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978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

### *Commerce and Its Discontents*

On the eve of the Seven Years War (1756–63), a self-proclaimed French *philosophe* published a series of “Poetic amusements.” Amid odes to “The Triumph of Poetry among all Peoples,” “Love of the Fatherland,” and “Idolatry,” we find six pages devoted to “Commerce, a poem.”<sup>1</sup> Firmin Douin de Caen, the poet in question, has since disappeared from the historical record, yet at the time he was awarded a certificate of merit from the French Academy for these verses on the origins and progress of commerce in France. His poem ended on a promise: that commerce would render “the Empire of the Lilies even more flourishing, / The French happier and Louis more powerful.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly triumphant declarations about the potential of commerce abounded during this period, though not always in poetic form. But Douin’s ode represented the discourse of commerce in eighteenth-century France in yet another way: Its “hymn to commerce” also struck darker notes.<sup>3</sup> Midway through, Douin lamented the vile qualities of the slave trade, calling it a “*commerce odieux*.”<sup>4</sup> This characterisation of the

<sup>1</sup> Firmin de Caen Douin, “Le Commerce, poème. Qui a eu l’Accessit à l’Académie Française, en 1754,” in *Amusemens poétiques d’un philosophe, ou Poèmes académiques sur différens sujets, dont plusieurs ont été couronnés, et autres pièces fugitives* (Paris: Chez Cailleau, 1763). The author is identified in the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s catalogue. All translations are my own unless I have specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> “Rends l’Empire des Lys encor [*sic*] plus florissant, / Les François plus heureux & LOUIS plus puissant.” *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> For the term “hymn to commerce,” see Yves Benot, “Diderot, Pechméja, Raynal et l’anticolonialisme,” *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle* 41 (Jan.–Feb. 1963): 147.

<sup>4</sup> “Disgraceful objects of an odious Commerce, / hapless Negroes, what have you done to the Gods?” (“Déplorables objets d’un Commerce odieux, / Nègres infortunés,

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

commerce in humans as “odious” was but one example of a tension prevalent in eighteenth-century French political and economic thought, a tension between a triumphalist discourse of commerce and a foreboding sense of its destructive potential. This book aims to explore how this tension was intelligible to eighteenth-century French public intellectuals and how it manifested itself in their thought and texts.

As we shall see, Douin’s ode to commerce anticipated an attitude that flourished in the aftermath of France’s devastating defeat by the British in the Seven Years War. This conflict, which Winston Churchill deemed the “first world war,” strained the kingdom’s finances, ballooned its debt, and drastically reduced its overseas possessions.<sup>5</sup> It also generated a crisis of confidence among France’s public intellectuals centred on the humiliating decline in their nation’s power and glory, especially in comparison to victorious Britain’s perceived strength.<sup>6</sup> This study follows the

qu’avez-vous fait aux Dieux? ”). In Douin, “Le Commerce, poème,” 47, my emphasis. I have previously referred to this kind of commerce, the *commerce odieux*, as “commerce amer,” an antonym to *doux* which means, essentially, bitter or sour. But further research has confirmed that the term *odieux*, like the term *vil*, which also qualified commerce in eighteenth-century France, emanates directly from eighteenth-century texts, whereas *amer* does not.

