

A History of Everyday Things

The birth of consumption in France, 1600–1800

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translated by Brian Pearce



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
54 Boulevard Raspail, 75270 Paris Cedex 06, France

Originally published in French as 'Histoire des choses banales' by Librairie
Arthème FAYARD, 1997 and © Librairie Arthème FAYARD 1997.

First published in English by Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
and Cambridge University Press 2000 as 'A History of Everyday Things'.
English translation © Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge
University Press 2000

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12pt [VN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Roche, Daniel.

[Histoire des choses banales. English]

A history of everyday things: the birth of consumption in France,
1600-1800/Daniel Roche; translated by Brian Pearce.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 63329 x (hb). – ISBN 0 521 63359 1 (pb)

1. Consumption (Economics) History. 2. Consumer behaviour –
History. 3. Social history. I. Title.

HC79.C6R613 2000

399.47'0944-dc21 99-23258 CIP

ISBN 0 521 63329 x hardback

ISBN 0 521 63359 1 paperback

ISBN 2 7351 0840 6 hardback (France only)

ISBN 2 7351 0841 4 paperback (France only)

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I The natural framework and the human framework

In the society of the Ancien Régime, as in other societies, the relation between production and consumption was based upon an asymmetrical relation. One can consume only what has been produced, but the transformation of goods precedes the demand for them. For economists this relation applies universally. For historians of material culture it depends on capacity to consume and on numerous constraints, and reveals forms of behaviour the changes in which indicate more than economic fluctuations. The dependence or independence of societies in relation to objects, the responses made to the pressures of natural settings and the choices men make are undoubtedly concretised in this association wherein production corresponds, broadly, to supply and consumption to demand.¹ The economy does not totally exhaust the relation of man to things and objects, but it remains the most general framework when the market is established, even if several phenomena of exchange and circulation, such as gift or theft, do not depend upon it directly. In order to understand this imbrication of the market and what does not belong to the market – the non-commercial sphere of the private and symbolic economy – we can either analyse the transformation of goods and their commercialisation or investigate, in the context of scarcity and stability, the various factors – moral, intellectual, religious – which affect consumption and its social inequalities.

Goods in history

It is men's activity as producers and consumers that creates goods, through their labour and the value with which they endow objects, both utility and symbolic value being possible contributors to this. This transformation of objects into goods and wealth has a long history and is oriented towards two poles: that of access to natural goods and that of the hierarchy of values, which raises the problem of luxury goods and, therefore, of differences in consumers' behaviour.

As we observe every day, natural goods may all possess a history in

which one could read how they were appropriated by men, who then transformed them into wealth. Our civilisation is now becoming aware that if these goods should be lacking, all of its foundations would collapse. Air, water, forests, the products of the soil are the basis of food, clothing and housing, and the relation which is then established determines a major link between men and material civilisation. But how are we to recognise what is necessary and indispensable for survival which will subject the consumer's relation to nature to strong constraints without eradicating it all together, when historically technology has not been able to change or solve the problem of needs?²

Natural goods, use and exchange

'A commodity is . . . a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another', Marx reminds us. There can be no exchange value without use value: in particular, goods can satisfy needs without founding immediate value. For centuries peasants did not pay for water, but that is no longer the case today.

The hierarchy of and the frontiers between use values and exchange values can change. The concrete and everyday dimensions which appear when we analyse the inventories made after someone's death reveal this plainly to the historian of patrimonies. Among the possessions assembled, some objects are easily classifiable, but where are we to place silverware and jewellery, which figure in both the circuit of exchange and that of use? Goods can have a high symbolic value in social relations, yet, when necessity compels, their owners or the family that inherits them do not hesitate to mobilise them as a financial reserve.

Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as a general rule, water was not sold. It was a natural good, accessible to most people by means of inexpensive procedures. However, the growth of towns resulted in an increase of consumption and the towns then entered into a system of production and commercialisation of water which engaged the municipal authorities in far more than supervision and regulation, since it implied the building of aqueducts and pipes and the installation of machinery and pumps. Water became a form of wealth but, in most cases, it was paid for out of the inhabitants' taxes and indirect taxation. Direct access continued to be inexpensive.

Indirect access and distribution, however, hardly reached Parisian households before the end of the eighteenth century, and then only in a very small part of the town. Elsewhere they came still later, but already through a system of commercialisation or even of subscription or privilege. The water-carriers' market, free but regulated and supervised, sup-

plied everyone's needs. The carriers fetched water from the river, where it cost nothing, or from the fountain, where it had been paid for through taxation, and then sold the contents of their pails to housewives or their homes. This natural good had entered into the circuit of exchange, and that happened already in the Middle Ages. An entire section of the population still lived outside the trade in water, but this trade gained ground progressively. Water, which was at the heart of the technical system of pre-industrial societies, also created forms of social behaviour which varied in space as in time and which could reflect hierarchies of income as well as various choices. This is a sphere of mass consumption which enables us to understand how complex in former times was the relation to production and resources.

