

POLITICAL ECONOMY, THE STATE, AND REVOLUTION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE*

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Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006)

Among the stunning changes in material and intellectual life that transformed eighteenth-century Europe, perhaps none excited as much contemporary consternation as the twin-headed growth of a modern commercial economy and the fiscal–military state. As economies became increasingly based on trade, money, and credit, and states both exploded in size and forged seemingly insoluble ties to the world of finance, intellectuals displayed growing anxiety about just what kind of political, economic, and social order was taking shape before their eyes. Two important new books by Michael Sonenscher and John Shovlin, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* and *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution*, tackle these apprehensions and the roles they played in forging French political and economic writings in the second half of the eighteenth century. Both authors also take the further step of demonstrating the impact of the ideas they study on the origins of the French Revolution.

The two books continue an important recent development in eighteenth-century intellectual history, the study of ideas about commerce, political economy, and the like. They are, however, animated by different questions and tell separate, parallel stories. Sonenscher focuses on canonical thinkers and analyzes

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their writings on public debt, inequality, and the state. Shovlin studies the writings of mid-level intellectuals, their construction of a political economy of virtue, and the various transformations that discourse underwent. The books are also distinguished by their methods. Although both authors practice a version of “contextual” intellectual history, ideas and contexts interact in starkly different ways in the two texts. Sonenscher sets up an overarching intellectual context of concern among intellectuals that the era’s explosive growth of public debt would devastate states’ capacities to preserve their domestic prosperity and external security. This context then remains static throughout the book and frames Sonenscher’s analyses of the various thinkers he studies. Conversely, Shovlin locates the political economy of virtue within much more specific, and fast-changing, events of French political and economic life. His analysis focuses on how the discourse changed in response to that shifting context and, in turn, how the discourse affected the context. Read side-by-side, *Before the Deluge* and *The Political Economy of Virtue* complement each other’s historical accounts and demonstrate the relative merits of their respective approaches to the history of political and economic thought.

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Michael Sonenscher’s sweeping, challenging, and at times brilliant rereading of eighteenth-century French intellectual history takes as its starting point the age’s deep-seated anxieties about public debt. Unprecedented levels of state borrowing to fund warfare beginning in the late seventeenth century provoked profound disquiet about the long-term consequences of committing future tax revenue to pay for present-day military conflict. Booming public debt might lead, it was feared, to a state crippled by interest payments. Such a state would either collapse, fall prey to its rivals, or, more likely, declare a voluntary bankruptcy and purposely default on its debt. Voluntary bankruptcy amounted to confiscation of private property because the state would not pay back the resources it had borrowed. Furthermore, the state would emerge with newfound strength because it would possess the entirety of its future tax revenue (since none of it would still be committed to creditors) to promote domestic prosperity and external force.¹ The competitive nature of international politics would force other states to keep pace, setting off a chain reaction of property-usurping and power-enhancing voluntary bankruptcies. In the eighteenth-century political imagination, Sonenscher argues, public debt thus threatened either social collapse

¹ Debt service in the eighteenth century consumed proportions of state budgets that are unthinkable today. For example, France and Great Britain both paid as much as sixty percent of their tax revenue toward debt service at times in the eighteenth century.

or, in the case of a voluntary bankruptcy, to “make most types of private property the property of the state” and “give the state itself despotic power” (7). Little wonder that David Hume wrote, in 1752, “either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation” (quoted on 4). Little wonder as well that when the French monarchy announced in 1787 that it was on the verge of bankruptcy, the English traveler Arthur Young recorded in his diary that “bankruptcy” was discussed at a dinner in Paris in terms of whether it would “occasion a civil war, and a total overthrow of the government” (quoted on 65).

Before the Deluge is about how “this kind of vision of the future”—the catastrophes runaway public debt might bring about—“was registered in eighteenth-century thought, and, more specifically, about how it can be connected to the political thought of the period of the French Revolution” (2). “Connected” here is a euphemism for intellectual context. French intellectual history in the second half of the eighteenth century, Sonenscher contends, is best understood in the context of profound anxiety about public debt. The context was international, perhaps more British and specifically Scottish than French, and took shape in response to institutional change, notably the growth of the fiscal–military state.² However, while the latter phenomenon has been extensively studied, Sonenscher explains, “the much more lurid light of the eighteenth century’s nightmare vision of a revolution driven by the modern system of war finance itself. . . has barely been studied at all” (37–8).³ Sonenscher thus devotes the first half of chapter 1, titled “Facing the Future,” to demonstrating just how prevalent such predictions of catastrophe were in the eighteenth century. Once established, this overarching intellectual context frames Sonenscher’s analysis in the rest of the book. However, it largely recedes from the narrative and functions more as a looming backdrop that was always present for the great thinkers of the eighteenth century than as a continually active part of the story. As context, pervasive anxiety about public debt provides Sonenscher a hermeneutic key for rereading a remarkable number of eighteenth-century France’s most important political and economic thinkers, reconceptualizing the intellectual origins of the French Revolution and its initial radicalism, and outlining a far-reaching genealogical account of the system of representative government sketched by the Revolution’s most important political thinker, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès.

