

French political economy and the making of public opinion as a political concept (1750-1765)

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1 Introduction

Since the translation in French (1978) and in English (1989) of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Habermas's twin concepts of 'public sphere' and 'public opinion' has received a growing attention from historians.¹ One of the most fruitful program of research which grew from Habermas's ground-breaking study has been concerned with the reformulation of the concepts of Habermas in the terms of late eighteenth-century French political discourse.² These authors rejected Habermas's thesis of public opinion as a sociological category. For the most prominent of the historians working in that perspective, it "emerged in eighteenth-century political discourse as an abstract category, invoked by actors in a new kind of politics to secure the legitimacy of claims that could not longer be made binding in the terms (and within the traditional institutional circuit) of absolutist political order".³ Although the politics of contestation were introduced in French political literature by Montesquieu's presentation of the English political model, it was not until the end of the 1760s that "public opinion" began to be invested with a powerful political power.⁴ Despite their differences, Baker and

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¹ A detailed bibliography on this literature can be found in Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of the Historians", *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 153-182.

² Keith Michael Baker, "Politics and public opinion under the old regime: some reflections", in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1987), pp. 204-246; "Public opinion as political invention", in *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 167-199; "Defining the public sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas", in Craig Calhoun ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA, 1992), pp. 181-211; Roger Chartier, "Espace public et opinion publique", in *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris, 2000), pp. 37-60; Robin J. Ives, "Political Publicity and Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century France", *French History* 17 (2003) pp. 1-18; Mona Ozouf, "Le concept d'opinion publique au XVIII^e siècle", in *L'homme régénéré. Essais sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), pp. 21-53.

³ Baker, "Public opinion...", p. 172.

⁴ Baker, "Public opinion...", pp. 173-199.

Habermas's interpretation of the emergence of public opinion shared an essential characteristic. Public opinion was a concept created out of the conflict between the state and a challenging opposition, the bourgeoisie for Habermas, men of letters and the parliaments for Baker, Chartier and Ozouf.⁵ They both emphasized that the concept of public opinion was created outside and against the traditional public order, that of the absolute monarchy and its institutions. It was the growing importance of this concept in political debates that forced propagandists of the crown, like Moreau, to accept the existence of this new type of tribunal and to try to use it against those who invented it.⁶ In the analysis of Habermas, the discussions initiated by economic writers played a central role in the emergence of public opinion.⁷ Although they recognize the importance of debates on economic policy, Baker, Chartier and others have put more emphasis on parliamentary issues. However, Ives's recent article calls for a reconsideration of the role of economic literature.⁸ Ives showed that it was on the initiative of Vincent de Gournay, intendant of trade, and his circle of economic authors that a doctrine of political publicity that argued "that the truth of any matter was best discovered by the public competition of enlightened opinion", emerged in the 1750s.

This purpose of this presentation is to complement Ives's thesis by showing that the writers of Gournay's circle were only a part from a bigger picture that involved members of French government. "Public opinion" as a political concept was created and put into motion by a group of high administrators as part of a plan to reform French economic administration. These individuals – Malesherbes, Silhouette, Trudaine father and son, Vincent de Gournay – were bound by a desire to publicize the economic debates. They believed that public discussion by way of printed writings can overcome the influence of the traditional political forces, the Court and the financiers, who influenced economic policies according to their particular interests. This belief led Gournay and others to organize the publicity of political and economic issues in the 1750s in order to rationalize the political process of policy making of the French monarchy. I will show that this program was quite successful and that it introduced wide-ranging changes in the process of policy-making during the 1760s. Using the

⁵ Baker, "Defining the public sphere...", p. 185.

⁶ Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, p. 53-59 and p. 85-123 (French translation). See also Edmond Dziembowski (ed.), *Écrits sur le patriotisme, l'esprit public et la propagande au milieu du XVIII^e siècle* (La Rochelle, 1997).

⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA, 1989), pp. 68-69 and 95-96 ; Baker, "Defining the public sphere...", pp. 194-197. See also James Van Horn Melton, *The rise of the public in enlightened Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 48-61.

⁸ Robin J. Ives, op. cit.

example of the implementation of free trade policies in matters of grain (1763-1764), we will see that the royal government repeatedly looked for support and instruction in the public opinion and that the latter had a strong bearing on the policies it finally selected.

2 The political status of economic discourse

Since the end of the Renaissance, economic discourse was considered as falling under the ‘*secret du roi*’.⁹ As Joël Félix puts it: “The administration of finances of the old regime inherited from old traditions in which secret and, by extension, the secret confidants – the secretaries of the State –, had served both as a justification and a tool at the service of absolutism”.¹⁰ First designed by Bodin and refined by subsequent theorists of absolutism, this doctrine placed the discussion of economic problems and policies under the direct authority of the king:

“It follows from this definition of absolutism that the king, and the king alone, is a public person. The king alone among its subjects, sees the whole and can take counsel for the whole; his alone is a truly public will. Frenchmen as a body – or, more precisely, as a congeries of corporate bodies – are related to each other indirectly as subjects of the crown. They participate in government only to the extent that they are officers of the crown (and hence share its judicial function) or retain a traditionally constituted right to make representations on their partial interests. There can be no useful public discussion of political questions, since there is no public apart from the person of the king.”¹¹

The production and circulation of economic texts were confined within the two spheres of publicness that stems directly from the person of the king which Habermas designed as the sphere of representative publicness and the sphere of public authority.¹² Printed economic writings were rare and in general they had very small issues, a few hundreds at most. They were made primarily for the members of court society, and they were not designed to reach a larger public. Hence, the output of printed economic writings was quite modest until mid-eighteenth century and, at the exception of a few severe economic and

⁹ Ives, pp. 2-8.

¹⁰ Joël Félix, *Finances et politiques au siècle des Lumières. Le ministère L’Averdy, 1763-1768* (Paris, 1999).

¹¹ Baker, *Inventing French Revolution*, p. 114.

