to honor: "Those French gentlemen, so jealous of honor, so free with their blood, we thought them avid for glory, [but] they were [avid] only for money: and for a little of that vile metal, they have set fire to their *patrie*, and preferred the loss of their Nation to the loss of their tyranny."⁸⁹

The claim that the nobility was interested in money rather than honor—that is, that they were corrupted by luxury—was a central feature of the attack on the privileged late in 1788 and early in 1789. Jean-Baptiste Rougier de la Bergerie, a rising star of the Royal Agricultural Society in Paris, reverses some of the standard traits of the noble and the commoner, attributing to farmers qualities traditionally seen as noble traits, and attributing to nobles the excessive interest in money long considered a characteristic of the ignoble. The cultivator, he argues, is "always useful, always virtuous, always honest, always beneficent, always attached to his *patrie*, to his king."⁹⁰ He is always willing to spend his whole fortune and spill his blood for their glory and

88. Anon., *Le dernier mot du tiers-état à la noblesse de France* (n.p., 1788).

89. Constantin-Frédéric de Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, *La sentinelle du peuple, aux gens de toutes professions, sciences, arts, commerce et métiers, composant le Tiers-Etat de la province de Bretagne*, nos. 1–5 (10 November–25 December 1788), 15, 18.

90. Jean-Baptiste Rougier de la Bergerie, *Recherches sur les principaux abus qui s'opposent aux progrès de l'agriculture* (Paris, 1788), 111.

interest. De la Bergerie implies that the modern nobility has been corrupted by an excessive interest in money: if you had proposed to a soldier that he become a tax farmer under the reign of Louis XIV, he would have been insulted, de la Bergerie claims, but today *chevaliers de Saint Louis* clamor for such positions.⁹¹ Luxury was the critical failing of the nobility, according to Pierre-Laurent Berenger's *Les quatre états de la France*.⁹² Calling for sumptuary legislation to reintroduce order and simplicity among nobles, Berenger argued that the nobility must be made to see that the way to win consideration was through virtue, not through dress.⁹³ Berenger leveled these charges within the context of a work that drew heavily on political economy: he attacked exclusive privileges and fiscalism as sources of rapid fortunes and destructive inequality; he warned about the poor state of the countryside and called for the encouragement of agriculture; and he condemned tax farmers, financiers, and the spending of the court.

Even more damning conclusions were drawn by the abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, who emerged in 1789 as a leader of the Revolution. In his *Essai sur les privilèges* (1788), Sieyès suggested that, as a consequence of their luxury, nobles were more interested in money than non-nobles. According to Sieyès, "they are even more prone to give themselves over to that ardent passion, because the prejudice of their superiority inflames them ceaselessly to overdo their expenditure." While prejudice pushed nobles to spend, Sieyès argued, it cut them off from almost all honest ways to replenish their fortunes. Considerations of honor actually restrained nobles less than commoners, he suggested, because, being born with honor, it was difficult for them to lose it. As a consequence, "intrigue" and "beggary" had become the "industry" of the nobility.⁹⁴ Sieyès went on in his *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?* (1789) to define the nobility out of the nation altogether on the grounds of its economic uselessness.⁹⁵

91. *Ibid.*, 8. He suggests that the "zealous cultivator" ought to enjoy as much consideration as the "true gentleman." The nobility founded on the residence of a non-noble in a *seigneurie*, on the establishment of a manufacture, or on land reclamation, he argues, "ought without doubt to be preferable to the commonplace variety conferred by so many vain and useless offices" (109–10).

92. Pierre-Laurent Berenger, *Les quatre états de la France* (n.p., 1789).

93. For another example of the equation of luxury with nobility, see Pierre-Toussaint Durand de Maillane's diatribe against luxury, *La noblimanie*, published on 25 February 1789, which laid the blame for luxury squarely on nobles. Pierre Toussaint Durand de Maillane, *La noblimanie* (n.p., 1789).

94. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788), 32–33.

95. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?* (Paris, 1789), chap. 1. On this point, see also William H. Sewall Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and 'What Is the Third Estate?'* (Durham, 1994), 66–108.

I hope it will be clear to the reader that it was not a foregone conclusion that political economy should be used to write the nobility out of the nation. This economic language was not inherently and essentially a framework that would exclude nobles from an important role in society. Certainly, since the 1750s, some French political economists had used political economy to criticize the role of the nobility in French society. Such writers as Véron de Forbonnais, Plumard de Dangeul, and Coyer outlined political economic positions suggesting that noble corporate distinctiveness, and the cultural attitudes associated with the nobility, were inimical to the national welfare. In response to such arguments, however, nobles, beginning with the marquis de Mirabeau, elaborated new political economic perspectives that were far more favorably disposed toward the nobility. These new political economies emphasized the centrality of agriculture, and thus of landowners, to national prosperity and power and gave powerful validation to the provincial nobility's anti-luxury ethic. Philo-agricultural political economists diverged on the precise role of the nobility. In the course of his own literary career, Mirabeau had argued in favor of reinvigorating a society of orders, whereas later, as a physiocrat, he offered nobles a chance to insert themselves into the commercial life of the nation only on the same basis as other large landowners. The Achilles' heel of the nobility proved to be its own topmost stratum, the court nobility. These grandees, distinguished from the rest of the nobility by their wealth, had formed an alliance with financiers over the course of the eighteenth century. This alliance left court nobles, and ultimately the whole of the Second Estate, vulnerable to the charge that *nobles* were the principal carriers and disseminators of luxury, a charge widely directed against the nobility in the late 1780s.