

**Science, Technology, and Reform in the French Countryside:
The Role of Provincial Officials in the Eighteenth-century Press**

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In 1773, Denis Louis Joseph Robin de Scévole, barrister at the *parlement* of Bourges, *président des gabelles* and *secrétaire du roi*, wrote his first letter to the editor of the regional newspaper, the *Affiches du Poitou*. In it, he decried untested techniques that healers in the countryside practiced. Taking it upon himself to advocate for “our” peasants, he argued, “in this enlightened century, one must carry light into the midst of their huts; one must uproot superstition, ignorance and charlatanism.”¹ He urged his fellow readers to make the best medical remedies known to “this class of men occupied with our nourishment, this portion of humanity that is the most numerous, the most necessary, and yet the most neglected.”² For Scévole, such aims were particularly urgent, because he believed the peasantry constituted a substantial, indispensable part of France — and they did essential work to feed the kingdom.

Scévole’s letter reflected a larger discourse circulating among French elites in the late eighteenth century. Since the 1750s, the physiocrats, known to their contemporaries as the *économistes*, had begun arguing for the significance of agriculture in creating renewable wealth for the state. Physiocracy was first coined in 1767 by Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours as “rule of nature.”³ Dupont’s *physiocratie* described the doctrine developed by François Quesnay and

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¹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Nov. 4, 1773.

² *ibid.* The concern with the need to provide reliable medical information to the peasantry echoes the work of Samuel Auguste Tissot, whose books and pamphlets circulated widely in the late eighteenth century. See Singy, “Popularization of Medicine.”

³ Fox-Genovese, *The Origins of Physiocracy*, 9-10.

Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, which emphasized that agriculture alone produced a surplus. While physiocracy has largely been treated as an economic theory, recent work by historians has demonstrated that for its contemporaries it was much more than that. The physiocrats radically reimagined natural right theory.⁴ They developed a new understanding of the role of imagination and reason in human understanding — a reformulation that had consequences in economic, social and political thought, but also in the elaboration of a new aesthetics.⁵ Indeed, physiocracy, along with orientalism and ethnography, was one of many pre-revolutionary discourses popular in elite circles, especially during the 1750s and 1760s.⁶

In part, physiocracy was popular for pragmatic reasons. Reform-minded monarchs and their bureaucrats expressed an openness to economic theories that served their own fiscal goals. The key figures of the physiocratic movement were, after all, embedded within court life.⁷ Physiocracy was also popular for its moral aesthetics, which focused on the material and moral improvement of mankind, which Michael Sonnenscher describes as a project “to bring about the recovery of a ruined world.”⁸ Most agronomists, political economists and reformers did not participate fully in physiocratic philosophy and aesthetics, but many did share an interest in finding practical solutions to improve everyday life.⁹ Nevertheless, interest in reform, especially where it concerned agriculture, animal husbandry and household management remained popular among French elites throughout the 1770s and 1780s. Perhaps the enduring interest in such themes was a reflection of the nature of physiocratic thought itself. As Dan Edelstein and Sonnenscher have suggested, while the political, legal, economic and institutional component parts of physiocratic thought worked together, they were not necessarily adopted wholesale, even by the proponents of physiocracy themselves.¹⁰

By the 1770s and 1780s, the discourse of reform had shifted to what E. C. Spary has characterized as the practice of *économie*, which she describes as both a moralizing and rationalizing impulse designed to maximize and better manage resources. *Economie* could be exercised in a range of contexts from one’s personal conduct, to the management of one’s farm, to the organization of the state.¹¹ Peter Jones has elaborated on such reform impulses through the development of ‘how-to’ knowledge that proliferated in agricultural manuals and other print matter. This print matter spurred on notions of progress: that Nature’s secrets could be “unlocked and adapted to man’s own purposes,” and that elites, including savants, landowners, bureaucrats and even monarchs, had a role to play in applying human reason and innovation to agricultural improvement.¹² It is the contention of this essay that the French information press served as an important locus for the development of such ideas, forming a key vector for the circulation of practical knowledge. The letters by savants and bureaucrats like Denis Robin de Scévole, reveal the ways that the press shaped the discourse of *économie* and utility in the last decades of the Old Regime.