¹² Habermas, p. 9 and 18. Habermas separate neatly representative publicness (the court) and the sphere of public authority (the state). Yet, as most of the representants of high administration were also office and title holders, it indicates that the two spheres overlapped each other during the Ancien Régime to a large extent.

political crises, political economy was but a very marginal genre of printed writings.¹³ Economic debates were taking place almost exclusively through manuscripts writings. These were mostly administrative reports commanded by the institutions that organized and directed the economic policies of the kingdom (the Board of trade, of Finances, the Control-general of finances and other departments) or petitions and memoirs that represented the interests of nobility or those of its most important members.¹⁴ Finally, lay subjects of the kingdom also addressed a host of memoirs and projects, most of them anonymous, to the king and his ministers. The circulation of economic texts and arguments was regulated by the traditional hierarchies of Ancien Régime. Personal relations and status still had a strong bearing on the way economic debates were conducted: Economic texts and arguments were valued according to their place in the two traditional spheres of publicness. In the offices of the various state departments, only those texts and arguments which were produced inside the administration (reports) or those which came from prominent members of the court society were considered of some interest and discussed.¹⁵ Petitions and projects which came from the ordinary subjects were disdained by the administration and did not participate in the process of policy making. Accordingly, the soundness of the arguments exposed in the debates of ideas and legislations were only one of the factors influencing their final outcome. The status and/or the positions inside the state of the contestants interfered with, or superseded, the rationality of their argumentations.

Eighteenth century's authors were well aware of the differences that existed between manuscript and printed circulation of economic texts in this regard, and the political consequences of the transition from one type of publicization of economic discourse to the

¹³ During the *Fronde* and the 'years of misery' of the end of Louis XIV's reign, the French state temporarily lose control of whole parts of the territory, where printed political pamphlets burgeoned. See Christine Théré, "Economic publishing and authors, 1566-1789", in *Studies in the History of Political Economy. From Bodin to Walras* (London, 1997), pp. 13-18.

¹⁴ The writing workshops of the peers played a major role in the production of political and economic memoirs during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, see Lionel Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV. The political origins of French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1965); Harold A. Ellis, *Boullainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early 18th Century France* (Cornell, 1988).

¹⁵ For example, David K. Smith's article on the Council of commerce ("Structuring Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Innovations of the French Council of Commerce", *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 74, 2002, pp. 490-537) shows that economic informations and representations travelled from the center to the periphery of the kingdom back and forth in the network that the Council of commerce created. In this network, representative publicness in the form of patronage still played an important role. Moreover, although lobbying was based on an impersonal monetary relationship between the principal and its agent, the principal hired agents which were capable of creating and using personal relationships to achieve objectives (get inside information, influence policy and legislation making), which favored the economic interests of the principal.

other. Discussing the topic in the last chapter of his *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734), “Des Systèmes”, Melon made clear that the publicization of economic discourse through impression was a political issue.¹⁶ He contrasted the doctrine of publicity to the politics of secret of China and Oriental empires, hence clearly suggesting that the “*secret du roi*” was a feature of despotic governments. According to Melon, the manuscript memoirs discussed inside the administrative sphere were often the product of particular interests, most notably those of *financiers*, and when they came from outside the traditional spheres of publicness, their authors lacked experience to design feasible and really useful projects. Conversely, “the publicity of Memoirs” preserved them from these shortcomings: “The work is presented to the observations of all, and whatever the quantity of bad critics that must result from this, there will be judicious ones who will develop and distinguish the good from the pernicious.”¹⁷

Montesquieu, in his presentation of English government, in the chapter 27 of the book XIX of *De l'Esprit des loix* developed the same kind of arguments in favour of the public debate of political issues:

“As the climate has given many persons a restless spirit and extended views, in a country where the constitution gives every man a share in its government and political interests, conversation generally turns upon politics: and we see men spend their lives in the calculation of events which, considering the nature of things and the caprices of fortune, or rather of men, can scarcely be thought subject to the rules of calculation. In a free nation it is very often a matter of indifference whether individuals reason well or ill; it is sufficient that they do reason: hence springs that liberty which is a security from the effects of these reasonings. But in a despotic government, it is equally pernicious whether they reason well or ill; their reasoning is alone sufficient to shock the principle of that government.”¹⁸

Like Melon, Montesquieu pointed to the incompatibility of despotism and political publicity, thereby casting doubts on the political soundness of the politics of secret.¹⁹ As Montesquieu classified France, with England and most of European nations, as a moderate government, political publicity in France was both harmless for the government and necessary to ensure the liberty of French citizens. Following the lead of Melon and Montesquieu, economic writers close to the intendant of trade Vincent de Gournay took up these themes in their writings. Not only they developed a doctrine of political publicity, they put it in practice

¹⁶ Jean-François Melon, *Essai politique sur le commerce*, in Eugène Daire (éd.) *Economistes financiers du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1843).

¹⁷ Melon, p. 831.

¹⁸ Montesquieu, 1748, *De l'Esprit des loix*, p. 582 (translation based on the 1752 English translation).

¹⁹ Melon and Montesquieu were close friends and their political thought had much in common, see Loïc Charles, 1999, *L'économie politique française et le politique au milieu du XVIII^e siècle*, in *Séminaire Histoire du libéralisme en Europe*, fasc. n° 3, (Paris, 2002), pp. 7-11.

through their numerous pamphlets and economic writings. Notwithstanding the success of their writings, Melon and Montesquieu were two isolated voices, cut from the government who was unsympathetic to their works.²⁰ Authors from Gournay's circle held a very different position in this respect. Not only did they find support inside the administration, but their writings were part of a plan to reform the process of policy making of the French State launched by several enlightened members of French government.