² On the fiscal–military state see, now classically, John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

³ The exception to this statement is the pioneering work of Istvan Hont, which Sonenscher generously acknowledges throughout *Before the Deluge*. Hont’s essays are now collected, with a sweeping new introductory essay, in *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

Sonenscher outlines Sieyès's system of representative government at the end of chapter 1 and then jumps chronologically backward and works through the system's different conceptual lineages in the remaining three chapters. The structure is unusual, but it allows Sonenscher to accomplish two important tasks. First, by explaining Sieyès's system immediately after he establishes the importance of anxiety about public debt—in fact, in the same chapter—Sonenscher directly positions Sieyès's system as a response to that problem. Second, by explaining Sieyès's ideas before working through their different intellectual pedigrees, Sonenscher brings coherence to the extraordinary diversity of thinkers he studies in *Before the Deluge*.

In one of the book's most surprising arguments, Sonenscher locates the proximate roots of Sieyès's system of representative government in the system of monarchy Montesquieu delineated in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Sieyès himself would have balked at the association, but Sonenscher nonetheless argues for a true “family resemblance” between their conceptions of government and even claims that Sieyès's system “is perhaps best described as a point-by-point reworking of Montesquieu's conception of monarchy” (94, 18). Sonenscher takes an interpretive cue from Sieyès's critics during the Revolution, a number of whom compared his system to Montesquieu's and mobilized arguments that had been made against *The Spirit of the Laws* (95–7). The real basis of Sonenscher's claim for filiation, however, is structural similarity: Sonenscher reads both Montesquieu's and Sieyès's political systems as constituted by two parts, a sovereign center flanked by an institutionalized extragovernmental social hierarchy that would play the role of an intermediary power. Both Montesquieu and Sieyès feared that a government unchecked by an intermediary power could turn despotic. On this front, they were both motivated by suspicion of sovereign power, which in the eighteenth century was inseparable from the problem of spiraling public debt. It should be noted that neither Montesquieu nor Sieyès wrote very much about public debt, but the overarching intellectual context Sonenscher establishes frames his analysis of their respective systems of government.

Although formally alike, Montesquieu's and Sieyès's respective systems differed in substance. Montesquieu's system of monarchy was made up of a hereditary monarch and a hereditary property-based nobility. Sieyès's republic would be constituted by a meritocratic government and a nonpolitical meritocratic social hierarchy, both of which would choose and promote their respective members through electoral schemes that were indebted to Rousseau's idea of graduated promotion. Sieyès's reworking of Montesquieu's system thus involved the substitution of merit for heredity as the means to choose the members of both the sovereign center and the extragovernmental social hierarchy. The extragovernmental part of Sieyès's system was only loosely sketched, but looked something like the Legion of Honor that was established in France in 1802 and

still exists today (in fact, Sonenscher suggests, the Legion of Honor emerged almost directly from Sieyès's ideas). It would "complement" but not "replace" the social hierarchies "generated by property, industry, and inheritance" (79). Sieyès's reformulation of Montesquieu's system thus produced a "dual hierarchy" (80), one within the government and one outside it, and both based on election and gradual promotion. The two hierarchies designed "a system of government that was able to limit its ability to swallow up private property but was still powerful enough to tax and spend" by establishing "as dense a set of obstacles as possible against the dangerously unpredictable effects of" unfettered sovereign power (76–7). They would also buffer the government from colonization by financial and social elites who "might get entangled with the financial and fiscal requirements of the state" (80). Sieyès never systematically explained his system, and, although its precise features remain somewhat cloudy, Sonenscher has performed virtuoso detective work piecing it all together.⁴

Sonenscher's argument that the intellectual roots of Sieyès's system lay in *The Spirit of the Laws* requires that he establish his particular interpretation of Montesquieu's masterpiece, which occupies chapter 2 of *Before the Deluge*, "Montesquieu and the Idea of Monarchy." Because Sonenscher provides his interpretation of Sieyès's system before his reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*, the chapter could easily have fallen into the trap of simply delineating those aspects of Montesquieu's ideas that foreshadowed Sieyès's system. Instead, Sonenscher provides an expansive, detailed, and dense reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*, its intellectual context, and its relationship with Montesquieu's two previous major texts, *The Persian Letters* and the *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*. The core of Montesquieu's conception of monarchy was the "monarch, a number of intermediate powers, and a set of fundamental laws" (133), a formula that broke with virtually every contemporaneous conception of monarchy and sparked an extensive debate about the nature of monarchy and "the nature and location of the real limits on sovereign power, particularly under conditions of war and debt" (103). The key to Montesquieu's system was establishing the monarch and the nobility, the intermediate power, as independent of one another and equally indispensable. "No monarch, no nobility; no nobility, no monarch," as he famously wrote near the outset of the text.⁵ Montesquieu achieved such an equal footing between

⁴ The reader who wants a fuller picture of Sieyès's system would do well to supplement *Before the Deluge* with the critical introduction Sonenscher penned for an edition of Sieyès's political writings he edited a few years ago. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, 2003).

⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge, 1989), 18. See Johnson Kent Wright, "A Rhetoric of Aristocratic Reaction? Nobility in *De l'Esprit des lois*," in Jay M. Smith, ed., *The*

the monarch and the nobility by assigning each one an independent historical lineage that served to deny either historical antecedence (thus sidestepping both the *thèse royale* and the *thèse nobilaire* that rivaled one another in the first half of the eighteenth century). This definition allowed Montesquieu to establish the monarch as a representative sovereign (in Hobbes's sense, Sonenscher claims) and simultaneously to build into monarchy's very nature real limits on the monarch's sovereignty without actually dividing sovereignty itself—the key point that Sieyès inherited from Montesquieu and would later build into his own system. Sonenscher does not fully draw the connections between Montesquieu's conception of monarchy and the problem of public debt, but the reader can connect the dots and understand that fear of a voluntary bankruptcy made it all the more imperative to limit the monarch's power.