⁴ Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 101-104.

⁵ Vardi, *Physiocrats*, 3.

⁶ Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime*, 424-25. Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 109.

⁷ Vardi, *Physiocrats*, 40-42.

⁸ Sonnenscher, “Property, Community, and Citizenship,” 466; Sonnenscher, “Physiocracy as a Theodicy,” 338.

⁹ Vardi, *Physiocrats*, 9. Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes*, 367-8.

¹⁰ Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*, 109; Sonnenscher, “Property, Community, and Citizenship,” 466-68.

¹¹ Spary, *Feeding France*, 9-10.

¹² Jones, *The Agricultural Enlightenment*, 9.

In these same decades, the French domestic press grew, as printers throughout France began to publish short weekly newspapers under the title “Annonces, Affiches, et Avis divers.”¹³ The publications, known as *affiches*, covered a range of content that included advertisements, short announcements, and articles covering themes from literature and the arts, to science and medicine, to philanthropy and the law. The *affiches* also featured letters to the editor.¹⁴ Letters were set apart from the articles with a separate heading “à l’Auteur du Journal” or “au Rédacteur du Journal”, and the published missives followed epistolary norms in their organization and tone. Moreover, they reflected a diverse range of voices, writing styles, and levels of education. In content, letters overlapped with the issues covered in the rest of the paper. Indeed, letter writers actively referred to the particular articles, letters, or authors that had inspired their response.

Such letters are particularly remarkable, because more than half of the writers who penned them signed their names or gave an indication of their social position, and in doing so participated in a public sphere that was particularly diverse.¹⁵ The majority of the letter writers were elites: members of the nobility, or of the liberal professions (especially doctors and lawyers). Some of the individuals who signed letters were quite prominent figures indeed. Jérôme Lalande and Pierre Beaumarchais, for example, both wrote letters to the editor. But many of those who signed were lesser-known doctors, lawyers, or businessmen who did not otherwise publish in their lifetime. Many writers also identified themselves as corresponding secretaries of academies or other learned societies. Yet not all of the letters were penned by elites; craftsmen, farmers, and domestics also wrote letters. Indeed, it is the range of professions and social positions of people who penned letters that makes these newspapers such a unique sphere of sociability.

While some correspondents wrote in repeatedly (like Scévole) most writers engaged in a dialogue — they referenced the particular article or letter that had sparked their interest, and they wrote to the paper to question, qualify, or contest the content the paper had published. This is especially significant, because studies of the francophone press and its role in the public sphere have demonstrated national and international papers offered little room for debate, and at best provided competing views from rival political interests. Historians of the international press have thus concluded that political discussions about newspaper content happened in person, if at all.¹⁶ The *affiches*, and their publication of letters to the editor in particular, provided a unique and vibrant space for discussion among readers. The readers wrote letters on a wide array of topics, including medicine and science, literature and the arts, history and grammar, public works and social welfare.¹⁷ Based on a sample drawn from publications in eight towns over five years of publication in the 1780s, letters on agronomy appeared in approximately a tenth of the letters published.

¹³ Historians of the press have studied the evolution and content of the Old Regime press.

¹⁴ While previous work has mentioned the presence of letters in the *affiches*, they have remained little studied. The frequency of publication varied. In some towns like Bordeaux, letters appeared only a few times a year, while in Poitiers, the editor published letters consistently. In Paris, where the first daily newspaper appeared, the number of letters published was much greater. The number of letters typically published in a given numéro of an *affiche* varied, but usually one or two letters appeared.

¹⁵ Some letters were written pseudonymously, though it seems not nearly as frequently as in England and America. Their pseudonyms were usually descriptors of their social position — a widow, a farmer, etc. Occasionally book or theater reviews were signed by “un ami” of the theater or artists. Latin pen names were not nearly so common.

¹⁶ See, especially, Burrows, “The Cosmopolitan Press, 1760-1815.”

¹⁷ For a sense of the range of subject matter that letters published in the domestic press discussed, please see Andrews, “Between Auteur and Abonné.”