3 Between public sphere and the sphere of the public: The emergence of economic discourse

As Christine Théré has shown, the time when Gournay's circle came into full existence was one of great changes for economic publishing.²¹ The volume of new editions of printed economic works rocketed up, doubling every five years between 1745 and 1759.²² Interestingly, this revolution was a phenomenon quite specific to economic edition, since there was no rupture in the rhythm of publication of other genres of French literature.²³ Contemporaries were quick to register this brusque change and in October 1754, the *Journal de Verdun* noted that "for sometime now, excellent works on trade are published".²⁴ There is no doubt that the "group of writers that surrounded the influential *intendant du commerce*, Jacques-Claude-Marie Vincent de Gournay (1712-1759)" played an essential role in this process.²⁵ From 1753 until the death of Gournay, these 15 authors produced more than 40 books and pamphlets related to trade, taxes and economic policies.²⁶ However, it would be a mistake to ascribe to these authors the sole merit of this printing revolution in political

²⁰ Ives, p. 5.

²¹ Christine Théré, "Economic publishing and authors, 1566-1789", in *Studies in the History of French Political Economy*, Facarello éd., (London & New York, 1997), pp. 1-56.

²² 25 first editions of economic writings between 1740 and 1744, 58 between 1745 and 1749, 125 for the 1750-1754 period and 224 between 1755 and 1759. The growth continued during the 1760s, though at a slower pace (265 new works in 1760-1764 and 295 in 1765-1769).

²³ Henri-Jean Martin, *Le livre français sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1987), p. 117. See also Théré, p. 21.

²⁴ p. 252. See also *Correspondance littéraire*, 15 mars 1755, T. II, p. 506-7 ; *Journal de Verdun*, mai 1755, p. 324 ; *Mercure de France*, octobre 1754, p. 133 et novembre 1758, p. 69.

²⁵ Ives, p. 8.

²⁶ These authors were : Abeille, Buchet du Pavillon, Butel-Dumont, Carlier, Clicquot-Blervache, Coyer, Gua de Malves, Herbert, Le Blanc, Montaudoin de la Touche, Morellet, O'Heguerty, Plumard de Dangeul, Turgot, Véron de Forbonnais. I have discussed the content of Gournay's circle in : Loïc Charles *La liberté du commerce des grains et l'économie politique française (1750-1770)*, (Paris, 1999), pp. 114-156.

economy. They certainly furnished the primary goods necessary for such a revolution, but the whole design was not their. It was enlightened members of the French government – Gournay himself, his superior Trudaine and his son Trudaine de Montigny, Malesherbes, director of the book trade (1751-1763) and first president of the Cour des Aides, Silhouette, controller general in 1759 –, who conceived and make Gournay’s circle, a *machine de guerre* whose goal was to impose a reformulation of policy-making to the administration of Louis XV.

In the beginning of the 1750s, Gournay and his friends from the administration looked for men who could write and publish on economic policy and related subjects, such as history of trade, money, the nature of political government, etc. Most of the authors they recruited had a definite profile. The Abeille, Butel-Dumont, Carlier, Clicquot de Blervache, Dangeul, Morellet, Turgot, Véron de Forbonnais were young and eager to climb the ladder of French administration and society. Others – the abbots Coyer, Le Blanc and Gua de Malves – were men of letters of some talent and literary success with an interest in political issues, suffering from a lack of social recognition they thought they deserved.²⁷ All these men saw the opportunity that lied before them when Gournay, Malesherbes or another member of the government contacted them. The testimony of one of them, Butel-Dumont, is compelling. He wrote to his friend Hennin:

“[D]epuis notre séparation [1753, LC] je n’ai cessé de travailler avec la dernière opiniâtreté. Des hommes éminents ont tourné mes études du côté du commerce. J’ai publié deux ouvrages sur cette matière : l’un intitulé *Essai sur le commerce d’Angleterre* en deux volumes in 12° assez épais. L’autre a pour titre *Histoire et commerce des colonies anglaises*. Ce dernier qui a paru le premier m’a fait nommer presque sans sollicitations, secrétaire de la *commission établie pour le règlement des limites des colonies en Amérique*. Il y a bientôt deux ans que j’occupe ce poste”.²⁸

It is not too difficult to put names on these eminent men Butel-Dumont mentioned in his letter. In the next letter to his friend, he invited Hennin to send memoirs on trade “sous le couvert de Mr de Malesherbes premier président de la Cour des Aides”.²⁹ Moreover, Étienne de Silhouette, *maître des requêtes* at that time, was one of the commissaries for the settlement of the limits of the colonies in America: he had been one of the main supports for Butel-Dumont’s (successful) application as secretary of the commission. Gournay was also one of

²⁷ The abbot de Gua was expelled from the French academy and always on the verge of bankruptcy, Coyer and Le Blanc tried several times but without success to join one the great Parisian academy. They were all from very humble backgrounds and resented it.

²⁸ Bibliothèque de l’institut, Ms 1266, ff. 446-7 (emphasis is in the original ; all transcriptions are mine otherwise indicated). The letter is dated 23 August 1756.

²⁹ Bibliothèque de l’institut, Ms 1266, f. 449 (20 October 1756).

these eminent men as a letter from Butel-Dumont to Malesherbes shows.³⁰ Another testimony from Gua de Malves showed that Butel-Dumont's recruitment was not an isolated case.³¹

To the abbot Trublet, moralist and censor, the involvement of Gournay and others in recruiting writers to publish their ideas and to promote economic and social reforms on a grand scale was no mystery. He wrote to Malesherbes (unaware that the latter was part of the scheme) that the *Noblesse commerçante* "thèse de l'abbé Coyer, thèse et opinion que je n'ai jamais approuvée malgré ma déférence pour mon ami et compagnon Mr de Gournay. Soyez bien sûr que l'abbé Coyer n'est pas lui-même de l'avis qu'on lui a fait soutenir. Ce n'est qu'un jeu d'esprit de sa part. On lui a présenté l'occasion de faire une brochure ingénieuse ; il l'a saisie".³² To approach potential collaborators, Gournay made extensive use of one of his own production: detailed remarks he had written on Joshua Child's *Treatise on trade*.³³ He had first made them to win his superior, the reputed intendant of Finances Trudaine, to his ideas.³⁴ Later, Gournay distributed the same text to other would-be collaborators, Forbonnais and Turgot, who discussed it with him.³⁵ In 1756, reading an essay published by the Chevalier de Vivens, Gournay felt that the latter could join his circle of writers and he sent right away his remarks to him.³⁶ This time he had less success: Although Vivens appreciated

³⁰ "J'ay l'honneur de vous faire part d'une lettre que M. Jean Marie Brusset libraire de Lyon, m'a écrite... j'ai mis aussi dans ce paquet les observations de M. de Gournay sur le mémoire concernant les laines que vous m'avez chargé de parapher. J'ai communiqué ces observations, comme de moi-même à M. Dessaint éditeur du mémoire, il m'a promis qu'on y auroit égard", Bibliothèque Nationale, Manuscrit Français 22147, f. 49. The letter is dated 25 January 1755.