The same demonstration could be made regarding air. What good is more available and more accessible without cost? It was at the end of the eighteenth century that people began to think about its consumption. In the main, this thinking resulted from the great debate about the importance of fresh air for health and neo-Hippocratism. It involved administrative and medical authorities who, in the course of a large-scale investigation in which values both material and sentimental figured, raised the question of civilisation's relation to this natural good, which seemingly lacked both cost and weight.³ Particular places where it was consumed attracted their attention: prisons, where the density of population was already creating an unbalanced climate; cesspools, where the stench was proving fatal to the men who had to empty them; cemeteries, where the accumulation of graves was contributing to urban pollution (their transfer beyond the walls was to alter profoundly, and not without difficulty, a fundamental relation to death and the sacred); mines, where the requirements of exploitation and increased output came up against established techniques which included ventilation. An entire society pondered on the meaning and the cost of the new equipment needed to cope with the evolution of a form of behaviour in relation to everyday needs and a familiar natural good.

Ice offers another illustration.⁴ In the old society ice was something very scarce and reserved for the rich, because it was hard to transport and conserve. However, before the sixteenth century, human ingenuity, responding to the consumer-demands of court elites, especially in Italy, managed to find sites for the production of ice and to invent methods of transport and techniques of immediate preservation which did not require much knowledge of physics or chemistry. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries natural ice became a form of wealth and entered into the general circuit of consumption, and thereafter it was traded in. The Paris corporation of lemonade-sellers owed part of its prosperity in

summer to the sale of iced and cooled drinks which were no longer the exclusive of Versailles and the rich.

Many other examples could be given. Take wood, which enters into all of life's uses, from the most necessary to the most luxurious. We observe a comparable evolution and mobilisation, at both ends of the chain (the relation between production and consumption), on the part of the peasants, defenders of usages and customs, the big wood-merchants and the large-scale landowners, with the monarchical state at their head, who were concerned with profitability. The value of this natural good cannot be reduced to an economic definition, since other values, symbolic and sentimental, complicate usages regarding both heating and domestic and urban lighting.

The identification of production and consumption with supply and demand emerged from the thinking of the political arithmeticians of the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, William Petty and Boisguilbert. This idea is, of course, more verifiable in the long than in the short term: economists learnt to take account of time-differences. It was connected with an historical tradition directed mainly towards the study of production, therefore of supply, based on the history of prices and their relation to the market.⁵ In turn consumption itself enters into this relationship between goods and prices between demand and the market. It is at the heart of transactions, because the nature of objects and appearances is at the centre of their construction, leading to an organisation of distinct and hierarchised commodities. One has also to take into account the behaviour of consumers and not only the tendency to imitate, even if this remains essential in the hierarchy of consumptions.⁶ The history of consumption must include analysis of demand, and therefore of the structuring of needs, the classification of consumers, the circuits of distribution and the spatial organisation of supply. Small-scale trade, especially, has a place here which has been insufficiently emphasised.

The nature of goods, the relationship to objects

In natural goods and their transformation through use we soon see the phenomenon of luxury and superfluity appearing. Ice provides the best example, but the history of the bath is equally eloquent. 'Ten centuries with no bath!' said Michelet, already in the middle of the nineteenth century. The relationship of men to objects here takes on a different meaning. 'The economists of the eighteenth century sensed vaguely that there is an order in needs which causes a distinction to be made in the nature of goods.'⁷

The contrast between natural or real needs and needs that are subject to opinion, between 'comfort and luxury', needs due to necessity, on the one hand, and luxury, even ostentation on the other, dominates the shifting frontier between degrees of use and of social visibility that are highly diverse. It distinguishes different spheres of consumption, but also of production and distribution: the sphere of personal and useful consumption; that of the superfluous 'the second order of needs', what is pleasant; and that of the useless, 'the third order of needs', which is also that of the greatest symbolic and social identification. In the realm of commodities, and still more in that of luxury, we are remote from the elementary necessities (consider clothing) and have now entered the world of transformation through labour, the triumph of added value, although dependence on natural resources has not ceased. Old-time industry, the clothing economy and the luxury sector of earlier ages depend upon those resources entirely for their raw materials and for the transformation and transport of these products. At the same time, however, those goods, which are less and less primary and are oriented towards luxury, represent quantities of investment and of labour that are connected.

Labour and money alike go into resources and necessities, but even more into the superfluous. Circulating capital is larger than fixed capital, emphasising the role of the merchant, who leads the dance of profit and accumulation until at least the middle of the nineteenth century.

Several questions thus arise for the historian of consumptions who seeks to understand the relation between supply and demand and consumers' choice. In the first place, whoever controls the circuits enjoys an exceptionally favourable situation. The case of the entrepreneur presents, however, a problem which is both economic and social. The old society does not yet appreciate his true place, even though he is already a decisive agent of transformation, since, by his capacity for innovation and invention he was to be the decisive actor in the change observable between the first and second halves of the eighteenth century.⁸ Secondly, what is it that impels men to go into business and invest their money, and what enables these entrepreneurs to see ahead and imagine a result of their activity? Everyone's consumption in the sphere of goods of the second and third orders, as in that of objects of necessity, is based upon this ability and upon the way in which the entrepreneur acquires the intellectual tools required for it.⁹ Finally, how are we to understand the dynamic of consumption which is at work behind these motivations of production and trade? How to understand demand, and the market which results from it, which goes beyond necessity, and the way in which it incites to transformation? We have to look for the answers on the side of capacity to

consume, and that, yesterday just as today, is measured by the income of households.¹⁰