<sup>5</sup> France lost more than three-quarters of its imperial holdings in North America and West Africa, and the French debt doubled, from 1,360 million to 2,350 million livres, between 1753 and 1764 as a result of the decision to finance the war with credit and not taxes. What is more, all of this loss occurred on the tails of the already devastating French losses in the preceding War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), of which the Seven Years’ War was in many ways an extension and an expansion. James C. Riley has argued against the grain of a general historiographical consensus about the war’s devastating repercussions for France, stating that France’s economic loss from the war has been grossly exaggerated by historians (using “dramatic language”), although he concedes that France did suffer a fiscal and political catastrophe. See James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 191, 225. Gail Bossenga highlights that the British debt at the end of the war was greater than that of France; however with the French monarchy’s mired fiscal institutions, the cost of servicing that debt was much greater for France due to its high debt servicing charges. See Gail Bossenga, “Financial Origins of the French Revolution,” in Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 37–66. Significant for our purposes here is the sense among public intellectuals in France during this period that the war had further crippled France’s financial situation. The authoritative account of that mindset is Michael Sonenscher’s “The Nation’s Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic,” *Political Studies* 42 (1994): 166–231, and, most recently, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For Churchill’s oft-quoted assessment of the Seven Years War, see Winston S. Churchill, *The Age of Revolution* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1957), 148–49.

<sup>6</sup> The term “crisis of confidence” comes from Riley, *Seven Years War*, 192. See David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

conceptual and ideological change the Seven Years War unleashed as it intersected with thinking about empire and what I will refer to here, in shorthand, as “Enlightenment critical practices.”<sup>7</sup> At the time, the discourse of commerce in France was interwoven with different discourses, of politics, of empire, of justice, of equality, and of wealth. But its most common loci were histories of commerce.<sup>8</sup> These histories offered a perspective on commerce that ran parallel to but remained interdependent with a burgeoning “science of political economy” – what many scholars from Franco Venturi to John Robertson have considered the “unifying discourse” of the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

This “science” was first identified as such in France by a group of theorists and practitioners clustered around the court of Louis XV in the 1750s.<sup>10</sup> In this period, as Voltaire famously quipped, “the nation” turned

MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), especially chapter 3, “English Barbarians, French Martyrs,” for the ways in which the French defined themselves against the English in this period.

<sup>7</sup> This clumsy phrase aims to synthesize the plethora of critical gestures, in texts and beyond them, that self-identified agents of the Enlightenment in France deployed to advance their political and moral projects to counter and transcend despotism, including promoting agency among their readership. Reinert Koselleck offered one of the most powerful accounts of the process of “critical ferment” in sway in the eighteenth century, though he famously drew disastrous conclusions from it. See *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (1955) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 10. Dena Goodman’s *Criticism in Action: Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) offers another influential account of the practices of social and political critique I consider. Jay Smith’s “Between Discourse and Experience: Agency and Ideas in the French Pre-Revolution,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 116–42 provides an alternative approach to agency which moves beyond discourse analysis to encompass experience. Because language and texts are the tools we use to convey our understandings of our biography, our politics, and our society, I am here interested in uncovering the way people related ideas to one another and what choices of words they made to do so, with the hope of arriving at a better understanding of the foundations of ideologies governing political and economic theory and practice today.

<sup>8</sup> Paul B. Cheney demonstrated this early on in “History and Science of Commerce,” 226, and later in chapter 3, “Philosophical History,” in his *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> For the ways in which John Robertson and Franco Venturi cohere Enlightenment thought about political economy in Scotland and Italy, see Charles Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Whereas Adam Smith later defined political economy as “a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator” (*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, 2 vols. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, eds. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976], book 4, chapter 1), it was in France that this scientific status was first attributed to political economy. See Philippe Steiner, *La ‘science nouvelle’ de l’économie politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998). Cf. Liana Vardi’s recent argument that in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

its attention away from “opera” and “theological disputes” in order to “reason about wheat,” as droughts and shortages focused public attention on the statutes regulating its supply.<sup>11</sup> Led by the king’s physician, François Quesnay (1694–1774), this mix of theorists and practitioners comprised the first group of thinkers to call themselves *économistes* since their stated aim was to think analytically, arithmetically, mechanically, and graphically about the national “oeconomy.”<sup>12</sup> Because they argued that agriculture ought to be the principal focus of attention in France, and thus that France should be ruled by (*-cracy*) nature (*phusis*), and not industry or international trade, they came to call themselves Physiocrats and their doctrine Physiocracy.<sup>13</sup> Their detractors referred to them otherwise, however – as a “sect” and a group of “small-frys,” to name but

fact Physiocracy’s “epistemological underpinnings ... tied it to the realm of imagination from which it sought to escape.” Liana Vardi, “Physiocratic Visions,” in Dan Edelstein, ed., *The Super-Enlightenment: Daring to Know too Much* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), 97.