By establishing a hereditary nobility at the heart of monarchy, Montesquieu made structural inequality one of modern monarchy's defining features—again breaking with virtually every other political thinker in eighteenth-century France and again providing Sieyès with a key insight that he would build into his own system. Inequality was part and parcel of the more famous “honor” that the nobility needed to be an effective intermediate power. It was “what made monarchy, uniquely, the type of government it was, giving it, as Montesquieu put it, its nature” (103). Structural inequality in the form of a nobility would furthermore free the state from public debt because the pressures of social emulation would create a national economy of high-profit, luxury-based trade that generated substantial tax revenues (obviating the need for massive state borrowing). “The dynamics of acquisitive emulation between the component parts of a rich, open, and highly stratified society would produce a number of different, but overlapping, markets to build up and maintain the wealth required for both domestic prosperity and external security” (169). Montesquieu thus envisioned noble inequality as the solution to both the political and economic sides of the problem of public debt. He made inequality a political and an economic virtue, a stance that, Sonenscher charges, set him apart from virtually every one of his contemporaries and has been almost entirely neglected by the typical scholarly portrait of “irenical moderation” (97) even though it emerged as one of the principle points of criticism against *The Spirit of the Laws* in the decades after the work's publication (again, Sonenscher takes an interpretive cue from contemporary criticisms).

The problem of public debt derived from, and was rendered all the more acute by, international power politics, or inequality between states. The third chapter of *Before the Deluge*, titled “Morality and Politics in a Divided World,”

French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches (University Park, PA, 2006).

turns to the visions of international trade and power politics articulated by François Véron de Forbonnais, the marquis de Mirabeau, and Rousseau during the “protracted argument” over the “normative content” of *The Spirit of the Laws* subsequent to its publication. For Forbonnais and others in the Gournay Circle of political economists, who figure as the “moderns” in this discussion, there could be “no way out of the logic of collective self-preservation” and states would have to mobilize every tool in their arsenal, including public credit (187). In contrast, and often in vehement disagreement, Mirabeau and the Physiocrats sought “to substitute the logic of collective reciprocity for the logic of collective self-preservation” (215) by refounding economies on a combination of agriculture and free trade that would allow states to move toward self-sufficiency—and thus peaceful reciprocity. Sonenscher here paints Physiocracy as an intensely moral doctrine that aimed through self-sufficiency “to see how it might be possible to have something like the modern world, with its large territorial states, prosperity, and culture, but to avoid having its self-defeating commercial rivalry, its deep-seated domestic and international divisions, and its wars” (253). The third party to this argument was Rousseau, who shared the Physiocrats’ moral critique of the modern world and pointed to the same solution: self-sufficiency. However, Rousseau did not believe that self-sufficiency was actually possible, and in the end offered no way out of the zero-sum game of international competition. Sonenscher thus argues in a cleverly illuminating juxtaposition that Rousseau shared with Mirabeau a common assessment of the modern world and the same solution, but shared with Forbonnais the conviction that the logic of self-preservation was inescapable and would always have to be the foundation of state policy (175–7). Rousseau had thus “come to a dead end” (253) and envisaged a world of states driven by international competition to increasing despotism at home and thus, as he put it in a famous letter to Mirabeau, “the most perfect Hobbism” (238–9).⁶ As in the chapter on Montesquieu, the problem of public debt does not figure prominently in this chapter, but the link is implicitly clear: it was international power politics that had provoked the cycle of state borrowing in the first place, and if international peace could be achieved then public debt might be curtailed or even eliminated. Thus the problem of public debt lurks in the background as the overarching context in which Sonenscher analyzes the writings of Forbonnais, Mirabeau, and Rousseau on competition between states.

The fourth chapter of *Before the Deluge*, titled “Industry and Representative Government,” turns to the series of thinkers in eighteenth-century France—Claude-Adrien Helvétius, Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot, Jacques Necker,

⁶ Mably appears in the chapter as a coda to Rousseau in large part to highlight Rousseau’s deep pessimism. Mably’s diagnosis was similar to Rousseau’s, but he pointed to natural sociability (which Rousseau rejected) as the way out of the maze.

Pierre-Louis Roederer, and Jean-Baptiste Say—who embraced economic modernity and sought to consolidate the ascendance of industry over agriculture. Collectively, their modern commercial outlook constituted the “real setting to which Sieyès’s political thought belonged” (260) even if they did not have the same tight internal coherence as those discussed in previous chapters (which Sonenscher acknowledges; 266). These thinkers offered a diverse range of lessons: Helvétius emphasized individual happiness, thus posing the right question even if he had provided the wrong answer; Turgot stressed the permanence of inequality, the importance of property in money, and the establishment of “a fairly stable hierarchy of ranks” that could be transformed into the “subordinate, dependent, and intermediate powers” of Montesquieu’s system (290); Chastellux and Necker pointed to the socially productive potential of public credit; Roederer highlighted the need to “identify the extraconstitutional sources of constitutional stability” in the social system (323); and Say wrote about industry itself. The composite conclusion Sieyès took away from this diverse array of writings was that the modern state would have to represent industry and commercially driven social hierarchies rather than older, premodern ones.⁷