³¹ BN Man. Fr. 22142, f. 60-64 and Man. Fr. 22152, f. 3-5.

³² Lettre du 14 août 1756 à Malesherbes, in Jean Jacquart éd., *Correspondance de l'abbé Trublet* (Paris, 1926), p. 67-8.

³³ Gournay made a translation of Child's pamphlet (first published in 1669) and added several detailed notes of his own. His remarks were not published at this time. They have been subsequently rediscovered and published by Takumi Tsuda: *Traité sur le commerce de Josiah Child avec les remarques inédites de Vincent de Gournay*, (Tokyo, 1983).

³⁴ "J'ai l'honneur de vous envoyer ci-joint le 8^e chapitre de M. Child sur la laine et les manufactures de laine. Ce sujet m'a donné occasion de traiter avec assez d'étendue la question de savoir si nos inspecteurs et nos règlements portant amendes sont utiles ou non aux manufactures. Outre l'exemple des nations les plus commerçantes dont je me suis appuyé, j'ai tâché de faire voir que le préjugé où nous sommes à cet égard nous éloigne du véritable esprit et des connaissances du commerce et est aussi nuisible au progrès de l'industrie qu'à l'augmentation des sujets du Roi et de ses revenus. Il m'a fallu des motifs aussi puissants pour me dissimuler à moi-même la témérité qu'il y a d'attaquer une opinion reçue et consacrée depuis 80 ans. Je me flatte au moins que la question paraîtra assez importante pour mériter d'être discutée. Au reste, M., je me soumettrai toujours lorsque vous m'aurez condamné.", Letter dated 25 septembre 1752 in Takuma Tsuda éd., *Mémoires et lettres de Vincent de Gournay*, (Tokyo, 1993), p. 152.

³⁵ Turgot reacted to Gournay's remarks on Child by anoting them. They are published in Schelle's *Œuvres* (Paris, 1913), T. I, p. 372-6. Notes made from the hand Forbonnais appear on one of the manuscript copy deposited at the Saint-Brieuc's municipal library (ms 81).

³⁶ François de Vivens, *Observations sur divers moyens de soutenir et d'encourager l'agriculture, principalement dans la Guyenne*, (sl, 1756).

the gesture and gave it publicity in the sequel of his essay, he was not interested in going further than that.³⁷

In parallel to the recruiting of authors that turned the interest of the public to political economy (“*science du commerce*” as they phrased it) and launched several public debates on *administration des manufactures, commerce des grains, corporations, luxe, noblesse commerçante, toiles peintes*, Gournay and his friends were keen to publicize memoirs and discussions produced inside the administrative sphere.³⁸ This aspect of Gournay circle’s activity is lesser known, although it is by no means unimportant. During the 1750s, more and more economic texts that have circulated in manuscript in the Board of trade or in other parts of the administration were published through Gournay circle’s intercourse, thereby transgressing the official policy of the *secret du roi*. For example, the *Journal économique* published two memoirs calling for free trade wrote by intendants of trade in 1752 and 1754.³⁹ Another one in 1754, “*Sur le commerce du Levant. Mémoire tiré d’un rapport fait au bureau du commerce en 1753*”, was partly published.⁴⁰ The timing of publication of these memoirs shows that Gournay and his friends were behind it: the memoir on grain trade appeared two months before an *Arrêt du conseil* (17 September 1754) which partially liberalized French internal and external grain trade. The one of the *levant* was intended as a preparation for the publication of *Questions sur le commerce du Levant* published the year after.⁴¹ In 1755 and 1756, Forbonnais published under his name several memoirs and official reports only slightly

³⁷ In the second part published a little later, Vivens recounted: “Pendant que je travaillais à cette seconde partie, un citoyen vertueux, consommé dans la science du commerce, a eu la bonté de me communiquer des mémoires très intéressants [Gournay’s Remarks], sur une matière qui a tant de liaison avec celle qui m’occupe. Il prouve très solidement que les anglais ont acquis une grande supériorité sur nous dans cette science ; que nous traitons désavantageusement avec toutes les nations [...]” (Vivens, 1756, *Observations sur divers moyens de soutenir et d’encourager l’agriculture, principalement dans la Guyenne*, 2^e partie, p. i ; and also pp. 64-5 and 80).

³⁸ On the role of Gournay’s circle in these debates, see Loïc Charles, *La liberté du commerce des grains et l’économie politique française (1750-1770)*, (Ph.D. Thesis, Paris, 1999), pp. 108-223 ; Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations* (Paris, 2001), pp. 27-38 ; Simone Meyssonier, *La balance et l’horloge*, (Paris, 1989), pp. 174-236; Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme*, (Paris, 1998), pp. 263-270 and 313-21.

³⁹ « Lettre sur la liberté du commerce » in May 1752 and « Mémoire sur les bleds » in July 1754 by, respectively « M. D. B. I. D. C. » (Monsieur De Boula Intendant Du Commerce) and « M. D. M. I. D. C. » (Monsieur De Montaran Intendant Du Commerce).

⁴⁰ The first part was published in September 1754 and the sequel should have been published in the next issued as advertised, but it never showed, probably because of censorship.