<sup>11</sup> Voltaire, “Blé ou Bled,” *Dictionnaire philosophique in Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Chez Antoine-Augustin Renouard, 1819), 241. In the eighteenth century, *blé* was translated into English as “corn, or grain for bread.” Abel Boyer, *The Royal Dictionary, Abridged, In Two Parts: I. French and English, II. English and French*. Ninth edition. (London: n.p., 1755). I have opted for *wheat*, however, as it more accurately renders the sense of the term *blé* used by Voltaire into contemporary English, since *blé* is a subset of the broader term *grain*, also employed in eighteenth-century French. Voltaire’s sarcasm in this quote is best heard when the passage is read in its entirety: “Around the year 1750, the nation, satiated with verses, tragedies, comedies, opera, novels, dreamy stories, even dreamier moral reflections, and theological disputes about grace and convulsions, finally turned to reason about wheat. We even forgot about vines in order to talk but of wheat and rye. We wrote many useful things about agriculture: everyone read them, except the farmers.”

<sup>12</sup> Quesnay’s *Tableau oeconomique* (Versailles, 1758) offered the first graphic conceptualisation of the forces, both “destructive” (by which he meant consumption) and “regenerative” (by which he meant reproduction), circulating within and defining the national economy. Karl Marx described the *Tableau* as “an extremely brilliant conception, incontestably the most brilliant for which political economy had up to then been responsible.” *Theories of Surplus Value*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969–71), vol. 1, 344.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre-Samuel Du Pont de Nemours (1739–1817), Quesnay’s promoter (and renowned co-founder of the still trading Dupont Company), coined the term *physiocratie* in his compilation of writings entitled *Physiocratie, ou Consitution naturelle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain* (Leiden, 1768). As the editors of the recent edition of Quesnay’s works note, the “Doctor” never publicly acknowledged his texts. Du Pont’s collection of Quesnay’s writings lists the group of Quesnay’s followers as “the marquis de Mirabeau, Abeille, the abbé Baudeau, and Le Mercier de la Rivière,” but Quesnay is never mentioned by name. See Loïc Charles, Jean-Claude Perrot, and Christine Théré, “Introduction des éditeurs,” in *François Quesnay: Oeuvres économiques complètes et autres textes* (Paris: INED, 2005), xii. Quesnay’s first expressions of the thesis that agriculture was the most productive economic activity were published in his articles for the *Encyclopédie*: “*Fermiers*,” “*Grains*,” and “*Impôt*.” On the ultimate failure of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

5

a few of the taunts.<sup>14</sup> Most accounts of the history of economic thought have construed this antagonism to the *économistes* as a consequence of the challenge Physiocracy posed to the long-standing principles of the *système mercantile*.<sup>15</sup> Yet their accounts have borrowed, intentionally or not, the categorisation of “mercantilism” first conceived by its critics. For if ever “mercantilism” existed, it was more a political system than an economic one.<sup>16</sup>

The policies and institutions identified with mercantilism in France were developed by Louis XIV’s chief minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83), with the aim to counter Dutch global dominance. The operating premise of the Colbertist programme was that wealth was finite and measurable in bullion; the state should thus be the sole benefactor of trade and economic gain acquired mainly through resource extraction from the colonies.<sup>17</sup> This ideology has long been portrayed as bellicose – and it

“practice” of Physiocracy in France see Martin Giraudeau, “Performing Physiocracy,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 225–42.