Industry thus emerges in chapter 4 as the underlying principle that completed Sieyès’s reformulation of Montesquieu’s system. Industry would be the basis of modern, meritocratic inequality and serve as “the stabilizing principle of representative government in much the same way as Montesquieu had earlier identified virtue and honor as the stabilizing principles of republics and monarchies” (262–3). The chapter also reinforces Sieyès’s status as a disciple of Montesquieu: just as Montesquieu understood political forms in relation to their underlying principle, so did Sieyès. In Sieyès’s hands, however, that underlying principle moved closer to nineteenth-century political economy. Sieyès’s representative system can thus be interpreted as the joining together of two distinct lines of thought, one more strictly political and the other more focused on political economy. By “redesigning both the constitutional and extraconstitutional aspects of modern political societies” and moving beyond the “great normative and political systems that the eighteenth century had inherited from its past,” Sieyès formulated “the eighteenth century’s most elaborate attempt to find a way to deal with both the promise and the menace of public debt” (259, 371). Sieyès’s representative government was, in short, an adaptation of Montesquieu’s monarchy suited to the particular possibilities and dangers of the modern, commercial world. Sieyès’s system pointed ahead to the representative democracies of modern politics and some of their most profound questions:

⁷ The contributions of Roederer and Say were articulated at the same time as and after Sieyès had developed his system—perhaps part of the reason Sonenscher terms the intellectual context covered in this chapter a “setting.”

their “equivocation about sovereignty”; the all-important question of whether representative government is “the realization or the nemesis of democracy”; and, if representative government’s “underlying principle was industry, whether this entailed more, or less, inequality” (350, 358).

Sonenscher’s rereading of French intellectual history in the second half of the eighteenth century is a monumental achievement. But *Before the Deluge* is even more ambitious. Comprehending the depth of eighteenth-century anxieties about public debt also casts a whole new light on the intellectual origins of the French Revolution and the radicalism of 1789.⁸ “Intellectual origins” here should not be understood as the “causes” of the French Revolution. Sonenscher’s real concern is not how the various ideas he elucidates helped to bring about the Revolution by undermining the monarchy, destabilizing traditional institutions, or calling into question customary hierarchies. Rather, intellectual origins in *Before the Deluge* function more in the mode of what Bernard Bailyn and Keith Baker have called “ideological origins”: the origins of the conceptual frameworks (or ideology) that organize historical actors’ interpretations of political events—the meaning of those events to contemporaries—and thus shape their responses.⁹ The interpretive payoff of Sonenscher’s argument on this front is that the debt crisis preceding the French Revolution was not just the precipitate that opened the door to bigger, “real” political questions. The debt crisis framed the very meaning of the political questions and shaped the actions taken. “The radicalism of 1789, or, more simply, the difference between revolution and reform, is best understood in the light of” eighteenth-century fears about the potentially disastrous effects of a debt default (10). Recall the diary entry from the English traveler Arthur Young, quoted above. As Sonenscher paraphrases Young’s report, “either the crisis would be resolved by a royal coup against the state’s creditors, or, if it were not, continued vacillation would lead to an involuntary default and civil war” (66). Because of these nightmare scenarios, the seemingly more prosaic questions of state debt and tax revenue quickly became a question of whether a revolution in the very nature of sovereignty and state institutions was necessary. “From this perspective,” explains Sonenscher, “the political and constitutional part of the French Revolution”—that is, the summer of 1789—“might best be seen as the

⁸ It should be pointed out that, although the book’s subtitle refers to the “intellectual origins of the French Revolution” and the back matter describes it as “a major revisionist account of the French Revolution’s intellectual origins,” the phrase “intellectual origins” never appears in the text itself.

⁹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); Keith Michael Baker, “On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution,” in *idem*, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

last of a number of eighteenth-century attempts to think about how to devise a way to avert Armageddon” (66).

Sonenscher phrases this argument in the ironic language that the political and constitutional revolution of 1789 was designed to forestall the Terror (“In imaginative terms, 1794 came before 1789” (37))—ironic because of the recent historiographical tradition that locates the origins of the Terror in the ideas of 1789.¹⁰ The ironic language, however, is in some ways misleading since the Terror as a specific historical event did not occur in the manner predicted by the apocalyptic imagination of the eighteenth century. The ironic language is also potentially confusing since Sonenscher explicitly questions the hypothesis that “the principles proclaimed in 1789 . . . set revolutionary politics on course for the Terror” (37) and just as explicitly refrains from advancing an explanation for just how the Revolution descended from the lofty ideals of 1789 to the furies of 1793–4—that is, refrains from explaining the origins of the Terror. Sonenscher’s argument here would have been more effective had he not used the terms “Terror” and “1794” and restrained his language to something closer to that of the “lurid nightmares” he so evocatively details.

Sonenscher’s reinterpretation of the politics of 1789 is an enormously important historiographical intervention. One of the most intractable questions for historians of the French Revolution has been just how a debt crisis turned into a revolution. *Before the Deluge* offers a compelling reinterpretation of the meaning the debt crisis held for contemporaries and thus of the actions taken (it also provides a new context for reading Edmund Burke’s famous prediction of “fire and blood,” which, Sonenscher claims, “was simply one of a much larger number of eighteenth-century anticipations of Armageddon” (32)). While the kind of tight linking to the actual politics of the so-called Prerevolution of 1787–8 and then the rapid-fire events of the summer of 1789 is carried out not in *Before the Deluge*, but rather in a major two-part article published in 1997,¹¹ the argument advanced in *Before the Deluge* nonetheless provides an illuminating new context for reconceptualizing the radicalism of 1789.

Sonenscher’s claims on this front amount to an argument for the importance of intellectual or ideological origins to the historian’s craft. Because the problem of public debt constituted the conceptual framework that gave meaning to the political crisis, historians who want to understand the meaning of that crisis to contemporaries have to understand very specific, sometimes arcane, debates in eighteenth-century intellectual history. The politics of those years cannot

¹⁰ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Foster (Cambridge, 1981).