Among the administrators who penned letters to the *affiches* were mayors, *intendants* and subdelegates; even when they did not author letters, such figures appeared as key agents in the letters of their fellow reformers. For example, one letter relayed the actions of the *intendant* in Nancy, who had provided the funds necessary to improve the road between Nancy and Custine, which often flooded, drowning travelers on the highway. He provided 300 *livres* to a local *seigneur* for the improvement of the road, or the building of a bridge, “if it was considered more useful.” The actions of the “*Magistrat bienfaisant*” were motivated by the *intendant*’s sense of responsibility to those he governed, “to the conservation of the king’s subjects and to the good of humanity.”¹⁸ Tax collectors, inspectors and secretaries also contributed correspondence to the local paper, which tended to concern their interest in improving production and, in turn, generating state revenues. Officers from the military also contributed their perspective to the *affiches*. As a particularly prolific writer, Scévole offers an interesting case study within a much larger group of savants and officials. From his letters and a larger corpus of correspondence penned by savants and administrators in the late eighteenth century, we may gain a sense of the scope of change that reformers envisioned in the 1770s and 1780s.

Savants like Scévole and his contemporaries sought to bring *lumières* to the countryside, and they argued that the press had an essential role to play in the endeavor. As early as 1772, Scévole wrote a letter to the editor to share agricultural advice.¹⁹ He wrote avidly to the *Affiches du Poitou* in the years that followed. For him, the press was to serve as an accurate, useful public record. In his request that the editor publish his letters, he situated the newspaper as “destined only to educate, so one must, as much as one can, correct any error that could mislead.”²⁰

State administrators and minor officials in the 1770s who wrote to the *affiches* echoed Scévole’s sentiments and articulated the press’ responsibility in practical change. They defined the press as a repository of useful knowledge dedicated, as one writer put it, “to the progress of the arts and sciences, and to the good of humanity.”²¹ Such notions of improvement had grown into a patriotic duty by the late eighteenth century — a sentiment echoed in the letters to the editor.²² Provincial administrators also linked the press to savant and state institutions. For example, when he wrote to the *Affiches du Poitou* in 1775 about the *Académie* in his town, the mayor of La Rochelle addressed the editor as a *confrère*, and thanked him for “your work and the use of your *lumières* for the good of humanity.”²³ Letters like this one underscored the connection between the provincial *affiches* and provincial administrators, who described their shared efforts to employ knowledge in the service of the public. Their appeals to the greater good emphasized their association with the Enlightenment as a practical and dialogic endeavor — one in which the

¹⁸ *Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, Aug. 23, 1781. This letter is the only description of travelers drowning on the stretch of highway, so it is possible that the author took some license to emphasize the impact of the intendant’s contribution to public works.

¹⁹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Feb. 8, 1776. When Scévole wrote to the *Affiches du Poitou* to share his advice on the same subject, he explained that he had used the name of one of his farmers in a 1772 advice letter. This is an exceptionally rare instance where a reader admitted to writing a letter to the editor under another person’s name.

²⁰ *Affiches du Poitou*, Feb. 8, 1776.

²¹ *Affiches de Troyes*, Aug. 13, 1783. A similar sentiment appeared in the *Affiches de Toulouse*, Nov. 22, 1786.

²² Jones, *The Agricultural Enlightenment*, 9.

²³ *Affiches du Poitou*, Jun. 6, 1775. A letter published in the Marseillais paper, *le Journal de Provence* by a *capitaine de dragons* also references this alliance between administrators, academies, and the paper in his critical review of the newspaper, *Journal de Monsieur*, by l’Abbé Royou. He explained that the editor Royou was making waves with women, the academies, his own confreres: “en régentant ainsi chaque littérateur, & même les Académies, Monsieur l’Abbé fait soupçonner qu’il ne sera jamais membre d’aucun de ces Corps Littéraires, qui éclairent la Nation.” *Journal de Provence*, July 26, 1782.

government, the press and the academies were all engaged. As the subdelegate of the intendance of Poitiers described it, the role of the editor was, “to instruct your compatriots in all that can be useful.”²⁴