<sup>14</sup> The terms *secte* and *fretin* are Frederick Melchior Grimm’s, the co-editor of the influential *Correspondance Littéraire*. See his report dated 1 January 1770: “There has arisen since some time, in the heart of this capital, a sect as humble as the dust where it was formed, as poor as its doctrine, as obscure as its style, but soon imperious and arrogant: those who make it up have taken the title ‘*Philosophes économistes*.’” And later: “I defy you to draw a single drop of genius from all of the apocalypses of the Quesnays, the Mirabeaus, the de La Rivière, and all of the fastidious commentaries of the Baudeaus, Roubauds, Dupont de Nemours and other economic small-frys.” *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot, depuis 1753 jusqu’en 1790* (Paris: Chez Furne, 1829), 322–23. Further jabs at the “sect” by the future *contrôleur-général* of France, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, and by Scottish moral philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith are discussed by Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 35–36. Possibly their greatest critic was Véron de Forbonnais, author of the *Encyclopédie*’s article, “Commerce.” See Peter Groenewegen, *Eighteenth-Century Economics: Turgot, Beccaria and Smith and their Contemporaries*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 255.

<sup>15</sup> As Céline Spector has shown, the term *système mercantile* can be first traced to Quesnay’s first convert, the marquis de Mirabeau, and his *Philosophie rurale* (1763), 329. Spector aptly locates the “birth certificate” of mercantilism as a concept in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, however: In book 4, Smith inveighs against the “popular” principle that money creates wealth, and that wealth consists of the abundance of gold and silver. See Céline Spector, “Le concept de mercantilisme,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* no. 3 (2003): 290.

<sup>16</sup> The influential reconceptualisation of mercantilism as a political theory (rather than simply an economic one) whose contestation structured the first critiques of the absolute monarchy was Lionel Rothkrug’s *Opposition to Louis XIV: The Political and Social Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 38.

<sup>17</sup> On the Colbertist strategies, see Pierre H. Boulle, “French Mercantilism, Commercial Companies and Colonial Profitability” in Blussé and Gastra, eds., *Companies and Trade*:

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

certainly was, since the notion of finite wealth sparked a long list of wars over scarce resources.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the Physiocrats were and still are characterised as pacifists, but also as “liberals,” because of their second abiding principle, that goods should circulate freely *within* France – just as blood does in the body, according to the surgeon Quesnay’s famous analogy.<sup>19</sup> This last principle did not originate with Quesnay, however. It was developed earlier by an influential *intendant de commerce*, Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay (1712–59), best remembered for allegedly coining the phrase still used to describe this ideology: “*laissez faire, laissez passer*.”<sup>20</sup> Gournay had earlier formed a circle of followers, charging them with the publication of works promoting competitive markets, and, especially, the translation of writings about commerce emanating out of England, seen as a model for France to emulate.<sup>21</sup>

*Essays on Overseas Trading Companies during the Ancien Régime* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1981), 106.

<sup>18</sup> To wit Colbert’s own statement of its bellicose nature, in a 1666 letter to his cousin, the intendant of Rochefort: “Le commerce est la source de la finance, et la finance est le nerf de la guerre.” Quoted in Céline Spector, “Le concept de mercantilisme,” 294. For one of the earliest such assessments, see Edmond Silberner’s still influential *La guerre dans la pensée économique du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1939), 263. With Terence Hutchison, I suggest that it is “inadequate and misleading” to “try to force” particular thinkers into “either one compartment or the other of a mercantilist–*laissez-faire* dichotomy.” Terence Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith: The Emergence of Political Economy, 1662–1776* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Contesting this characterisation early on, Samuel Hollander has argued that the Physiocrats were in fact “as much interventionist as the mercantilists.” See his “Malthus as Physiocrat: Surplus versus Scarcity,” in *The Literature of Political Economy: Collected Essays II* (London: Routledge, 1998), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Despite its currency today, this phrase belongs to the curious history of alleged attributions. Gournay never published the phrase, but its earliest printed attribution to him is most likely by one of Quesnay’s eminent followers, the marquis de Mirabeau (“the elder”), in an essay entitled “*Sur la cherté des grains*” published in 1768 in the newly founded Physiocratic journal, *Éphémérides du citoyen, ou Bibliothèque raisonnée des sciences morales et politiques*. Here Gournay’s phrase is referred to as a “maxim” of great use to those interested in the “science of good legislation relative to commerce,” a phrase anticipating Adam Smith’s definition of political economy. See *Éphémérides du citoyen* (Tome 7, 1768): 157.