Consumption was a reality well before the industrial and commercial revolution that began in the eighteenth century. It was inseparable from the family dimension, in which expenditure was organised not round the individual, the isolated economic agent but round the parents-and-children group, that dynamic collectivity within which individual identities were formed, especially in the days before expanded and large-scale school attendance. In expenditure, and therefore in the choices which are a feature of everyday economy, there mingle in a complex way the factors of socialisation, cultural and anthropological but also social and economic, the level of income and the gaps between levels, and also the perceptions of the persons concerned. Family consumption is not only the product of these conditions, it is also a way of defining oneself and behaving, in accordance with a set of norms of identity and knowledge, of rules which are, primarily, the concern of mothers of families. In the old society the models of consumption were bound up not with economic capacities alone, and the principle established in the nineteenth century by Engel can be applied to them only partially.¹¹ Actually, variation in consumer behaviour is inseparable from a relation with incomes and family usages the dynamic of which is based on differentialisation and imitation.

This point is essential for understanding how the consumption of clothing has evolved in the modern period. Two principles are simultaneously operating: that of the stationary economy, the appearances and rules of which are determined by social situation (the habit makes the monk, everyone should consume according to his rank – the central argument in conceptions of good manners since Erasmus), and that of the economy of luxury, in which the practitioners and interpreters of fashion talk up the desire to mark oneself off from inferior groups, from which ensues the commercialisation of needs and the construction of new social identities for the individual. This example lets us see what the historian must expect from a re-reading of the rules of material civilisation. He has to combine two approaches – that of the economy and its interpretation, in order to understand how societies function and the relation between consumption and production, and that of social and cultural analysis, which takes account of the imperatives of private and public life, the norms which manifest themselves in the choices of material culture.

The end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth were a special moment for thinking about these matters. We find there the roots of what would emerge in definitive form thanks to Adam Smith, but

also and especially the foundations for an economics, analytical, thoughtful and rational, exemplified by the work of Boisguilbert, who formulated the theory of an economy driven by demand.¹² In the context of crisis, wars, currency disturbances and jerky price-increases, awareness that 'a large population does not by itself produce wealth' dictated the idea that the population's consumption is alone decisive. This is merely an indicator of the relation between production and consumption on which depend capacities for growth and expansion. Three precepts are thus to be found at the heart of the debates in the France of the Enlightenment: a break with the mercantilist tradition and its two supreme indices of prosperity, money and population (money was now seen as a means, and population as a test); fascination with private interest, since the individual, as actor in the economy, decides for himself his capacity for choice; and social differentiation in consumption, which has a different weight for different economic actors and social categories and induces effects that are not uniform.

Consumption by the poor has an excellent economic result because, with little money available to the individuals and households concerned, taken severally, it makes possible rapid resumption of activity by the production circuits and guarantees their survival. Large-scale consumptions of bread and clothing have immediate consequences. Consumption by the rich, however, is slower and heavier and gives rise to the question of how goods are used. Here we come upon the 'dispute about luxury', which refers back to concern with the moral aspect of economics: the prosperity of a few millionaire financiers does not make up for the impoverishment of the poor people upon which it is based. This debate was set going as a result of the growth of towns and the social fragmentation of the consumptions for which this growth provided the shop-window. Luxury thus remained a major problem for Ancien Régime society, because needs were not defined by pure economic relations (do such exist nowadays?) and because the consumptions it motivated cast light on the functioning of demand, which, moreover, was not the same for all sectors and periods.

The primacy of the agricultural sector bore down with a weight that was clearly revealed in the crises analysed by C.-E. Labrousse, even if his study of demand can do with further refinement.¹³ Production and consumption by unearned income, taxes and purchases depended upon eighty per cent of the population. Quesnay was not mistaken in his *Tableau économique*: the social product of the peasants' labour more than covered the non-economic expenditure of society – luxury, the administration, the army, the church and religious activities, prestige and the arts.

Relationship to objects, the nature of standards

On the social and cultural side, consumption presents the questions of how people are apprentices to its rules and how one can understand the ways in which these rules are internalised. In other words, why are certain forms of behaviour approved of and encouraged, and why do people agree (or fail to agree) to conform to them? This problem is linked with a great problem in philosophy because freedom and constraint are involved.

The historian can offer no simple answer, especially because he has to take account of a historiography which stresses too strongly the dependence and the constraints of necessity which are characteristic of the lives of society's lower orders. The old society was obviously a society of scarcity. Another society, with more fluid consumptions, emerged very soon in the aristocratic world and in the towns, but this spread only very slowly to the rural areas and the lower orders in general. My own generation is doubtless the last to have observed this world, which is rapidly disappearing into the past, in proportion as objects become more numerous, more accessible, because less expensive, and more mobile. At the same time, however, the social frameworks of ordinary life are changing, in step with that development.