¹¹ Michael Sonenscher, “The Nation’s Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic: The French Fiscal Deficit and the Politics of the Revolution of 1789,” *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997), 64–103, 267–325.

be reduced to generic models of contestation for political power or noble–non-noble conflict. Intellectual origins are crucial to understanding political processes and outcomes because those processes are understood through conceptual frameworks that shape, even structure, the outcome.

Positioning thinkers and political actors within such an overarching intellectual context, however, does run the risk of constraining those thinkers, blinding us to authors' full creativity, and losing the multiplicity of texts' meanings—not to mention ignoring the ways the context might have changed, whether in response to those authors' writings or to outside events. These are familiar issues in intellectual history and Sonenscher, through painstakingly detailed analysis, largely avoids the reductive readings of texts his method risks. Still, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that he overprivileges anxiety about the problem of public debt when reading certain thinkers, notably Montesquieu. The textual evidence specifically linking Montesquieu's system to the problem of public debt is thin and the magisterial reading of Montesquieu's conception of monarchy could easily have been framed within a less specific political-philosophical paradigm, such as the problem of the state. Was concern about public debt really a necessary spur to think about limiting sovereignty without dividing it? Similarly, by positioning Sieyès's system of representative government as a response to the problem of public debt, Sonenscher discounts the possibility that Sieyès's thought changed over the course of the French Revolution, especially in response to the Terror. As much as Sonenscher strives to acknowledge and weave in the full density of contexts that shaped eighteenth-century political thought, he has explicitly strongly favored one to the exclusion of others and thus privileged one set of meanings over others. In this regard, *Before the Deluge* is something of a "tunnel history," as J. G. A. Pocock once described his classic *The Machiavellian Moment*.¹²

A related methodological question arises from the book's architecture. The book is emplotted as a genealogy of Sieyès's political system (although Sonenscher never uses the term "genealogy"). As noted earlier, Sonenscher presents Sieyès's ideas in the introduction and the second half of chapter 1, and then jumps chronologically backward to elucidate "the sequence of moves that, in a not particularly stylised way, can be said to have led from Montesquieu to Sieyès" (19). The book thus reads a bit like a narrative of thinkers who are reworking each others' frameworks in order to travel the journey from *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748 to Sieyès's system sketched in the 1780s and 1790s. As with the overarching framework of public debt, such a genealogical account runs the risk of straitjacketing certain thinkers. For example, can Montesquieu really

¹² J. G. A. Pocock, "Reconstructing the Traditions: Quentin Skinner's Historians' History of Political Thought," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3 (1979), 95–113.

be described as using Hobbes's concept of a representative sovereign? Would Montesquieu have accepted this statement? The effort to establish a genealogy of Sieyès's system, which most certainly did rely on Hobbes's categories, may in this instance have overdetermined Sonenscher's characterization of Montesquieu's system.

Despite these caveats, *Before the Deluge* is an extraordinary work. Collectively, the four chapters, each of which stands as an independent essay, offer a stunning mapping of eighteenth-century political thought and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution. Building on and extending Istvan Hont's work on the Scottish Enlightenment, Sonenscher has constructed a virtually new paradigm for understanding eighteenth-century French intellectual history that leads to truly important rereadings of some of the century's most important thinkers as well as some of the most enduring questions about the French Revolution. His command of the sources is remarkable. Unfortunately, a final warning to the reader is necessary. The book is not an easy read. The prose is difficult and the level of detail can be numbing. The reader is shown the forest tree by tree, if not branch by branch. It is a cliché, but an apposite one: the level of detail makes it extremely difficult to keep an eye on the big picture, and Sonenscher does not do as much as he might to explain how all the details, fascinating and instructional as they all are, fit into the overarching argument. To be perfectly clear, *Before the Deluge* is a hard book. However, it is more than worth the effort. It is a tour de force of eighteenth-century French political and economic thought that, as the back blurbs promise, should be "a paradigm-shifting book."

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Public debt was not the only problem of political economy facing eighteenth-century French intellectuals. John Shovlin argues in his lucid, elegant, and concise *The Political Economy of Virtue* that "for many French elites who engaged with political economy in this period, the central problem was one of balancing wealth and virtue," of simultaneously promoting economic prosperity and fostering moral virtue (6). This imperative will be familiar to intellectual historians of the eighteenth-century anglophone world,¹³ but the discourse Shovlin studies was not simply a transplant from across the Channel or the Atlantic. The "political economy of virtue" developed in distinctively French terms and in response to specific changes in French political and economic life. *The Political Economy of Virtue* narrates the emergence, mutations, and impact of this discourse from the middle of the eighteenth century through to the French Revolution. The book

¹³ Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983).

stands as both complement and contrast to *Before the Deluge* as it highlights a different side of French political economy and employs a different approach to intellectual history.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Shovlin examines a different stratum of intellectuals than does Sonenscher. His protagonists are not the “original minds” of the eighteenth century but the “unremarkable” authors “who wrote commonplace works” of political economy (4). The quantity of writings on political economy exploded in France in the second half of the eighteenth century, and just as important to Shovlin as the authors of these works is the reading public who digested their books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Predominantly “middling elites anxious about the effects of economic transformation on their own social position and on the nation’s capacity to compete in the international system”—members of the provincial nobility but also urban professionals and office-holders—this public, Shovlin argues, constituted “the center of gravity of French political economy” (4). The difference between Shovlin’s and Sonenscher’s casts of characters is highlighted by a key verb in Shovlin’s lexicon, “represent.” The authors in Sonenscher’s book “reworked,” “demonstrated,” and, most of all, “argued,” while those in Shovlin’s book just as often “represented.”