<sup>21</sup> Gournay and his school, which originally included key figures in the history of commerce in France such as the abbé André Morellet and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, are still often identified as precursors to the Physiocrats though his project differed substantially from theirs. On Gournay’s aims and strategies see Sophus A. Reinert, *The Virtue of Emulation: International Competition and the Origins of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), especially 199–204; Antonella Alimento, “Entre animosité nationale et rivalité d’émulation: La position de Véron de Forbonnais face à la compétition anglaise,” *GIM* (2009): 125–48; Simone Meyssonier, *La Balance et l’horloge: La genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Passion, 1989); and a forthcoming volume by Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre, David

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

7

These ideas had been percolating since the 1720s, when a trend towards rethinking the relationship of commerce to colonialism emerged in France following the spectacular crash of the *Système* set up by charismatic Scottish financier (and gambler) John Law (1671–1729).<sup>22</sup> Called in by the regent Philippe duc d'Orléans (1674–1723) to repair the kingdom's finances, Law issued paper money to pay off the kingdom's debts and sought to strengthen state-run monopoly companies founded on colonial trade (to which we will turn in Chapter 4) by issuing their stock on the market. When the bubble then burst, Law's scheme crashed in a wash of panic and fortunes lost overnight. Yet it was followed in 1728 by the passing of a law in the same spirit – known as the *Exclusif* – which dictated that state companies had exclusive control over the colonial trade.<sup>23</sup> Both Law's *Système* and the contentious *Exclusif* spurred writings about the connection between the polity and the economy which have also been characterised as “liberal”<sup>24</sup> – from Richard Cantillon's *Essai sur la nature du commerce en general* (written in 1730 and published in 1755) to Jean-François Melon's *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734). Although scholars have recently sought to introduce new frameworks for understanding the origins of classical and neoclassical economics, the narrative which paints the easy transition from mercantilism to liberal and pacific economic theories has remained powerful.<sup>25</sup> Yet eighteenth-century

K. Smith, and Christine Théré, *Commerce, société et population autour de Vincent de Gournay* (forthcoming, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> The most comprehensive recent account of Law's life and theories is Antoin E. Murphy, *John Law: Economic Theorist and Policy-maker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> The still authoritative account of the *Exclusif* is Jean Tarrade's two-volume *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: L'Évolution du régime de "l'Exclusif" de 1763 à 1789* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972). Cf. Paul Cheney's important reinterpretation of the debates over the *Exclusif* in *Revolutionary Commerce*.

<sup>24</sup> On Cantillon, see Antoin E. Murphy, *Richard Cantillon: Entrepreneur and Economist* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> As Peter Groenewegen has noted, the view that Physiocracy was a “landmark in the beginnings of the science of economics” is widely held by “authorities as diverse as McCulloch, Marx, Marshall, and Schumpeter.” *Eighteenth Century Economics: Turgot, Beccaria and Smith and their Contemporaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 56. For alternative accounts, see Richard Whatmore, who has offered a compelling account of how the sense of decline that followed the Seven Years' War structured what would eventually become a republican discourse of political economy. See Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially chap. 2. Other approaches tending towards a more complex view of the origins of economics include *Reflections on the Classical Canon in Economics: Essays in Honor of Samuel Hollander* (Routledge, 2002), especially Samuel Hollander's own “‘Classical economics’: A reification wrapped in an anachronism?” 7–26.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)

approaches to the economy and to its political basis were more varied than what this dualist model quietens in its simplicity.