Some administrators were even more explicit in identifying who was to benefit from their ‘how-to’ correspondence. In 1781, the subdelegate from the intendancy of Saint-Maixent opened his letter to the editor with the following injunction: “Every citizen whose talents are recognized as useful has not only the pleasure, but also the duty to communicate to the public observations that may be useful to the fortune of individuals.” His particular letter concerned animal husbandry, and he suggested *laboureurs*, a group he characterized as “men so essential to the state,” would find his letter especially helpful.²⁵ *Laboureurs* were part of a middling group of peasants who usually owned a plough and plough team (the term *laboureur* itself came from *labourer*, to turn the earth or to plow).²⁶ But the reality of their economic conditions varied by region, and the usage of the terms *fermier*, *laboureur* and *cultivateur* in the eighteenth century did not uniformly conform to such distinctions.²⁷

The subdelegate’s letter was emblematic of the how-to literature of the late eighteenth century. In it, he first underscored the responsibilities of a citizen: those with useful knowledge had a duty to communicate to the public. In this way, his letter echoed literature on agricultural improvement that framed reform as a matter of patriotic and moral duty.²⁸ Second, he identified agricultural workers as particularly important to the vitality of the state. Agriculture and agricultural workers were given a place of prominence in the paper as essential to the state’s well-being.²⁹ Patriotic language that linked the press and the state continued to appear throughout the 1780s. Indeed, this notion of the editors as patriots committed to the public good was echoed in a letter to the *affiches* in Compiègne. After reading a few editions of the local paper, a military officer reflected that the editors were “friends of good literature, zealous for the glory of the homeland.”³⁰

Furthermore, officials extended the patriotic duty of the press to the marketplace. In his reflection on the success of the *Affiches de Poitou*, Scévole argued that the presence of provincial administration, and the role of industry, had together enabled the newspaper to flourish.³¹ Indeed, according to Scévole and others, the local administration, the marketplace and the press would thrive when they worked in concert. Writers throughout the kingdom echoed the notion that the paper had a role to play in the market. For example, a letter to the Marseillais paper by a *receveur* concerned with the distribution of powders and saltpeter adopted a similar tone in his address to the editor: “One of the purposes of your newspaper, sir, is to publicize anything that might interest commerce.”³² In this way, letter writers echoed the literature of agricultural enlightenment, when

²⁴ *Affiches du Poitou*, Oct. 23, 1777. This particular letter was concerned with remedies for the disease known as Panaris.

²⁵ *Affiches du Poitou*, Jan. 25, 1781.

²⁶ Most *laboureurs* typically owned enough land to support themselves, in contrast to the *fermier* who had to rent his land. Goubert, *The French Peasantry*, 110.

²⁷ Bouton, *The Flour War*, 48-49.

²⁸ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 7.

²⁹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Jan. 25, 1781.

³⁰ *Affiches de Compiègne*, Feb. 5, 1786.

³¹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Dec. 27, 1781.

³² *Journal de Provence*, Feb. 5, 1784.

the relationship between agriculture, industry and commerce was opened up for examination.³³ Indeed, the majority of scholarly attention that the *affiches* have received focuses on their role in the marketplace.³⁴

In addition to correspondence connecting the paper to the aspirations of the academies and local administrators, writers also identified the *seigneur* and the parish priest as partners in the transmission of useful information.³⁵ Indeed, the social professions of men writing letters to the editor, and the audiences that they identified as their intended audience align closest with the “vectors of knowledge transmission” identified by Peter Jones.³⁶ Writers sometimes included a short aside at the conclusion of their letter, requesting the *curé* or *seigneur* keep a copy of the information enclosed. *Curés* wrote letters to the editor to share the results of their experimentation with crops, and to provide reports on the state of the harvest in the fields around their parish.³⁷ A review of the signatures of letters on agricultural subjects reveals that while *curés* regularly wrote letters on agriculture, public health and animal husbandry, seigneurs either did not write to the paper, or they chose to do so anonymously. Landowners like Scévole or the Chevalier de la Cressonniere wrote to the *affiches* to share a technique that they had implemented among the farmers on their estate, but published letters by reform-minded landowners appear rather exceptional. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, few *seigneurs* resided in the community where they owned land.³⁸ Historians of the French Revolution have argued that over the eighteenth century, seigneurialism became increasingly delegitimized in the eyes of the people. Debates over exactly when this shift took place and what factors drove it continue to attract the interest of historians, who have produced rich regional studies.³⁹ Nevertheless, cooperative relationships between landlords and their tenants prevailed — even among absentee landlords — especially in the Paris basin.⁴⁰ Indeed, the burden of the seigneurial system on the peasantry was uneven, and it was by no means the only source of agricultural reform. While reformers who penned letters to the editor appealed to seigneurs as persons with the power to transmit useful knowledge, the responses of seigneurial lords in general to the the suggestions printed in the newspaper are unknown.