The family was at the heart of this transformation, because, in town and country alike,¹⁴ it was the unit of production and consumption. The influence of family life was felt in two ways. In some sectors, particularly in manufacture, a tendency appeared here and there to separate labour from the family unit of consumption. This often happened also among urban craftsmen: the movement, once begun, would quicken in the eighteenth century and still more later on. The modern age sees a modifying of family feeling, with the development of a family sensibility, a conception of private life and new expressions of feeling for children. The withdrawal into the 'family nucleus', the importance ascribed to the values of intimacy, the different relations established between generations, the new ways in which the different ages of life find expression, the differentiated effects of age – everything that goes to make up the distinctive features of the parental and family relations in the West has its consequences for consumption, whether this be measured at the macro-economic level or micro-economically, at the household level. The birth of the intimate thus provided the subject of an enquiry into the material environment in Paris, based on a confrontation of family values with objects possessed,¹⁵ such as the bed and the bedroom, the fireplace and the kitchen range.

What, then, were the norms that constituted the 'domestic science' of the family economy, the rules which organised the time, space and

manners appropriate to consumption? On the production side, great works dealing with the rural economy and rustic dwellings, from Charles Estienne to Liger, offer lessons in old-time agronomy and a family economy inherited from Antiquity, presented in all its aspects.¹⁶ On the consumption side, family record books, private accounts and guardians' accounts show how the strategies and styles peculiar to domestic life were a field in which rules, knowledge and usages confronted each other. The schooling of boys and girls¹⁷ also played an important role, as it aligned the girls' culture with that of the boys, in their apprenticeship to elementary knowledge (reading, writing, counting), even if this happened with a time-lag and a gap in content, while, at the same time, the school refined and accentuated the definition of women's work and role. By forming good housewives and pious mothers, this education had a considerable influence on consumer behaviour within families.

The economy of everyday life was bound up with the autonomisation of private life and the way in which this was organised in relation to places of labour and of leisure. The urban craftsman would have specific modes of consumption depending on whether he was an apprentice and dependent on his family or on the club of his craft, an independent journeyman, or a master-craftsman involved in representative functions. Jacques-Louis Ménétra offers in his diary examples of this for the three phases of his life. Study of consumption is linked with these different social situations which are neither wholly separate nor uniformly homogeneous.

Persons appear who offer definitions of 'educative consumption', such as the teacher Verdier who, in 1777, asked in his *Cours d'éducation*: how are those pupils to be educated who are destined for the highest professions and employments? Verdier is aware that he is responding to a new need. His concerns are similar to those of the doctors and apothecaries who at the time, on the initiative of Dr Tissot, were propounding diets, 'health regimes' adapted to different social categories. In each case the family played a role, for it had become less than an economic and emotional relationship which aimed to nourish and bring up children in accordance with a new division of tasks.¹⁸ The issue is how to achieve a better understanding of the way that growth starts up in a stationary economy, the way in which it is connected with a consumers' revolution and levels out, while not abolishing the differences within society.

Stability and change

Two major phenomena govern the relation between production, population and consumption: dependence on the natural setting, and the

demographic regime which tends to self-regulation so as to maintain the balance between numbers of population and resources available. The constraint imposed by the natural framework must be conceived as operating within a certain model of technical environment, through the totality of living conditions, and not as a deterministic relation. The ecological dimension of our epoch has contributed to this tendency in which what matters is to show the variability of man's power to control nature. The old regime of consumption was set within a model of relations with the worlds of vegetation and animal life, the ecosystem as a whole, the sun, crops, woods and water. It laid the foundation for adapting demography to resources.

From the geographical picture to rural history

Any consideration of the relationship between the natural setting, development or agriculture and the history of material culture must start from the French tradition of the geographical picture¹⁹ established by Vidal de la Blache. We know that France is many sided, with its five hundred cheeses, its regions defined by permanent features, the little districts which are all different, its peasants and their works. This historical and physical vision provides the basis for regional geography. Yet Vidal de la Blache's *Tableau* includes, in spite of all that, only general and constant features. It congeals the movement of nature and history alike, from the standpoint of a situation achieved, and to some extent leaves in the dark the dynamism of the relations established between rural societies and natural settings.²⁰ The regional framework adopted blurs the influence of other levels of spatial reality, the dimensions and functions of which have altered with the passage of time. It fails to take account of the different scales that apply where individuals and groups are situated in many relations. Life organises itself and the ecological dimension, which can be perceived at different levels, becomes established through the plot of land, the field, ownership, exploitation, the soil, boundaries. What we see first of all is the heritage of old landscapes and of their transformation, which can still be observed after many centuries. Then we learn of fluctuations, such as the history of the climate, which has its own movements, connected with those of forms of vegetation and of their utilisation. We need also to take account of the phases of human intervention – ground-clearing, hydraulic development, abandonment of soils, large-scale re-forestation, meaning the way that landscapes have evolved in response to demand and changes in needs. Finally, we have to look into the question of how contemporaries analysed the relation between the natural setting and rural society.