⁴¹ François Véron de Forbonnais, *Questions sur le commerce du Levant* (Marseille, 1755). There is several documents in Gournay’s archives related to the *commerce du levant*. There is, among other things, a heavily annotated copy of the memoir that was published in the *Journal économique* which shows that Gournay favored a complete liberalization of this trade and disapproved the much more cautious opinion of author of the memoir.

changed or rephrased. These volumes were constructed on the same pattern: The administrative memoir came first, then its critic written by Forbonnais and in one case by Gournay himself.⁴² In all the examples given above, Gournay and the writers from his circle were literally unveiling the *secret du roi* and offered to the reading public the opportunity to take a good look on the kingdom economic affairs.⁴³

What Gournay and the others were looking for was to transform the administrative debate on economic policy into a discussion open to all the French citizens and patriots who had ideas on this question. In this way, they thought that a public debate would give a voice to economic interests largely ignored inside the administration: those of the agriculturers, farmers, manufacturers, merchants and workers. Although these categories had a central economic role since they produced the wealth of the nation, they had only a very marginal role in the process of policy making that directly affected their economic activity and productivity. This was strongly underlined by Malesherbes in the *Remontrances* (1756) he wrote as Président of the Cour des aides.⁴⁴

By giving publicity to the debate on economic policy through the publication of texts produced inside the state, Gournay and his friends were planning to change this course. The publication of both administrative documents related to actual policy making ensured that those who were concerned by them were correctly informed. By complementing these publications with detailed critics made by fellow writers, the enlightened administrators

⁴² In *Examen des avantages et des désavantages de la prohibition des toiles peintes*, Forbonnais reproduced a report had been presented by Michau de Montaran in 1749 at the Board of trade. The two other memoirs of this volume, written by Gournay and Forbonnais, criticized it (see Simone Meyssonier, *op. cit.*, p. 267-72). In *Divers mémoires sur le commerce*, Forbonnais published administrative memoirs on privileged manufactures of glass and silk that came from the Board of trade to attack their arguments.

⁴³ Using different sources, Ives (p. 8-12) arrived the same assessment.

⁴⁴ “Les citoyens dont nous défendons ici les intérêts, sont ceux qui, par un travail assidu, des risques continuels et des combinaisons presque infinies, ont trouvé le moyen de faire goûter nos arts aux nations étrangères et de nous enrichir du produit de leur luxe ; ce sont eux qui entretiennent une circulation nécessaire d’espèces et de denrées entre la métropole de vos états et vos colonies ; ces colonies précieuses qui font la richesse de la France et la jalousie de tant de nations ! Ce sont eux-mêmes, en un mot, et eux seuls qui portent l’abondance dans le sein de votre royaume. [...] Nous venons [de] vous présenter cette classe puissante de négociants, dont les vastes entreprises nous ont paru dignes d’attirer les regards de V. M. Mais il est un autre ordre de citoyens dont l’industrie ne peut être trop encouragée, et dont cependant l’industrie devient un prétexte à de nouvelles taxes. Ce sont ceux dont le travail journalier augmente la masse la valeur des productions de la terre et la masse des richesses réelles ; sujets nécessaires à l’État, puisque c’est d’eux seuls que le commerce général du royaume tire toute sa force et toute sa subsistance ; hommes livrés à la peine et au travail, dont l’indigence serait seule un motif pour les secourir, et dont l’obscurité leur fait éprouver des injustices toujours impunies, parce qu’elles restent toujours ignorées.”, in Auger (éd.), *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du droit public de la France en Matières d’impôts, ou recueil de ce qui s’est passé de plus intéressant à la Cour des Aides, depuis 1756 jusque’au mois de juin 1775*, (Bruxelles, 1779), p. 14-6.

imposed a new method (that of “*science du commerce*”) of evaluating economic policies. Moreover, they imposed it in the name of the public welfare, the good of the nation, a vocabulary that was until the 1750s reserved to the king and his administration. Publicity was presented as a political gesture that gave to politically underrepresented categories the opportunity of having their economic and social interests represented to the nation and the king. Forbonnais, in his introduction to the translation of an English pamphlet, insisted on both these points:

« Si j’ai hasardé quelquefois mon opinion particulière, je suis prêt à la changer pour une meilleure ; ainsi j’avertis qu’on ne doit l’admettre ni la rejeter sans examen. Je me saurai bon gré de mes erreurs, si elles peuvent exciter des citoyens éclairés à étendre les lumières de notre nation sur le commerce : j’ose avancer que la prospérité dépend des connaissances qu’elle acquérera [sic] dans ce genre. À mesure qu’elles se répandent de proche en proche, l’industrie s’anime et on devient plus curieux de ses ouvrages; l’aisance est plus générale parce qu’il y a plus d’hommes occupés ; les terres ont une plus grande valeur, et l’agriculture fournit à son tour la matière à un plus grand commerce. Enfin l’esprit de calcul ne saurait être trop commun ; et il est à souhaiter que chaque membre de la société connaisse en détail la portion immédiate d’intérêts qu’il a dans le commerce général, indépendamment de celui du service du Roi, qui tient le premier rang. »⁴⁵

In this passage, Forbonnais urged for a public debate on French commercial policy. This debate was to be rational, opinions were not to be accepted or rejected without examination says he. Moreover, this examination implied an informed calculus of one’s interest: All those who had interests in the general trade of the nation, that is virtually anybody, had the necessity to enlighten themselves as well as to enlighten the others on this subject through a public debate.⁴⁶

The emergence of a public discussion on French economic policy was to change the political process of selecting them. The writers of Gournay’s circle were quite clear that the French government cannot continue to rely solely on the authorized opinions that came from within the state apparatus. In moderate governments such as France or England, it was necessary to have recourse to the public opinion that stem from the printed debate. First, the

⁴⁵ François Véron de Forbonnais, *Le négociant Anglois*, (Dresde, 1753), p. xxviii.