Calls in the newspaper focused on how to implement reform and why such reform was necessary. Political economy garnered public interest in the *affiches*, and readers argued that

³³ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 15.

³⁴ See, especially, Jones, “The Great Chain of Buying;” Fialcofschi, “Le ‘Journal de Paris’ et les arts visuels;” Censer, *The French Press*; Takats, *The Expert Cook*. French historians of the *affiches* have focused on the evolution of the press over time. See, especially, Martin, *La presse régionale*, and Feyel, *La presse en France*. For the most exhaustive collective study of the *affiches*, see Feyel, *L’annonce et la nouvelle*.

³⁵ *Affiches du Poitou*, Nov. 18, 1779. *Affiches de trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, Sept. 9, 1779. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, chap. 3.

³⁶ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 57-77.

³⁷ See, for example, *Affiches de trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, Dec. 1, 1785; *Affiches du Poitou*, Aug. 17, 1786.

³⁸ McPhee, *Revolution and Environment*, 28.

³⁹ On the question of the timing of the shift in attitudes toward seigneurial authority, see, especially Doyle, “Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?” For studies of the growing friction between *seigneurs* and communities in the Aude, see McPhee, *Revolution and Environment*; Péronnet Fournier, *La Révolution dans l’aude*. For studies of seigneurial reaction in Burgundy, see Root, *Peasants and King in Burgundy*; Hayhoe, *Enlightened Feudalism*.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society*, 187-92. Hoffman’s work has demonstrated that a number of factors related to the tax system, and political and social factors, made absentee landlordship advantageous in Old Regime France. There is substantial evidence that peasant families remained on the same farms for long spans of time, suggesting greater cooperation between peasants and seigneurs.

spreading knowledge to the countryside was essential to the wellbeing of French farmers and to the French state. In one illustrative letter on this theme, Scévole asked his fellow readers to imagine the situation of the French farmer from the vantage point of a *laboureur*'s son, who, after "seeing his father's grip weighed down by taxes, unhappy, missing even the bread that his condition should assure him of more than anyone else," renounces agriculture. Scévole argued that the willingness of a young farmer to walk away from his craft would be "a desertion so damaging to the cultivation of our land, and consequently to the state, of which agriculture is the mother." For Scévole, the only solution was to continue to bring the results of agricultural experiments to the public's attention in an effort to "spread useful truths and gather the fruit we may."⁴¹

His description of the conditions of farmers in the countryside stepped away from idealized literary depictions of the peasantry and instead shed light on the economic injustice farmers experienced. He critiqued the burden of taxation under which the peasantry lived, and he suggested that these were conditions a rational man would escape if he could. For Scévole, the question that preoccupied him was how to keep farmers committed to agriculture, because their labor was critical to the health of the state.

The letters to the editor demonstrate that the efforts to puzzle out what ought to be done to improve agriculture were tried out in a piecemeal, incremental fashion. Most of Scévole's letters to the *Affiches du Poitou* in the 1770s and early 1780s reflected his desire to improve the lives of cultivators by sharing information from his own experience. He raised questions about the effect of feed, rather than climate, on the behavior of livestock.⁴² He wrote a letter on how to nourish bees throughout the winter.⁴³ He explained his hypotheses on why insects and caterpillars were so prevalent in the summer,⁴⁴ and he contributed news he thought beneficial to the peasantry. He sent in a report on three different diseases that were spreading among cattle in the Gastine.⁴⁵ In the following year he urged the editors to republish a report from the *Mercur de France* on rabies cases in Saintonge that were purportedly cured with an omelet recipe, which he enclosed in the letter.⁴⁶ He also wrote on the economy of the home with letters on laundering practices, bed bug removal and the ill effects of painting one's home too frequently.⁴⁷ Such letters fit within the larger practice of *économie* — an impulse toward a rationalized and moral society that extended from the home to the field. In his letter on bed bug removal in particular, Scévole drew his readers' attention to the divergent circumstances under which the peasantry and landowners lived. He asserted that while the wealthy had plenty of ways to eradicate them, workers like *vignerons* and *laboueurs* were especially afflicted by the pest.