From this analytical division, which is that of the *Histoire de la France rurale*,²¹ I shall take certain features which are needed if we are to understand the historical foundations of material civilisation. From this comes the concept of rural space associated with the elements of the natural setting developed for agricultural production, both of crops and of animals. If rural space is commonly contrasted with urban space, it is not so much because this lays down a rigid frontier between them but because of urban space's greater density of population, and, above all, because different functions appear in it. As early as the eighteenth century Richard Cantillon, in his *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général*, put forward a model of the way the economy functions and real wealth is produced, even perhaps a model of the market. He developed an economic sociology based on relation to the earth as source of value, distinguishing between landowners, farmers and wage-labourers, to whom he added traders and craftsmen. This was the hierarchy which defined the distribution of incomes and the structure of demand, the actual organisation of consumption and expenditure. The town dominated the country because it held the mastery, in respect of landownership and of politics, imposing models of consumption. It was the town, ultimately, that altered the natural space and caused the balance to vary as between areas that were intensively exploited and those that were only more or less developed, where the relation was more discontinuous, the forests and mountain pastures, or else the spaces kept in reserve, intermediate, depending on phases of occupation, but never wholly left to themselves.

The relation to the rural space, aiming at large-scale satisfaction of many needs through agricultural production can no longer be seen in a deterministic way. The weight of the natural factors varies from one period to another and in accordance with agro-technical attitudes, as is apparent from the geographical history of the vine, which has been thoroughly studied from R. Dion to M. Lachiver and G. Garrier.²² Two major factors of localisation operate in different ways and account for the overall process of evolution. There is the role played by the towns and the roads which organise demand and possibilities of access to the production-sites. Roads and rivers, together with coastwise traffic, favoured expansion beyond the original bounds which had been fixed long after the invasions by church demands, the work of vine-growing bishops and abbots, the glory of princes and the profit of merchants. The rise of the vineyards steadily accompanied the rise of the towns, taking place at their very gates, and, according to Garrier, demand always had to reckon with inadequate supply.²³ It may seem artificial to separate here towns from countryside, in that the town-dwelling landlord is often a vine-grower who sells his produce everywhere, and also in that vines are often

found around towns. Nevertheless, certain localisations are highly dependent on the natural conditions of the place. Improvement of complex soils in areas exposed to the sun and away from fogs led to vineyards being established on stony hillsides with cleared soil, preferably facing south. After choosing favourable locations, large-scale vineyards were developed, to meet the first consumer demands. Some plantations disappeared because changes in taste, helped by transport conditions, altered their capacity to meet demand. From the seventeenth until the nineteenth century, Parisians found the little wine of Suresnes drinkable – perhaps even delicious. A charming local product, this was eventually abandoned, like many other minor wines of Northern France which the citizens' thirst had kept at the limit of production-capacity.

These desertions, and sometimes some revivals, call in question the idea that growing-areas and supply were stable. To be sure, one can agree that, until the nineteenth century, the peasant community was stable and had adapted to the natural conditions and to the technological environment which underwent little change. From this resulted a permanence of agrarian practices not much open to alteration. The problem therefore is to discover how change could come about, both on the general plane and at a local and family level. The opening-up process, doubtless facilitated by schooling and by the circulation of recipes, was connected with external demand, the imperatives of new consumptions, road-building policy and administrative measures which had the effect of ending the isolation of certain areas.²⁴ New crops established themselves – maize in the seventeenth century, the potato in the eighteenth, and the chestnut. Agronomists and peasants saw all of these contributing in various ways to changes in the landscape, but they also, through changing dietary habits, altered the style of material culture and social relations. When we understand change and turn away from a static notion of history, we try to ascertain the possibilities for adaptation possessed by the agro-system on which everything depended.

Natural and developed space

The living cover of vegetation, heath and forest played a major role in this change. After the great land-clearances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this cover was determined by the mastery of fire and re-establishment of 'the full world' after the Black Death. It was no longer attacked except on a limited and localised scale, though such onslaughts increased from the eighteenth century onward. For rural France this space, both free and yet under control, mastered and yet often magical and marginal, has defined long since the main lines of the landscape. It

was there that species both vegetable and animal were selected, and sometimes transformed by the introduction of new varieties (the pine and the sweet-chestnut tree, in the forests) and specific kinds of fauna (deer for the nobles to hunt).

Similarly, in this living eco-system ponds and rivers became important. It was in connection with a fundamental element in old-time diets in which a great deal of fresh-water fish were eaten, that sheets of water were developed and protected, as an important source of income for land-owners, contributing to the wealth of great estates both secular and ecclesiastical. In some parts of France, such as Dombes, the monasteries and the rural communities controlled the entire system of ponds and supplied the neighbouring towns with fish.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the general principles for domesticating the natural setting were established, but the relation of man to nature was not passive. It consisted of the transference of old elements, both vegetable and animal and the introduction of new components, with a variety of changes in the balance. This could sometimes bring about considerable alteration in the ordinary life of the peasants: for example, the great royal and aristocratic hunting preserves were developed around Paris partly at the expense of grain-growing fields. A change in the balance in a set of practices can have many consequences. As regards consumption it is through the variations in available resources that attitudes and appropriations are to be understood.

These attitudes and appropriations are most easily visible in the developed space, the sphere of labour and the basis of peasant life. The land, meaning the soils in all their variety and with their productive capacity reconstituted by men, determines the entire organisation of country life, as ownership of land, through its fundamental prestige, defines the divisions in society. It is in a daily relationship with the land that is experienced the capacity to maintain and renew a world in which everything has its own importance, with actions and implements, practices and ideas, all dominated by the cyclical return of the seasons, of works and days.