⁴⁶ Forbonnais and other writers from Gournay’s circle pointed that English constitution was certainly superior to France in this respect. Its capacity to give voice to all the interests, i. e. all the citizens, of the nation through printed writings was the explanation of both its liberty and of its ability to mobilize them at the service of their king. The point was first made by Montesquieu in *De l’Esprit des loix*, (Paris, 1951), p. 582 (book XIX, chapter 27). Plumard de Dangeul echoed it in *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande-Bretagne, par rapport au commerce et aux autres sources de la puissance des Etats*, (Leyde, 1754), p. 167-8. In his translation of Hume, the abbot Le Blanc abstracted the whole idea in one sentence, praising Hume’s *Political discourses* and “ce grand nombre d’écrits du même genre, qui commencent à devenir une école de politique pour les autres pays de l’Europe, qui ont secoué le joug de l’ignorance et de la superstition.” See *Discours politiques de Monsieur Hume* (Amsterdam, 1754), p. viii.

public debate protected the economic policies chosen by the government from malevolent critics produced by vested interests. It infused a public spirit to the nation.⁴⁷ Second, it was the only way for French government to overcome the political power of financiers and other privileged categories who opposed necessary fiscal and economic reforms.⁴⁸ According to Le Blanc, the public discussion of economic matters restored the central position of the legislator, note that he did not speak of the king, in the political process:

“C’est en effet, comme le dit M. Melon lui-même, de différents écrits, souvent contradictoires, que la vérité viendra éclairer le législateur, qui, placé comme au centre où toutes les lignes aboutissent, n’aura plus besoin que de l’esprit de discernement pour choisir et exécuter. Tels étaient les sentiments de ce philosophe : je l’ai assez connu pour assurer qu’il tenait plus à la vérité qu’à ses opinions, et à l’utilité publique qu’aux systèmes qu’il croyait pouvoir lui faire le plus d’honneur.”⁴⁹

Then, the state would be freed from the vested interests of financiers and courtiers. Public debate could check successfully their plots because “public instruction will incline the minds [toward the reforms], rectify the errors, give the necessary means” to the authority, and if the “speculations are wrong, they will be contradicted; even if self-interested people throw shadows on truth, she will go out pure and striking from the discussion.”⁵⁰ When Silhouette became controller general in 1759 with Forbonnais as his principal economic counsellor, they would act in coherence with this principle and would publicize their project of fiscal reform before discussing it inside the administrative sphere.⁵¹

⁴⁷ “Cette ébauche, car je n’ose lui donner un autre nom, pourra conduire le lecteur à des réflexions intéressantes sur la nature des impôts, des ressources de l’État, inspirer la curiosité sur cette partie, tracer la route de s’y rendre utile au service du roi et de la patrie. Ce devoir commun à tous les citoyens, si doux à remplir et trop négligé, est toujours mieux pratiqué à mesure qu’une nation s’instruit davantage sur les intérêts publics. C’est de leur connaissance qu’émane cet esprit général par lequel tous les particuliers tendent uniformément au bien qu’on leur présente, l’intérêt personnel étouffé par la honte, les fausses terreurs et les préjugés populaires éclairés par le flambeau de la vérité, n’opposent plus à la bonne volonté des ministres la brigue et l’indocilité, écueils trop communs des meilleures entreprises” says Forbonnais in *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France depuis l’année 1595 jusqu’à l’année 1721*, (Basle, 1758), vol. I, p. 5. Dangeul made a similar point in the introduction of his translation of Bernardo de Ulloa, *Rétablissement des manufactures et du commerce d’Espagne*, (Amsterdam, 1753), n. p.

⁴⁸ Forbonnais, *Recherches...*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Discours politiques de Monsieur Hume*, p. xxi.

⁵⁰ Forbonnais, *Recherches...*, p. 8. See also his introduction to the translation of King (p. x): « Le découragement dans les études n’est guère moins funeste à la patrie que les systèmes, puisqu’il la prive de la concurrence des talents ; les connaissances ne peuvent être trop multipliées pour le bonheur public. »

⁵¹ *Lettre d’un banquier à son correspondant de province*, the text bore the date of 30 April 1759 and was distributed in the first days of May. Forbonnais send it to Hennin, his friend, the 15 May with these words: « Voici M. mon griffonnage. Je ne prétend pas avoir envisager l’objet sous toutes ses faces. Si ce projet est agréé j’en serai très aise parce que je le crois utile », Bibliothèque de l’Institut, ms 1259, f. 294.

4 The creation of Agricultural societies (1760-1763)

The strong involvement of some of the most enlightened members of French government in the publicity of political economy showed that they expected direct returns from the emergence of a public debate on economic policies. They believed that the well-informed debates they were launching will help the monarchy in setting an agenda of necessary reforms. The position of Gournay and his friends at the highest level of the administration combined with their control over a group of gifted writers gave them a strategic lead over their more traditionally minded adversaries in the 1750s. Despite occasional setbacks, their rise in power inside the administration was clear enough up to the end of the 1760s.⁵² On the front of the republic of letters, their campaign was also quite successful since the number of economic writings continued to rise steadily during the same period. Political economy was *à la mode*. Moreover, weakened by the economic and political cost of the Seven Years War, the French government was ready to experiment more radical political solutions.

Since the 1740s several controllers general considered with some interest reforming the grain trade. However, it appeared too dangerous a political issue and, apart from the two cautious and ineffective *Arrêts du conseil* of 1743 and 1754, their projects did not really materialize.⁵³ The routines of the administration from top to bottom were too strong to give way to free trade. From 1753 on, there had been several writings, books as well as articles in the *Journal œconomique* and reviews in the main periodicals favoring more freedom for grain trade, and the debate had penetrated civil society, not only in Paris but also in the provinces.⁵⁴ When he became controller general in late November 1759, Henri-Léonard Bertin was perfectly aware of the powerful obstacles fear of grain scarcity and privileged companies had implemented in the royal administration. He himself had been, as Lieutenant General of Police of Paris, in charge of the provisioning of Paris just before his appointment at the head

⁵² See Charles, *La liberté...*, p. 135-147

⁵³ Kaplan, S., *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV*, 2 vols, (The Hague, 1976), pp. 99-101 and 125-130.