In his attention to the condition of the peasantry, Scévole was not alone. A certain Lieutenant General Curault writing to introduce new wheat cultivars asserted, "everyone knows how tied the peasant is to his old routines, that he repels any difficulty, and that to make him adopt a new cultivation technique, one must demonstrate very clearly its advantage."⁴⁸ If he was to have any hope of the peasantry adopting his wheat, he argued they must be properly educated ("bien

⁴¹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Mar. 14, 1776.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1774.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1777.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 10, 1780.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Oct. 26, 1778.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Nov. 18, 1779. Certainly, the rabies cases were not cured by omelet. Significantly, the preoccupation in this letter is the possibility of helping one's fellow man, not with validating the results of the remedy.

⁴⁷ On laundry, see *ibid.*, Dec. 11, 1777; May 20, 1779; on bed bugs, see Apr. 10, 1777; on paint, Jun. 12, 1777.

⁴⁸ *Affiches de l'Orléanois*, Jan. 23, 1784.

instruit”) on the bitter flavor of the variety and how to dilute it properly.⁴⁹ As these examples show, state officials characterized the peasantry both as a traditional group resistant to change, and as a population fundamental to the French state. The trope of the traditional, unenlightened peasant persisted, at least in part, because peasant cultivators resisted new crops and techniques. However, their resistance was not owing to lack of *lumières*, but rather to material and economic constraints that discouraged farmers from taking risks — crop failure remained a very real source of anxiety, and the cost of grain transport overland remained prohibitively high.⁵⁰

Scévole’s contemporaries also wrote to the paper with their observations and suggestions for improvement. Their letters tended to focus on three main themes: the first was securing the food supply and providing nutrition; the second focused on husbandry and sought to optimize production through how-to advice and incremental change; and, the third theme was the impact of climate on the food supply.

Administrators and tax collectors concerned with the kingdom’s food supply wrote letters debating the access to and nutritious value of a range of staple foods, but the chief concern was the availability and nutritional content of wheat. As early as 1780, Mougeon, a *receveur* and *controleur des Fermes* in Raon l’Etape wrote to the *Affiches de Metz* to ask for the paper’s help in sharing recipes for bread made without wheat flour.⁵¹ One particularly enthusiastic *intendant*, Maillart du Mesle, offered a thesis on how best to avoid food shortages. Many *affiches* were closely monitored by *intendants*. The *intendants* tended to have access to and control over the provincial newspapers’ content. In some cases, the editors would insert a *note du rédacteur* after a government official’s letter, indicating that the letter had been printed by the *intendant*’s request. Maillart du Mesle outlined the process of drying, roasting and storing grain so that it could be kept for future years. He had tested the technique in Bordeaux and in the colonies; he had even sampled bread made in 1780 with grain harvested in 1774 and 1775, and he assured his fellow readers that it was excellent.⁵² Still other officials turned to new staple crops, like the potato. In addition to nutrition advice and recipes, officials commented on the conditions of the growing season and the effect it would have on the potato crop.⁵³ In some regions, fields were set aside for potato crops that could then be donated to the poorest in the parish.⁵⁴ Interest in the potato’s cultivation and nutrition value was rather widespread and extended well into the revolution. As Mougeon the *receveur* put it, providing useful information to improve the situation of the cultivator was essential, because “the good of the homeland must touch all of us equally.”⁵⁵

The second theme in the correspondence adopted a somewhat different approach: how-to and advice letters on increasing harvests. One of the earliest letters in this vein appeared in the *Affiches du Poitou* in 1773, when a *receveur* suggested an effective fertilizer for the plants cultivated in the region, which had increased the yield in his fields by two and a half times. He also underscored the particular role of the paper, which he described as a “collection of that which is useful to the city-dweller and the villager;” in short, the newspaper was an essential avenue for circulating useful knowledge.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, a *receveur* suggested a new threshing technique, which he declared would be a great source of savings for the *fermier* and the *laboureur*, whose

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jones, *The Agricultural Enlightenment*, 92; Kaplan, *Bread, Politics, and Political Economy*, xxix.