The exploitation of the earth's riches was always restricted by shortage of fertiliser. There were no chemical fertilisers and not much of the natural sort. The shortages and deficiencies of organic matter conducive to increased yields could be made up for only by the system of fallows, which kept out of production a third or a half of the productive land. Agronomists applied their efforts to solving this problem, by extending universally the principles of a 'green revolution' which had been tried out in Northern Italy, Holland and England, based on more extensive planting of fodder crops. The fallow system stood firm because without it there would be no cattle, without cattle there would be even less fertiliser in the

form of manure, and without that it would be impossible to maintain yields that were already poor. Like wheat, it was a 'necessary evil' that restricted the surfaces from which a return could be got. But the fallow system was also at the heart of the question of animal husbandry: in the relation between production and consumption it was an element which was indispensable but calling for care. Agricultural France of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not merely the great grain-growing plains and open fields of the country's North, which resulted from a long evolution and an adaptation to natural conditions under the pressure of increased urban demand. This was only one of the ways of adaptation presented by the peasant realm. In other regions, the mountains, the bocages, the Mediterranean South, different systems operated, with ecological rates which the agronomists of the time did not always understand immediately, because they did not find there the landscape they were used to and the dominant model of the great grain-growing plains that provided the criterion by which they estimated all farming practices.

Here we see how important were variations in mastery of the developed space and how necessary it is to appreciate the criteria, intellectual and practical, that contemporaries applied in relations with the setting in which they found themselves. We have to measure the nearness and the distance between the agronomist's field and that of the peasant, to distinguish between the concrete meaning of ideas and their ideological usefulness, and to compare the rational choices with the technical possibilities of the localities and the social structure. In this way we can discover the meaning of a history of agronomy in the modern epoch, in its context and its missions.²⁵

The natural foundations of material culture are associated with a constant interaction between production and cultivated space. This relation depends on a balance, variable according to regions, between three components in the landscape: the *ager*, the *sylva* and the *saltus*, to employ the classical terminology which was familiar to agronomists in the period between Humanism and the Enlightenment. These three elements are complementary and form a set which was not to be much altered until the major transformation of the nineteenth century.

Cultivated land can be regarded as a single ecological unit without any anachronism. It was the sphere of existence of the peasantry, both vine-growers and cereal-growers. G. Durand has shown very well how, thanks to the daily comings and goings across the country roads, through conflicts and agreements on boundaries, profound relationships were woven, relationships that are essential for an understanding of peasant culture and of attitudes to nature and the possibility of change.²⁶

In the 'old forest' that bounds the landscape other practices are at

work. Here and there, peasants encountered juridical limits (remember the Code Colbert and the reformation of the forests) or else imaginary ones: the stranger and the strange was always to be found in the depths of the woods, a place without rules, but these very woods supplied the rural economy with all its customary building materials. The growing demand for timber from towns and ironworks gave rise to scientific and academic inquiries as well as giving rise to riots.²⁷ Forestry could be in conflict with customs, and a change in use could rouse rural communities faced with new constraints to resist them. Fierce competition developed around necessary but scarce and coveted produce, competition in which peasants were set against landowners, country-folk against townfolk, the administration against merchants, foresters against ironmasters – the country, the town, the factory all in mutual conflict. It was then that a specific criminality appeared at times to break the tension caused by these new practices brought in from outside, because a disturbance of the balance calls for a search for new ways of thinking.

Between the fields and the forests, the *salvus* is the space occupied by grazing-land, wet pastures taken from grasslands or marshes, meadows and heaths of the hills and mountains. For the peasants it is a transitional zone the cultivation of which can upset the general situation of the local economy, like re-colonising of the forests. It is undoubtedly the least stable of the three elements, but nevertheless it has a role to play, because it makes possible large-scale cattle-raising and provides additional resources.

The balance between the three elements obviously differs in accordance with ecological settings. It varies, too, depending on the type of control exercised by the rural communities and lordships, collective usages and common pasture. Moreover, the pasture-space is not entirely coincident with the *salvus*. In the Mediterranean regions, bush and moors provide wood and also grass for goats and sheep. In Brittany the heaths beside the sea and their furze enter into the agricultural system by offering conditions for animal husbandry, particularly horse-breeding, which the cultivation and the development of artificial meadows would sweep away. In the pastures of moderately mountainous areas animal husbandry is often predominant. In the summer pastures higher up an original setting survives, the key to the economy of the mountains and of the seasonal movements of men and beasts. Shepherds play a special role. They are good intermediaries between the forces of nature and those of society. They pass through all the circles of agricultural space. For their neighbours there is always something of the sorcerer about them. Their image also shows the overlapping of these three different landscapes, and points up how plain and mountain may even complement each other.

These elements are indeed complementary. Except in the grain-growing areas they are adapted to a polycultural economy which roots the peasantry in stability and tradition, one of the bases of which continues to be the defence of community usages. In the eighteenth century men become aware both of the natural and historical constraints upon them and of the rigidity which these constraints imply. This was an agricultural system in which productivity was low and technique clumsy, and which was acutely sensitive to all departures from normality, both meteorological and economic, a system that would be subjected gradually to a powerful pressure of demand.