⁵⁴ As the intendant of Soissons, Méliand, wrote to Bertin (December 26, 1760): “j’ai trouvé partout une grande facilité à parler de cette matière [free trade in grain, LC] qui est devenue, pour ainsi dire, à la mode par les livres qui ont été répandus dans le public depuis quelques années, sans avoir produit beaucoup de fruit.”, Archives Nationales [A. N.], K 906, f. 1.

of the royal economic administration. Bertin had a genuine interest in matters of agriculture.⁵⁵ Moreover, his main economic counselor, the Marquis de Turbilly, was an authority on practical agriculture and had a wide network of friends and correspondents, among them several members (including Abeille its Secretary) of the *Société d'agriculture, du commerce et des arts de Bretagne* founded under the auspices of the Provincial estates of Brittany in 1757. Trudaine de Montigny, in charge of the department of grain trade, also played a major role in designing Bertin policies in this matter.

Bertin's strategy to lead the administrative structure to regard liberalization in a more friendly way was to make contact between its representatives, the provincial intendants and their subdelegates, and the portion of the public who was taking part in the debate for freer grain trade. Its main weapon was the creation of a network of agricultural societies composed of enlightened local élites. The usefulness of such societies had been demonstrated by the *Société de Bretagne* launched by Gournay and his circle.⁵⁶ The establishment of this society aroused great interest in Paris in the next few years culminating with the editions in 1760 and 1762 of its *Corps d'observations* written by its secretary Abeille which detailed the society's activities. The government had no agency in the foundation of Brittany's society, it played a leading role in the creation of the other agricultural societies.

In a circular dated November 1760, Bertin in addition to asking information on the state of agriculture in their generalities advised the provincial intendants to “surround themselves with persons enlightened on these matters and to form assemblies that would convene at fixed days and would have the improvement of agriculture in view”.⁵⁷ Most of the intendants were lacking competence in regard to what was demanded from them: They had no training in economic or agricultural matters, they often did not know who would be interested in joining the assembly in their generality and they do not know what legal form the controller general wanted for the assembly. On all these subjects, the first *commis* (that is the head of the staff) of the controller general – Antoine Parent –, Bertin's main economic counselor – the

⁵⁵ On Bertin's interest in agriculture, see André Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France au 18^e siècle*, 3 vols, (Paris, 1967).

⁵⁶ See Loïc Charles, “Le cercle de Gournay : projet politique, institutions et réseaux personnels”, Conference Commerce, population et société autour de Vincent de Gournay (1748-1758) : La genèse d'un vocabulaire des sciences sociales en France, p. 7-10.

⁵⁷ Emile Justin, *Les sociétés royales d'agriculture (1757-1793)*, (Saint-Lô, 1935), p. 42.

Marquis de Turbilly –, Trudaine de Montigny, and Bertin himself had to provide them the necessary information, counsels, and even motivation to their intendants.⁵⁸

The results of this effort depended heavily of the existence of favorable local circumstances. In the generality of Tours (February 12, 1761) and Paris (March 1, 1761) the response to Bertin's request was quick and effective thanks to the direct action of the Marquis de Turbilly.⁵⁹ In Limoges, Lyon, Rouen, Soissons and Orléans, where willing and interested intendants were in charge, societies were also founded in 1761 and set to work immediately.⁶⁰ Conversely, in the generalities where these favorable conditions did not exist, the making of agricultural societies took more time and more than once did not materialize at all.⁶¹ In September 1765, Bertin, who was not controller general anymore but still supervised the societies for the government, wrote a circular to the generalities that were still lacking agricultural societies urging their intendants to do something about it.⁶²

Whatever the difficulties encountered by Bertin's project, it reached its main objectives in the first part of the 1760s. In several societies the intellectual quality of the members was beyond doubt. In Orléans, Le Trosne and Saint Pérary were founding members as well as Bœsnier de l'Orme, Bigot de la Touanne and the celebrated *Ami des hommes*, the Marquis de Mirabeau. In Soissons was Dupont de Nemours and Mahieux de Vauvilliers who

⁵⁸ Part of the correspondence between the agricultural societies and the control general is at the *Archives Nationales* (A. N., H¹ 1501-1514). Several examples of the agency of Bertin's office can be drawn from this. For instance, in 1760 Trudaine de Montigny sent the first volume of the *Corps d'observation* of the Brittany's society to all the provincial intendants with the suggestion that they copy its statutes (see the letters thanking him for his sending from the intendants of Soissons and Besançon in A. N., H¹ 1502 and H¹ 1504). In 1761 and for the same purpose, he send the two *Arrêts du Conseil* establishing the first two societies of Tours and Paris as well as the printed *Recueil des délibérations* of the Parisian agricultural society, see A. N., H¹ 1501, circular of the controller general dated October 25, 1761.

⁵⁹ The landed estate of Turbilly was situated in the territory of the generality of Tours where he had many correspondents and friends in the local gentry and administration. As to Paris, the leading role of Turbilly is shown by the fact that, among other things, he was the only one to contribute for two memoirs (on the establishment of agricultural societies in the kingdom) in the *Recueil des délibérations*. See also Guillory (dit L'ainé), *Le marquis de Turbilly agronome angevin du XVIII^e siècle*, (Paris, 1862) and A. N. H¹ 1501, H¹ 1506.

⁶⁰ The intendant de Rouen, Feydau de Brou, had been corresponding with Silhouette, predecessor of Bertin, on the liberalization of grain trade and he was already at that time urging the controller general to give complete freedom of trade. In Soissons, Méliand's interest for agricultural reforms is shown by the letters and the report he sent Bertin in 1760-1761, as well as archives of the Soissons agricultural society in the Archives Nationales. In 1763 and 1764, he would commission Dupont de Nemours to make economic surveys in his generality. La Michodière's (Lyon) had a direct hand in publishing economic writings favorable to free grain trade in 1760-1761 and Turgot's (Limoges) standing as an active reformer is well-known. See Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy*, pp. 125-130; A. N. K. 906, n° 36; K 908, n° 57; H¹ 1502, file 'Société d'agriculture de Soissons'; BN N. Acq. Fr. 3347, ff. 62-63; M. Fr. 22150, f. 104.

