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John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue, Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2006). Xi-265 pp. ill. \$39.99 (cl) and \$25.00 (pb). ISBN 0-801-4447-99 (cl) and ISBN 0-801-4741-83 (pb).

Review by Liana Vardi, University at Buffalo.

The nobility is back as the collection edited by Jay Smith testifies.[1] With his contribution to that volume, John Shovlin shows himself an active participant in this revival, and this present book is an extension of that enterprise. Nobles are both the subjects and contributors to debates on luxury at the heart of Shovlin's research and, therefore, he argues, to the political economy that emerges in the second half of the eighteenth century. This study therefore adopts the political culture model that has become a popular in explaining to the collapse of the Old Regime.[2] In this view, intellectual debates about the society of orders, about ways of acquiring wealth, about state finances and the possible reconciliation between traditional and modern values enabled the Revolution. Groundbreaking works by John Pocock's and Albert Hirschman's provide key concepts for these investigations.[3] Thus, John Shovlin revisits the conflicts between virtue and commerce on the one hand, and honour and self-interest on the other through the lens of the literature on luxury. Although others have looked at these debates in recent years, Shovlin is more insistent on the *longue durée* implications, especially for the French economy.[4] What began as mid-century debates about means of restoring honour to a "decadent" nobility that had given in to lucre, would supply an idiom that shaped and outlived the Revolution.

Firmly ensconced in textual analysis, Shovlin's chapters follow the literature on luxury, the resurgence of which he traces to the 1748 treaty of Aix La Chapelle. France's failure to end the war on satisfactory terms caused anxieties about the health of the kingdom, especially among those whom Shovlin terms the "middling elites." Patriotic spirit had dwindled, especially among the court aristocracy, they argued, and only a reform of morals would ensure the welfare of the state. Since the modern world demanded economic competitiveness, it was crucial that the upper nobility orient its income to more useful ends than needless display at Versailles (or worse, self-serving investments in tax farming or industrial monopolies that were ruining the nation). As of the 1750s, therefore, there was a noticeable outpouring of pamphlets and books dealing with the economy and ways to avoid luxury--its most disruptive element--directed principally against the Court.

The favoured solution was to encourage investments in agriculture. Although some, like Forbonnais, argued that trade and manufacture were equally deserving, agriculture triumphed as the panacea for France's economic and moral woes. In the 1750s and 60s, elites were seized with "agromania", and writers who vaunted the benefits of agricultural production as a means to redress state finances and restore noble virtue became celebrated. The most successful among them was the marquis de Mirabeau whose *L'Ami des hommes*, published in 1756, went through twenty editions. Such works appealed to "middling nobles" in particular, Shovlin maintains, because they celebrated their more modest and industrious mode of life and denounced an aristocracy that had sold out to moneyed interests.

While speaking to the resentments and ambitions of the provincial nobility, this literature also offered ways of distinguishing between beneficial and harmful forms of luxury.[5] The first stimulated consumption and investment in productive activities; the second merely encouraged waste and debauchery. Those who sustained the economy in positive ways, like farmers, (and honest traders and

manufacturers) should be celebrated rather than denigrated. Nobles should be encouraged to invest not just in agriculture but in trade (as the abbé Coyer argued in *La noblesse commerçante* of 1756) although diehards continued to view such activities as degrading to the order (the Chevalier d'Arcq for example, in his *Noblesse militaire* of that same year).

Agriculture proved a suitable vehicle, given its relative neglect and its symbolic associations. This was no appeal to feudalism but rather to commercialization, improved husbandry, and sound investments that would lend moral virtue and civic spirit to economic enterprise --all the more so since rustic themes retained their ability to evoke simpler aspirations, family values, community, and stability. Landowners could therefore display their patriotism by contributing to economic growth while seeing to the welfare of their tenants. Unlike the rootless cosmopolites that infected the Court and urban trades, the nativist argument ran, landowners had a special stake in the realm. Shovlin's novelty is to stress the flexibility (or "portability" as he prefers to call it) of such appeals.

Argument for proper noble investments could be invoked in favour of the nobility or against it. It became easy to slip, for example, from vaunting noble landowners to celebrating landowners *tout court*. More significantly, for Shovlin, criticisms of noble luxury, first aimed at the court aristocracy, could turn into weapons against the nobility as a whole. This is what happened as of the 1770s.

As commerce was detached from luxury, blame for the moral corruption and economic precariousness associated with *luxe* was tied more and more closely to political and social institutions. This was a momentous shift in emphasis: first, because it made luxury a political problem rather than an unavoidable adjunct to modern life; and second, because it removed a central obstacle to the emergence of representations of a virtuous commercial society (p. 119).

What is more, the effort to grant non-nobles as much honour as nobles and to celebrate their special achievements challenged the prevalent conceit (among nobles and those aspiring to that status) that only the second order was capable of disinterested acts. Quite the contrary, by the 1770s, attacks on luxury convinced the public that aristocrats were beyond redemption and that the hopes for the country lay elsewhere. Although some (like Necker) went so far as to propose that "money, not virtue, was the basis of power in the modern world" (p.145), few agreed with him. Self-interest was not equated with public interest and to a large extent never would for the French (pp. 219-20). The demand for virtue instead grew more insistent.