The Revolution, with its agrarian disturbances, was to mark a decisive break, because it supported property ownership in the exclusive and domanial sense recognised by the bourgeois class of victorious property-owning townsfolk.²⁸ The Revolution thus meant a setback for collective and extensive utilisations of the land and of the intermediate and forest zones. For political and social reasons the ecological balance entered a phase of change, because the relation to institutions, to rights and customs, already questioned, was now challenged. The stability due to the controls exercised by the lords and the communities and by the parish, had survived till then. It was within these entities, variously represented on the map of the kingdom and more or less active, that the constraints of technique and the possibilities of transformation were expressed, by means of leases, discussions and regulations governing the harvesting of crops. The whole technical system depended on the relation to natural conditions and adapted itself thereto, regardless. It made possible the ideal of subsistence farming along with, in normal times, a marketing of surpluses for the provisioning of the towns which brought about a decisive transformation of certain regions, as J. M. Moriceau has shown in the case of the farms of the Ile-de-France.²⁹ It was not immediately adaptable to the increase in population which occurred in the eighteenth century.

If we are to understand how, in this context, change was possible and how the principal features of the consumption–production relation were modified, we have to take account of two concrete dimensions; that of the population's self-regulation and that of the possibility of an agricultural revolution.³⁰ Demographic studies have shown that, after a long period of steady-state and with numerous local variations, the eighteenth century saw a period of growth. The population as a whole grew, and also the number of town-dwellers, most of whom had come from the country. All these people had to be fed. Before this time a homeostatic regulation of the population's size seems to have functioned, governed by the amount of food available. Crises, the effects of which were variously interpreted,

restored a balance. These crises were severe when the system of cultivation was altered, with increased dependence owing to specialisation, particularly in grain growing, and with economic and epidemiological effects into the bargain, having consequences that differed according to people's social position. Labrousse showed that in 1947. We now know the capacity of agriculture as a whole to reproduce itself, with each crisis giving younger people the opportunity to establish themselves on properties made available by deaths. The ecological balance was maintained, along with the entire agrarian structure. The self-subsistence of a mass of small peasants, small-scale landowners, semi-independent and semi-wage-earning, was safeguarded. The big landowners – noble, ecclesiastical, bourgeois – who marketed the greater part of their harvests, farmers and share-croppers, large-scale or small-scale entrepreneurs *à la* Cantillon served as intermediaries between variable demand and dispersed production which was heterogeneous in every way.

An increase in economic and political analyses, starting from the first half of the eighteenth century reflected awareness of the demographic problem. It was due to a false perception which Montesquieu reproduces in his *Lettres persanes* and *Esprit des lois* and the positive intellectual effects of which we can understand nowadays.³¹ France's intellectuals believed that the population was declining. Administrators and thinkers on social problems sought ways to understand the working of the productive mechanisms: e.g., Quesnay, in the article 'Man' in the *Encyclopédie*. A science of observation of population changes arose, with statistical apparatus, investigations and debates,³² and this gradually established that, in reality, the population was growing. Present-day historians take note of this, even if they diverge as to the causes and effects of this growth – mortality, age at marriage, family planning. The accepted figure gives 22,000,000 French in the kingdom in the 1720s and at least 28,000,000 in the 1790s.

This growth, which depended mainly on adaptation of employment, set in motion in the rural areas various processes of fragmentation of holdings or of transfer to wage-earning. The formation of large farms could create a centre of attraction for transformed labour-power. The zones of proto-industrialisation, where agricultural and manufacturing work were associated, could record high densities of population, as we see in Valentinois, Perche, Flanders and Normandy, dominated by Rouen. Migration relieved some of the pressure, finding an outlet in the towns, but mobility failed to check the growth, on the contrary its effect was to keep it up. It removed only surplus population from the countryside, and sent back part of the income earned, which served to pay taxes and finance dowries and even the purchase of land. Finally, it endowed the

rural world with a more optimistic outlook, regarding possibilities of expansion, an outlook which was also readier to contemplate change. To judge by the results of the concatenation of economic and demographic mechanisms, the thrust of population growth set going responses that were indispensable if it was to be maintained, in terms of production and distribution. This forms part of investigations, still today not entirely resolved, regarding consumption.

The debate on the agricultural revolution seems to be reviving. Even if, as must be agreed, the expression is hardly appropriate, it does indicate an issue. Demand was certainly increasing in quantity, and probably in quality as well. How did supply follow it, at all levels of society? The answer is not to be found merely in terms of arable yields, though those did show significant increases in some areas, but in the overall evolution of the agrarian system and the accumulation of results achieved in the regions. The increased demand for labour doubtless operated in its own way. Then there was the bringing under the plough of newly cleared land, despite marginal costs and the reduction in fallows, together with the diffusion of new crops – buckwheat, maize, potatoes – the ‘little outposts’ dear to Marc Bloch, meaning all the products used for self-subsistence, but the introduction of which altered the old dialectical balances, while changes were taking place in economic and social relations. Investment of labour in gardening could also bring returns. In the zones of proto-industrialisation the fragmenting of holdings and part-time work for factories made possible an increase in population. Finally, some of the increase was connected with improvements in the road network which favoured the marketing of such products as wine: this was noticeable in Alsace, in Beaujolais, and in the corn-growing areas of northern France, which were encouraged by the take-off of prices after 1740. Without any major technical transformation having occurred, an overall evolution was undoubtedly beginning.