⁵¹ *Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, Mar. 30, 1780.

⁵² *Journal de Paris*, May 6, 1781.

⁵³ *Affiches des trois Evêchés et de Lorraine*, Jan. 4, 1781.

⁵⁴ *Journal de Paris*, Apr. 11, 1787.

⁵⁵ *Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, Mar. 30, 1780.

⁵⁶ *Affiches du Poitou*, Oct. 21, 1773.

preparation of the soil and distribution of fertilizer had until now been delayed by the length of time they spent threshing.⁵⁷ He explained to the editor that he wished to announce his method, which was “at the same time simple and economical” directly to *cultivateurs*, and he invited them to write to him if they had any questions about the technique he outlined.⁵⁸ Whether any cultivators read the paper and implemented the advice found there remains an open question. But Peter Jones’ and Joel Mokyr’s studies of print media on agricultural innovation suggest that while most publications remained in savant circles of landowners and administrators, some knowledge did spread to farmers through personal contacts, reading circles and print.⁵⁹ By the late eighteenth century, small innovations made their way into practice; information circulation was extensive, and the press was part of this process.⁶⁰

One of the liveliest how-to discussions in the press centered on the introduction of a new cultivar of buckwheat known as *bled noir de Tartarie* (*Poligonum Tartaricum*). Responding to a series of announcements circulated by a M. Martin, letter writers from Troyes, Orléans and Poitiers wrote in to comment on the merits of the new crop.⁶¹ Writing to the *affiches* in Poitiers, the Chevalier de la Cressonniere offered a testimonial of sorts, as the first in his province to implement cultivation.⁶² In a letter to the *Affiches de l’Orléanois*, Lieutenant General Curault presented a thorough list of the advantages of implementing this new crop, especially its higher yield, along with a list of its drawbacks, which the writer assured his fellow readers were rather minor. For his part, he thought the largest impediment to its widespread adoption was its bitter taste.⁶³ A writer to the paper in Troyes identified the same problem, and he suggested one could cut the bitterness of the wheat by mixing it with other varieties of grain — like rye, for example — when preparing bread. He ended his letter by leaving it up to the farmers, themselves, to decide whether such a trade-off was worthwhile: “I don’t doubt that you will hasten to take part in the public good with me, by inserting in your paper the present letter, so that the *cultivateurs propriétaires* may judge my report in its entirety for themselves, and obtain the seed of this precious grain.”⁶⁴ The letters penned by agronomists were thus emblematic of the forum of letters to the editor more broadly: writers contributed practical knowledge for the public good, and then they left it to the reading public to weigh the merits of their argument.

A final theme of letters on agricultural subjects concerned the impact of climate on harvest conditions. These letters all appeared in 1787, during a particularly bad winter. The mayor and town consuls of Frontignan wrote to the *Affiches de Montpellier* to report on the effects thunderstorms had had on the muscat harvest.⁶⁵ The Toulousain paper printed a similar report on the damage the harsh winter had caused to trees in the region.⁶⁶ In the *Affiches du Dauphiné*, a letter published in April advertised techniques to increase the hardiness of fruit and olive trees that had suffered so much the previous winter.⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid., Aug. 28, 1777.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 100. Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, 186.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 106.

⁶¹ *Affiches de Troyes*, Feb. 25, 1784; *Affiches de l’Orléanois*, Jan. 23, 1784; *Affiches du Poitou*, Apr. 21, 1785, May 26, 1785.

⁶² *Affiches du Poitou*, May 26, 1785.