Shovlin’s narrative begins around the middle of the eighteenth century, when “a marked resurgence of disquiet about luxury” began to be felt in French intellectual, cultural, and political life (26). The immediate sources of this resurgence were the growing influence of plutocratic financiers in French court and society, and the rise of the marquise de Pompadour to the position of royal mistress in 1745, which was taken to be emblematic of the financiers’ rising power. “Anxieties about luxury” were felt most deeply by the middling elite and then “permeated much of the French political economy produced in the second half of the eighteenth century” (14). At the same time, the most important authors on political economy of the moment, the circle around Gournay, sought to stimulate commerce in order to increase France’s national wealth and shore up its place in the international sphere. These two trajectories—one a “politics of virtue” deeply hostile to luxury, the other seeking to augment national wealth—joined together, however uneasily, to form a new “political economy of virtue.” The new ideology combined “incongruous bedfellows” and “accepted the premise that wealth is the foundation of the power of states” while remaining “equally committed” to curtailing luxury and cultivating patriotic virtue (48).

France’s devastating defeat in the Seven Years War (1756–63) opened the gate for the new political economy. “Patriots” blamed luxury for sapping France’s strength and remade political economy “in their own image” (50): both wealth and virtue had to be revived. To square the political economic circle of simultaneously promoting national wealth and fostering virtue, proponents of “patriot political economy” turned to agriculture. Mirabeau’s *L’Ami des hommes, ou Traité de*

la population (1757), which condemned luxury and celebrated agriculture as the only means to regenerate France, was the “paradigmatic expression of this new perspective” (51). Other key moments in the emergence of patriot political economy were a craze for agricultural improvement that swept through France in the 1750s (“agromania”), the heated debate between the abbé Coyer and the chevalier d’Arcq over whether the nobility should participate in commerce, and a proliferation of translations and imitations of works in the English Georgic tradition in the 1760s. Collectively, these developments added up to “Constructing a Patriot Political Economy,” the title of chapter 2.

France’s humiliation in the Seven Years War was so complete that “Regenerating the Patrie,” as chapter 3 is titled, became an unquestioned national priority and patriot political economy came into official favor. Agricultural improvement, or agronomy, enjoyed the patronage of Pompadour and the powerful duc de Choiseul. Administrative support, however, split the reform movement into three camps: those who accepted agronomy on official terms and worked through royal agricultural societies to raise the profile of farming; those who called for fundamental reform, especially in regard to taxation and the power of plutocratic financiers; and the Physiocrats, who, in an effort to accommodate themselves to the monarchy, limited their agriculture-based reform program to advocating large-scale commercial farms and the liberalization of the grain trade. The second of these camps called for the most far-reaching reform of the existing financial and political system. The Seven Years War had left a crushing public debt, with debt service in 1764 equaling approximately sixty percent of the state’s annual revenue. Middling elites bore the highest tax burden, and, to make matters worse, their taxes were in effect going straight to the very plutocratic financiers they believed to be corrupting France, since the debt service was paid to the state’s creditors. “Parasitic financiers” were thus perceived to be “getting rich on the backs of their fellow subjects” and the system registered a “crushing” “political cost” (94). The result was an explosive debate in 1763–4 over France’s financial system that, although it did not accomplish real reform, was “conducted, to a considerable extent, within the framework of a political economy pervaded by antipathy to luxury, hostility to financiers, and calls for the regeneration of agriculture” (100)—in other words, within the framework of the political economy of virtue.

Shovlin’s account of the resurgence of anxieties about luxury and then the emergence of an agriculture-centered patriot political economy in the first three chapters demonstrates just how much his methodological approach differs from Sonenscher’s. He privileges immediate developments such as the rise of Pompadour and the Seven Years War over the type of broad-based intellectual paradigms that Sonenscher favors. While Shovlin provides a brief overview of “the luxury debate” in France before the mid-eighteenth century, the real analytic

weight lies in conjunctural developments. His preferred context is events and their impact, not overarching intellectual frameworks.

The political economy of virtue changed dramatically in the 1770s, again in response to political events. Choiseul's dismissal in 1770, Turgot's rise and fall, and the eventual ascension of the banker Jacques Necker to the all-important post of controller general in 1776 meant that partisans of agriculture-centered reform lost their connections in government and a more modern commercial and fiscal orientation triumphed within the halls of power. Patriot political economy, in turn, changed direction and the decade witnessed a proliferation of "representations validating commerce as a patriotic and honorable social activity" and painting merchants and entrepreneurs themselves "as virtuous and public spirited" (119, 128). The result was a novel intellectual formation, which Shovlin dubs "patriotic commerce." Patriotic commerce severed luxury from commerce's essential nature and reconceptualized it as specifically aristocratic (the chapter is titled "Patriotic Commerce and Aristocratic Luxury"). Whether or not commerce produced insidious luxury became a question of the political environment, and luxury thus became a specifically political problem—a "momentous shift in emphasis" (119). Attacks on luxury began to specifically target the wealthy upper nobility of Paris and Versailles—the capital and the court—who were increasingly represented as a "money-hungry class whose interests were contrary to those of the nation" (132). The new focus on financiers and courtiers was specifically "anti-aristocratic, as opposed to anti-noble," an important sharpening of anti-luxury sentiment that signaled "rife" anti-aristocratic attitudes among provincial nobles in the 1770s (120).