From the time of the Seven Years' War, [middling sections of the elite] drew on deep-seated cultural anxieties about luxury to argue that France had degenerated. Through a political economy perspective infused with older ideas about luxury, they claimed that the system of public finance, together with a Colbertist bias in economic policy, had not only undermined the wealth of the nation but eroded its virtue. Part of what made such a diagnosis attractive was that such policies were also perceived as damaging the interests of mid-level elites. The monarchy was held to be guilty of neglecting landowners and sponsoring a tax system that siphoned money out of agriculture and into the hands of rapacious financiers and selfish courtiers. This set of ideas and reflexes powerfully conditioned the perceptions and understandings of French elites in the 1780s, and played a significant role in turning financial crisis into Revolution (p. 152).

The opposition between Court and Country (to borrow from the English example) that had prevailed hitherto disintegrated as "middling elites" turned against nobles in 1788-89, accusing them of the same sins as aristocrats and denying their capacity for patriotism. During the Revolution, *sans-culottes* mounted similar attacks on the rich, culminating in calls, by the most radical, for an egalitarian

redistribution of property. With Thermidor, property and productivity returned as moral imperatives, and agriculture as a source of social peace.[6] “Political economy was the cultural space in which economic activity was reconstituted as a patriotic endeavour. Merchants, farmers, and entrepreneurs were remade as patriots” (p. 213). Revolutionary critiques of “luxury” and calls for “virtue” reflected the acrimonious debates that had raged since mid-century. Even struggles between Girondins and Montagnards, Shovlin argues most provocatively, have been misunderstood. Both groups were, in fact, trying to reconcile wealth and virtue, in their own way (p. 201).

However malleable luxury and virtue might be, Shovlin is too quick to conflate economic and social issues with the moral imperatives that bolstered them in contemporary texts. Social groups remain frustratingly vague. Shovlin distinguishes aristocrats, who are the butt of the attacks, from the nobles who fire them. The first category, as its eighteenth-century enemies would have it, encompassed very rich, privileged *grands* residing at Versailles and benefiting from pensions and ‘court capitalism’. The second group, on the other hand, remains extraordinarily murky. It is said to consist interchangeably of “provincial nobles,” “middling nobles,” “lesser nobles,” and “middling elites” –a loose assembly united by their hatred of the court aristocracy. Although such shorthand matters less when it is used to summarize pamphlets and essays on luxury, it becomes more problematic when presumed to reflect the views, interests, or anxieties of actual social groups. At best we get the occasional hint that they consisted of provincial nobles with incomes between 5,000 to 10,000 *livres* (p. 39) and included “*rentiers*, professionals and office-holders” (p. 38). More surprising they appear to share a Calvinist (Jansenist?) ethos of frugality, although religion is never discussed. In fact, denunciations of privilege itself or struggles between Crown and *parlements* play no role here. It is left to disagreements on luxury (and hence political economy) and chaotic state finances to bring about the regime’s demise. Given that Shovlin means to argue a strong thesis, administrative reformers, political thinkers, economic theorists, ambitious *belle-lettrists* are separated into supporters of either an agrarian or industrial economy (all accepted to a lesser or greater degree the necessity of trade) as if this were their sole concern. The fact that court aristocrats were responsible for the boldest economic investments and agronomic experiments is relegated to ‘court capitalism’, suggesting that Shovlin endorses his authors’ sentiments.

A new consensus has been building in recent historical literature that “something changed after 1750.” In Shovlin’s version, several decades of vigorous debates on economic regeneration, patriotism, and virtue combined with financial crisis to bring about the Revolution. Compilers of *cahiers* and representatives to the Estates General came to Versailles filled with resentments that had been fueled by the literature on luxury. They were ready for drastic change. The Revolution itself is not transformative in the fashion described by Timothy Tackett or Michael Fitzsimmons, but it is also not treated as a momentary aberration: it flows from ideas generated in mid-century.[7] So powerful were those concerns about the reconciliation of virtue and wealth that they continued to inflect French approaches to the economy into the modern era, lending France its own peculiar, wobbly path to modernization.

Shovlin’s analysis serves to remind us that debates about noble status in the eighteenth century, initiated within the nobility itself, had important reverberations. His approach also offers a way of making sense of the anti-noble turn of the late 1780s. Although this remains principally an intellectual history, the *financial* context in which debates took place is well documented, even if it falls short of Michael Kwass’s treatment. My conclusion will betray my personal bias as I advise readers to keep in mind that ideas are most often no more than that and that complex events have multiple causes.

NOTES

[1] Jay M. Smith, ed., *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006)

[2] For example Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[3] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[4] Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France. Liberté, Egalité, Fiscalité* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[5] Analyses of modes of consumption and changes in material life of the sort pioneered by Daniel Roche in France and John Brewer in England do not feature in this work. For a recent sunny synthesis of luxury debates, see Maxine Berg's *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[6] There are more arguments here for support of all types of productive activity than in James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[7] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

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