This book seeks to broaden our perspective on these early pronouncements on the connection between politics and the economy beyond this oppositional view. By adding French voices to the pioneering literature on the Anglophone origins of political economy and economics as disciplines, it proposes that their sources were more confused and contingent than generally portrayed.<sup>26</sup> Including works beyond the canon and not immediately identifiable as “political-economic” also encourages us to consider attitudes towards commerce as multiple.<sup>27</sup> We have forgotten that there was a cacophony to eighteenth-century writings about commerce – the contests, the range of preoccupations, and, most important, the imperial experience.<sup>28</sup> Building on the framework of Madeleine

<sup>26</sup> This study, and all studies of eighteenth-century ideas of commerce, is necessarily indebted to J. G. A. Pocock’s influential arguments first developed in *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), and articulated more fully in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Developing this approach further, with special attention to the Scottish Enlightenment, Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, along with Nicholas Philipson, Knud Haakonssen, and John Robertson, to name but a few, related the ideal of commercial humanism to the prevalent theories of natural law and classical republicanism. While the circulation of ideas across the Channel was continuous, some distinctions, or “exceptions,” do become apparent in the French engagement with commerce in the eighteenth century. Both Catherine Larrère and John Shovlin have, in turn, pointed to the overemphasis of the historiography of eighteenth-century France on the Physiocrats. Shovlin has also called for greater notice to be given to the “din of public debate on economic questions in eighteenth-century France.” See Catherine Larrère, *L’Invention de l’économie au XVIIIe siècle: Du droit naturel à la physiocratie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), and John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3. The authoritative accounts of early Physiocracy are still Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976) and Steven L. Kaplan’s *Bread, Politics, and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV*, 2 vols (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); for its legacy in the Revolution, see James Livesey, “Agrarian Ideology and Commercial Republicanism in the French Revolution,” *Past & Present* 157 (1997): 94–121.

<sup>27</sup> Mary L. Bellhouse offers such a model in her study of Rousseau’s *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire* and Montesquieu’s *Le Temple de Gnide*, “Femininity & Commerce in the Eighteenth Century: Rousseau’s Criticism of a Literary Ruse by Montesquieu,” *Polity* 13, no. 2 (1980): 285–99. Erik Thomson offers another example with his approach to uncovering economic thinking in seventeenth-century France. See especially, “Commerce, Law, and Erudite Culture: The Mechanics of Théodore Godefroy’s Service to Cardinal Richelieu,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68, no. 3 (2007): 409.

<sup>28</sup> Madeleine Dobie has recently provided a compelling way of understanding these varied models and ideologies as a comprehensive discourse of “colonial political economy.”



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

Anoush Fraser Terjanian

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Dobie and other scholars, this study seeks to open further discussion with approaches that have generally remained distinct from each other: the history of political thought, the history of economic thought, the history of empire, and the study of the European Enlightenment. It would be anachronistic not to do so, for in the eighteenth century these now distinct academic disciplines were recognised as mutually constitutive domains of inquiry. My engagement with them joins a growing chorus of voices contending that French imperial history cannot be considered a supplement to French national history but is rather a foundational, dialectical, and constitutive element of that history.<sup>29</sup>

*DOUX COMMERCE RECONSIDERED*

One tenacious phrase in particular still lies at the centre of much writing about eighteenth-century political and economic thought: *doux commerce*, taken to mean “sweet commerce” or “gentle commerce.” For

Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 206. This book only touches on the many insights provided by Dobie’s work. Her model is essential to this study in many ways because of its historical emphasis on and integration of the crucial roles of slavery and imperialism. Yet we can also note that a parallel track has been opened by international political economists with the call for a new “cultural political economy” which necessarily links politics, economics, and culture in its analyses. See the pioneering work in this field by Jacqueline Best and Matthew Paterson, eds., *Cultural Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> I build on Jeremy Adelman’s argument that histories of empire are “necessarily entwined” with histories of nationhood and thus offer a methodological and narrative prelude to Wilder’s account of the interwar French imperial nation-state. See Jeremy Adelman, “An Age of Imperial Revolutions,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008): 339, and Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20. With most recent works in the imperial history of France, Wilder begins by affirming the current (albeit slowly crumbling) refusal in French historiography and political discourse to recognise the living and constitutive character of France’s imperial system. Ann Stoler has referred to France’s “colonial aphasia” in reference to this phenomenon in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 14–15. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has accentuated the “silencing of the past” in the historiography of Haiti in particular; most recently, Madeleine Dobie has delved more deeply into the problem by uncovering the absence of representations of the colonial fact in eighteenth-century France. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) and Dobie, *Trading Places*, respectively. Moving beyond the imperial focus, this inquiry also shares in Sophus Reinert’s project to extricate a clearer image of eighteenth-century understandings of commerce from the still calcified assumptions about Enlightenment commitments to free trade. See Sophus A. Reinert, “Lessons on the Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Conquest, Commerce, and Decline in Enlightenment Italy,” *American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): 1395–425.

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978-1-107-00564-8 - Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought

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Excerpt

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academic and other commentators, this phrase is often used to summarize the celebration of commerce in the eighteenth century. Yet the story of *doux commerce* in France emerges as more complex when we pay attention to its historical specificity.<sup>30</sup>

In French, *commerce* (without the “sweet” modifier) has always carried a broad range of meanings. Its roots are Latin: *commercium* meaning “with *merx*” or “*mercis*,” meaning merchandise or the object of trade.<sup>31</sup> By the sixteenth century, the term had undergone a semantic shift to encompass social relationships.<sup>32</sup> The *Trésor de la langue française*, still the authoritative historical and etymological dictionary of the French language, begins by defining *commerce* as a series of human transactions and communications ranging from the exchange of ideas to sexual intercourse.<sup>33</sup> All major French lexicons and dictionaries of the eighteenth century began with this same definition.<sup>34</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, however, the phrase *doux commerce* has been bundled into causal narratives explaining the origins of political economy and classical economics. Perhaps the most iconic instance of this phenomenon can be traced to Karl Marx’s first volume of *Capital* in 1867. Marx drew on a cemented understanding of the term when

<sup>30</sup> To be sure, Laurence Dickey has offered the most comprehensive analysis of the *doux commerce* thesis and its various mobilisations in Hirschman and Pocock, yet the theorists to whom he refers are never specified beyond the canonical list of Smith, Hume, Constant, and Defoe. See Laurence Dickey, “Doux-Commerce and Humanitarian Values: Free Trade, Sociability and Universal Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century Thinking,” *Grotiana* 22–23: 272–83.

<sup>31</sup> Eminent linguist Émile Benveniste has shown that only in Latin did a fixed and stable expression exist to convey commerce distinct from notions of buying or selling. The origins of this vocabulary are difficult to trace, but Benveniste suggests an origin in the Greek *askhōlia* (“occupations”) and *prágma* (“thing”). The Romans adapted and transformed these terms to suit their adaptations and transformations of the institutions associated with them, leading to *negotium*, and, eventually, *commercium*. The roots of *commerce* are, thus, properly Roman since, for every other Indo-European language, commerce was a “trade without a name.” See chapter 11, “Un métier sans nom: le commerce,” in *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1969), 140–46.

<sup>32</sup> Oscar Bloch and Walther von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique* (Paris: PUF, 2008), 144.

<sup>33</sup> *Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789–1960)* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1977–80), 1118–19.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the articles “commerce” in the *Encyclopédie* (written by Véron de Forbonnais); in Furetière’s *Dictionnaire de Furetière* (1690); in Académie française, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1694); in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1743); and in Savary des Bruslons, *Dictionnaire universel de commerce* (1723, 1765).