⁶³ *Affiches de l’Orléanois*, Jan. 23, 1784.

⁶⁴ *Affiches de Troyes*, Feb. 25, 1784.

⁶⁵ *Affiches de Montpellier*, Sept. 29, 1787.

⁶⁶ *Affiches de Toulouse*, Jan. 17, 1787.

⁶⁷ *Affiches du Dauphiné*, Apr. 13, 1787.

For the amateurs and reformers who wrote to their local paper, agricultural preoccupations coalesced with their interests in the natural sciences, especially plant biology, chemistry and veterinary medicine.⁶⁸ Scévole weighed in on such interests when he posed questions concerning natural philosophy to the editor and to his fellow readers. In August 1778, he asked whether plants received nutrients by their leaves or their roots. Unaware of the correct answer, Scévole asked the editor to circulate his question to the *physiciens* of the province via the *Affiches*.⁶⁹ Throughout the autumn, the editor published a series of responses to his query.⁷⁰

But Scévole's particular area of interest was in the natural history of the region, a subject about which he had read a great deal and about which he wrote avidly. He brought his summaries of books, his ponderings about the work of Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon, and observations of his own to the *affiches*; and he invited his friends and fellow readers to contribute to the discussion in the paper. Among such letters, he showed a particular fascination for the prevalence of small shells found in the chalky soil in Tourain.⁷¹ Where had they come from? Was this land once the bottom of the sea? In this arena as with his letters concerned with agriculture and animal husbandry, Scévole expressed an optimism characteristic of the age that he and his contemporaries possessed the tools to comprehend the natural world. As he put it, the phenomenon he sought to understand "has nothing that cannot be explained totally naturally, and without the use of paradoxes that would shame the *siècle éclairé* in which we live."⁷² The *Affiches* published a series of Scévole's letters on this topic, along with the responses of a certain M. de la Sauvagère, *chevalier, militaire* and *ancien directeur en chef dans le corps militaire du génie* who had published a book of natural history on the subject. For Scévole and his contemporaries, participating in the Enlightenment was a process of observation and interpretation, and an optimism that humankind could uncover the laws of nature.

Indeed, exchanges between Scévole and his interlocutors were part of a larger effort in the 1770s and 1780s undertaken by savants and bureaucrats to expand agricultural knowledge through innovation that expanded to discoveries of minerals, metals and gases. Through observation and experimentation, they sought to construct what Peter Jones has called "an economy of portable knowledge."⁷³ Like many other readers, Scévole relied on the press as a site "where good citizens gather each day to record all that could tend toward public instruction and the good of humanity."⁷⁴

Letters to the editor serve as a touchstone of the mentalities of eighteenth-century French readers. One central preoccupation of the correspondence published in the *affiches* was the significance of the countryside and the critical role of agriculture for the French state. Savants and government officials articulated the press as a repository for useful knowledge destined to serve the public good; and they linked the paper's goals of utility, economy and humanity to key institutions in provincial life: the academy, the *seigneur*, the *curé* and the market. The content of their correspondence on agricultural reform reveals that by the 1770s and 1780s, few writers adhered fully to physiocratic principles, or to idealized notions of *la belle nature*. Instead, their suggestions were practical and the changes they imagined incremental. Their how-to letters offered advice about tested products and techniques. The press acted as a critical conduit to work out practical problems. Indeed, for the readers of the *affiches*, agricultural reform was situated within

⁶⁸ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 30; Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes*, 366.

⁶⁹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Aug. 27, 1778.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1778; Nov. 5, 1778; Mar. 18, 1779; Mar. 25, 1779.

⁷¹ *Affiches du Poitou*, Apr. 20, 1775; Dec. 7, 1775; Sept. 19, 1776; Sept. 26, 1776; Oct. 3, 1776; Oct. 10, 1776.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Sept. 19, 1776.

⁷³ Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*, 162.

⁷⁴ *Affiches du Poitou*, Oct. 26, 1778.

a more widespread practice of observation and experimentation at the heart of the Agricultural Enlightenment. While such conversations took place in a range of print publications and social spheres, the forum of letters to the editor afforded readers throughout the kingdom a key locus for debate and exchange.

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