These changes were accompanied by agronomists’ study of the rural scene, which, as in Lavoisier’s case, measured effects without completely changing their technical data, which were not to undergo a thorough upheaval until the nineteenth century. These writers were organised in ‘societies of agriculture and economy’ and they expressed themselves in periodicals and memoirs. Naturalists and chemists took part in a debate which ranged over all the problems of the power of nature and that of mankind: the grain famine, the diseases of crops, the balance of the *saltus*, of animal husbandry and the forest, the shortage of woods, the models of cultivation available, the art of managing one’s property and the social economy, English agronomy and its results, which showed that animal husbandry could free agriculture from the tyranny of corn (this model

functioned throughout France without any alternative, except in some regions).

Two conceptions of the change soon came into conflict.³³ For some, it happened through the introduction into the old system of a new element, a machine, a procedure, a product hitherto unknown – in short, through things. For others, it was the consequence of the transformation of structures and the actions of men who changed their practices. The question interested thinkers of all sorts, because the answer to it changed one's view of the relation of men to things and the acceptance of scarcity or abundance. The growth which led to agricultural production involved the consumption of non-agricultural goods as well.

In order to understand the pressures upon the supply of labour and the increase in the active population through women and children being drawn into work, we need to place the phenomena of consumption in the framework of the family and take account of the plurality of incomes from wages. A family's expenditure might increase even when wages failed to follow prices and so cause an increase in global demand. Intensive development of exchange and use of money introduced countryfolk to *exchange value* and broadened their taste for new things. New consumptions could spread in a society in which there was an ever-increasing contrast between rich and poor, but in which existed a wide hierarchy of unequal incomes. The constraint of subsistence must, therefore, be seen as relative and the specific character of consumer behaviour better appreciated.

Relations between generations, life-style ethnic and cultural allegiances are at the origin of forms of solidarity which are not superimposed on those which have their basis in production-relations. It is from this standpoint that the study of models of consumption is decisive: it can enable us to know which were the social scenes in which envy, imitation and conflict are at work.³⁴

The frontiers of production were beginning to move, and this aroused a will to know, an attentiveness which shifted from the exterior, where mercantilism reigned, to the interior, a realm where the role of more numerous and more diverse consumers challenged a system of old-established balances. Consumption itself questioned the moral and intellectual frameworks of old practices based on scarcity and stability. In the more fluid and mobile France of the towns, this experience began much earlier.

For the peasant world we can adopt the conclusions formulated for Alsace by J.-M. Boehler:³⁵ neither a revolutionary take-off nor a static history but an agriculture placed between tradition and innovation. It is no longer appropriate to contrast an archaic sphere of production, anathematised by the reformers, with an enlightened agriculture worthy of

praise but not understood by the peasant masses. Modernity was able to slip in everywhere, including small-scale cultivation. It was able to supply a majority of peasants who were short of resources with substitute products and, failing that, to improve global productivity by getting everyone to work. The material foundations, the technical aspects inseparable from the social context explain a struggle for survival and the coexistence, to varying degrees of new and traditional methods. The principal elements of the eco-system – wood, water, soil – were then utilised as much for the peasants' own consumption as for sale, divided in varying proportion between self-subsistence and the market. The Auvergne peasant aimed at self-sufficiency through polyculture and the communal right to cut wood, while the vine-grower of the Beaujolais or the Bordelais had entered the world of the market, like the Ile-de-France farmer.

The economic geography of France revealed by study of the records of the *Maximum* during the Revolution shows an extreme diversity of articles habitually consumed and an extension in the spheres of sale of products in 1793.³⁶ We find a greater amount of trade than could have been supposed, even in very isolated rural areas, and production that is very heterogeneous in quality and definition – in short, a picture of 'what is commonly sold'. The isolation of regions has been reduced: if the areas from which they show their supplies differ greatly in extent and intensity, there are now few that are completely independent.³⁷ Paris is very dominant, but everywhere else the diversity of the products consumed passes through urban filters, by virtue of a rationality of provisioning which is partly national and strongly regional. The diffusion of products marketed and taxed during the Revolution enables us to perceive the encounter on the ground between the logics of supply in a marketing sphere and those of demand as observed in the geography of tastes and choices, which are not entirely superimposable. Local and national goods divide the market of exchange in accordance with variable lines of influence and force. While textiles, hardware, groceries and colonial drysalteries circulate all over France, the basic foodstuffs – wine, oil, salt – are less widely represented in the markets.

At the end of the eighteenth century the cartography of the *Maximum* reveals the country's productive forces, the unevenness of development and of trade, but also a regional and national geography of consumptions. In both cases we see that Paris and the North of France are winners, with the difference between town and country clearly expressed in the number of places where food can be obtained and in the variety of products on sale.