The analytic privilege Shovlin assigns to immediate political and economic context is nowhere more clear than in this chapter. He attributes a momentous epistemological rupture—the conceptual divorce of luxury from commerce—to conjunctural political developments. While the description of changing political circumstances is deft and illuminating, it is hard not to wonder if such a wholesale epistemological shift can be explained by short-term shifts in high politics. This was a profound development that, it would seem, demands a deeper explanation. Such political realignments had happened before and contemporaries undoubtedly assumed they would happen again. To be sure, Shovlin points to Gournay's role in laying the conceptual foundations for this shift and discusses other events, such as the controversy over the French Indies Company in 1769, but a more sustained discussion of just why political-economic discourse responded so immediately to political circumstances would have been helpful. Does Shovlin want to claim that intellectual production normally mirrors political developments so precisely? Balancing context and intellectual creativity is one of the most difficult challenges facing the intellectual historian, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Shovlin flirts with reductionism in this chapter

by assigning such interpretive weight to short-term political developments, even powerful ones, to explain deep intellectual developments.

One of the striking aspects of this part of Shovlin's story is his claim that just as anti-luxury became increasingly anti-aristocratic at the hands of middling nobles, those selfsame "middling nobles had lost control of the anti-luxury critique" and would eventually come to be "represented as vectors of *luxure*" themselves (120). By the crisis of the late 1780s, all nobles, not only those connected to the capital and the court, were accused of "being part of a corrupt plutocracy inimical both to the prosperity and the virtue of the nation" (154). The provincial nobles who had done so much to elaborate the political economy of virtue were now portrayed as standing on the other side of the fence, the side that benefited, rather than suffered, from the financial system. This was partly because the discourse of patriot political economy had become "authoritative" by the mid-1780s (so much so that even financial speculators were employing it against each other) and partly because when the middling provincial nobles were in fact forced to choose sides in the spring of 1789 when electing delegates to the Estates General, they manifestly threw in their lot with the nobility as a bloc—the elections expressed an unmistakable "desire to reassert as clearly as could be the dividing line that separated the nobles from the nonnobles, a dividing line that, in social terms, had been profoundly blurred by financial and commercial wealth" (167, 176). Soon the crisis was understood as a conflict between nobles and non-nobles, between those who consumed and those who produced. In the more radical attacks on the Second Estate, nobility itself "was represented as antithetical to the public welfare" (180).

Shovlin's analysis of the prerevolutionary crisis and the role of the discourse of patriot political economy in "turning financial crisis into Revolution" (152) stands as one of the book's central arguments. It is also the aspect of Shovlin's narrative that dovetails most cleanly with Sonenscher's parallel story. Like Sonenscher, Shovlin asserts that the "deficit crisis" was not merely a "trigger" to revolution (and cites one of Sonenscher's articles on the topic as the "notable exception" among historians; 169). As Shovlin describes it, the debt crisis was understood as "a symptom of disorders that extended deep into the political economic fabric of the monarchy, disorders amounting to a modernized version of a luxury crisis" (169). As a result, contemporaries thought the monarchy's financial problems could only be solved through "a sweeping, comprehensive program of national regeneration" that would tackle far bigger issues than simply balancing the books (169). Nothing short of some kind of revolution would be able to solve the true causes of the debt crisis.

Shovlin's argument, especially when coupled with Sonenscher's, is compelling. Shovlin's explanation of how the threat posed by the debt crisis was understood by contemporaries is not as precise as Sonenscher's, which has both disadvantages

and advantages. The disadvantage is that Shovlin cannot point to a specific perceived threat along the lines of an apocalyptic scenario in the same manner as Sonenscher. The advantage, conversely, is that the reader has developed a strong understanding of the deep sense of malaise and alienation regarding the French political–financial system that had permeated the “middling elites” by the crisis years of 1787–9. Moreover, Shovlin’s analysis also contributes to understanding the origins of the Revolution in the sense that Sonenscher does not address: the political economy of virtue had most assuredly called into question the reigning political and financial complex of power. Taken together, the two books advance a compelling argument that historians need to reconceive the importance of the debt crisis in shaping the political imagination of those who gathered at Versailles in 1789.

The debt crisis, of course, did in fact lead to revolution. In the final chapter of the book, Shovlin takes up three final transformations of the political economy of virtue during the tumultuous years between 1789 and 1799. The first transformation saw the pseudo-triumph and then inversion of patriot political economy: its essential goals were achieved with the economic reforms of the early Revolution, but the problem of reconciling wealth and virtue persisted, only turned on its head. The problem became “not luxury, but its inverse”—the possibility that political revolution would “precipitate a collapse of wealth-creating capacity” and thus put “wealth rather than virtue” at risk (182). This anxiety was manifested most prominently, Shovlin argues, in fears of an “agrarian law” that would legislate widespread property redistribution along the lines associated with the history of the Gracchi in classical Rome.¹⁴ Fear of an agrarian law grew so intense that in March of 1793 it was decreed that anyone who so much as proposed one would be subject to the death penalty. In Shovlin’s view, the revolutionaries’ “fixation” with the agrarian law expressed “an anxiety that their own anti-luxury measures might go too far, that in trying to regenerate virtue, they might destroy the mainsprings of national wealth” (192–3). This analysis is extremely suggestive, but necessarily speculative. Shovlin’s second major argument about the fate of patriot political economy during the Revolution is that, as the Revolution radicalized, the “anti-oligarchic perspective” was once again redeployed, this time by the rising Parisian radical sans-culotte movement against the non-noble middling elites who had emerged as the Revolution’s political leaders. “Just as nonnoble elites used it against its original progenitors, the provincial nobility, so it could be used in turn against those same nonnoble elites by less exalted social strata” (199). The third transformation Shovlin traces took place during the final years of the Revolution, the Directory, when, he

¹⁴ On the broader history of early modern discussion of an agrarian law among intellectuals see Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge, 2004).

claims, a “politics of stabilization” turned to agronomy and political economy in a manner redolent of patriot political economy.¹⁵ The chapter nicely concludes Shovlin’s narrative and gives a strong sense of the different directions the discourse of patriot political economy—and thus, perhaps, any political discourse—could be pulled during a moment of intense political upheaval.

The Political Economy of Virtue, in sum, charts the emergence and subsequent transformations of the political economy of virtue over the latter half of the eighteenth century. In charting these mutations, virtually decade by decade, Shovlin characterizes the discourse of patriot political economy as “modular.” He does not define this term, but the implication is clearly that a discourse can be deployed in a manner that has strayed far from its original intention—never more apparent than when, in the 1780s, middling nobles became the target of the very patriot political economy they had first forged. Shovlin does not discuss on a theoretical level the question of just how far an unhinged discourse can travel from its original moorings without losing its constitutive features, but his analysis and the choice of the term “modular” suggest a capacious but not boundless sense of how much a discourse can change while remaining the same discourse. It furthermore suggests that the political economy of virtue’s conceptual unity came as much from the negative project of attacking luxury and plutocracy as from the positive program of fostering both wealth and virtue. Here again the contrast between Shovlin’s and Sonenscher’s approaches is revealing. Whereas Sonenscher’s book is a history of how intellectuals responded to an essentially unchanging problem, set up as an overarching intellectual context, Shovlin’s is the history of a changing discourse. Whereas Sonenscher privileges an intellectual paradigm, Shovlin is much more concerned to tell a story of intellectual change.

Intellectual historians who read Shovlin’s book will probably want more on the intellectual and conceptual lineages of the ideas that occupy center stage in his narrative. While chapter 1 gives a short but illuminating overview of the intellectual background to the “luxury debate,” it is hard not to think that Shovlin could have done more to link the concepts he discusses both to the “original minds” he explicitly does not study and to the longer-term intellectual history of the problem of luxury. For example, it is striking, even for a book on anti-luxury rather than pro-luxury writers, that Bernard Mandeville comes up in just one paragraph (and does not appear in the index). Likewise, Pierre Nicole, the French Jansenist who so importantly influenced Mandeville, is entirely absent. More seriously, to my mind, Shovlin never explicitly engages with the notion

¹⁵ I have advanced a divergent interpretation of the political culture of these years in *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, 2008).

of “classical republicanism,” which has had such a profound influence on early modern intellectual history. This is especially curious given the centrality of anxiety about luxury to early modern classical republicanism and how much his “patriots” sometimes sound like “classical republicans”: “Patriots sought to create a political community in which citizens subordinated their private interests to the welfare of the public, a polity stirred by the same spirit of civic virtue that had characterized the republics of the ancient world” (5). Shovlin may well disagree with those scholars who claim that there was an identifiable early modern political language called “classical republicanism,” but it is surprising that he did not at least address the interpretive paradigm, if only to signal his disagreement. It is all too easy, if not churlish, to fault an already wide-ranging book for what it does not discuss, but I do think Shovlin could have done more to connect the discourse of patriot political economy to broader currents in early modern intellectual history.

As should be clear by now, the same cannot be said about political, economic, or social context. Shovlin has an exceptional command of those contexts, and an enviable talent for summarizing dense complexes of events and highlighting their most important features. In truth, the discussions of politics in *The Political Economy of Virtue* are an integral part of the story, much more than context provided to situate intellectual developments (likewise the book is, on balance, more engaged with the historiography of eighteenth-century France than with that of intellectual history as it is traditionally identified). Reading Shovlin’s book alongside Sonenscher’s is especially instructive in this regard. The reader learns the specific numbers on eighteenth-century debt and taxation from Shovlin (92) and not from Sonenscher. Similarly, the reader learns who the major players in eighteenth-century French finance were from Shovlin and not from Sonenscher. Sonenscher’s preferred context is the overarching framework of anxiety about public debt, not the specific ins and outs of French political and economic life. The benefits and drawbacks of each approach are apparent. The reader of *Before the Deluge* comes away with a strong sense of how Sonenscher’s story fits into a diachronically expansive and Atlantic-wide story of the development of modern European political thought alongside the rise of the modern state. However, the book is rather thin when it comes to more immediately contemporaneous institutions and their impact. The reader of *The Political Economy of Virtue*, on the contrary, will have a detailed and nuanced understanding of eighteenth-century France, but a weaker sense of how the story fits into more expansive ones in European political and intellectual history. In sum, while Sonenscher could have put more flesh on the bones of his story (the specific numbers on debt are one obvious example), Shovlin’s strong emphasis on the impact of immediate political developments risks obscuring the bigger intellectual picture.

Before the Deluge and *The Political Economy of Virtue* jointly advance a major reinterpretation of the questions and discourses at the heart of French political and economic thought during the second half of the eighteenth century and cast the intellectual origins of the French Revolution in a significant new light. They furthermore pose for intellectual historians outstanding examples of two influential approaches to the history of political thought and thus the choices its practitioners face. The two books should help to define future research agendas for some years to come.