⁶¹ The last society was established in Aix (Provence) in January 1765. At this time, only half of generalities (32) had an agricultural society (16). Moreover, some of these societies had a very limited activity after the end of the 1760s.

⁶² *Circulaire de Bertin du 21 septembre 1765*, A. N., H¹ 1501.

also belonged to the school of Quesnay and in Lyon was Pierre Poivre. Unsurprisingly, the most impressive record is shown by the Parisian Society where one could find top level administrators like Bertin, Trudaine de Montigny or Monthyon, scientists like Buffon, Jussieu, Le Roy and Roux, together with the most famous agronomists of the kingdom Duhamel, Tillet, Pattullo, Butré, the Baron d'Ogilvy, and some of Gournay's pupils: Plumard de Dangeul and Abeille. But even in less gifted society's, the cooperation between the intendant and the agricultural societies was fruitful in 1761 and 1762. When Bertin engaged in a major consultation on the grain trade issue in August 1761, all existing societies were consulted by the intendants. One example is Rouen where the intendant, Feydeau de Brou, wrote to Bertin: 'I postponed the response to the letter you sent me on the 1st of August with the memoir on freedom of grain trade only because I thought necessary, before all things, to communicate it to the Royal agricultural society. I have the honor to send you its observations that I share completely on each point'.⁶³ Similar courses of events occurred in Alençon, Tours, Le Mans, and Orléans where no less than four memoirs or letters on free grain trade were addressed to Bertin before 1763.⁶⁴ In parallel with the societies, several intendants replied to the queries of Bertin. In one instance at least, an intendant (Levignen in Alençon) entertained his subdelegates in doing the same thing.⁶⁵ But Bertin felt that the shyness of administrators regarding free trade in grain was not completely overcome. Thus, he sent another circular containing a draft version of the new law in April 1762 with a fierce covering letter declaring that "The only means of encouraging agriculture and creating thereby a constant abundance was to leave liberty to the internal trade and assure the cultivators a price proportionate to their works".⁶⁶

The establishment of agricultural societies brought the intendants in contact with the ideas reformers were publishing for almost a decade. By sending books produced outside the administration and for the public to guide their provincial intendants to create and manage the agricultural societies, Trudaine de Montigny and the office of the control general blurred the frontier between the state and the public. To meet the demands of the central government,

⁶³ 7 septembre 1761, A. N., H¹ 1507.

⁶⁴ See for example : A. N., H¹ 1502, 'État des mémoires lus dans la société d'agriculture d'Orléans depuis son établissement' ; H¹ 1503, file 'Société de la Rochelle' ; H¹ 1505, file 'Société d'Alençon' ; H¹ 1506, '7^e dossier du Bureau de Tours' ; H¹ 1514 'Observations et réponses sur la liberté ou la prohibition du commerce des grains', par M. Véron Duverger (secretary of Le Mans's society and father of Forbonnais). Only a few memoirs are actually in the Archives Nationales, but the past existence of many more can be traced through the correspondence between the societies and the control general that has survived.

⁶⁵ Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy*, pp. 132-136.

provincial intendants were forced to interact more widely with the enlightened provincial elites represented in the agricultural societies.⁶⁷ Moreover, in economic matters the intendant had to consult regularly the societies on the behalf of the *contrôle général*. The weekly or monthly discussions that took place in the agricultural societies gave legitimacy to the debate that has developed in the public. The memoirs and letters from the societies quoted from the writings of the Gournay circle. In 1762, the Society of Rouen began his answer to Bertin by stating bluntly that: “Most of the issues of this memoir were discussed with as clarity as accuracy by M. Herbert in his excellent book named *Essai sur la police des grains*, the authors who wrote after him adopted his principles, and left almost nothing to be desired on this matter”.⁶⁸ Likewise, in in another memoir from 1763 the secretary of Rouen’s society, Jore, paraphrased the arguments of the writers of Gournay circle: “the interest of trade is always much more effective in keeping us from dearth than the police regulations”.⁶⁹ He also went further than Bertin’s project by asking external as well as internal liberty. Moreover, agricultural societies were also keen to publicize the inside debates over agriculture they had and published the reports of their sessions or the most important texts produced by their members.⁷⁰

The enthusiasm of most of provincial intendants for this new state of affairs might be questioned since few showed real concern and interest for the societies. However, on the whole Bertin’s plan was a success: it forced the intendants and their subordinates to acknowledge the debates on economic ideas and policies that developed outside the administrative apparatus. Hence, they would not be dismissed off-hand as inappropriate in

⁶⁶ Translated in Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy*, p. 137.

⁶⁷ The social composition of the founding members agricultural societies is given in Roche, D., *Le siècle des Lumières en province. Académie et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, (Paris, 1978), T. II, p. 435-438.

⁶⁸ ‘Observations de la société d’agriculture de Rouen sur le mémoire envoyé par le contrôleur général au mois de juillet 1761’, 6th file, H¹ 1507. See also the ‘Discours sur les sociétés d’agriculture’ in the collection of memoirs edited by Rouen’s society in 1763.

⁶⁹ ‘Mémoire sur le commerce des bleds et des farines en France à l’imitation des anglois et des approvisionnements qui en seroient naturellement la suite’, 18 avril 1763, 7th file, H¹ 1507.

⁷⁰ *Corps d’observations de la société d’agriculture, de commerce et des arts, établie par les états de Bretagne. Années 1757 et 1758*, (Rennes, 1760) ; *Recueil contenant les délibérations de la société d’agriculture de la généralité de Paris, au bureau de Paris, depuis le 12 mars jusqu’au 10 septembre 1761. Et les mémoires publiés par son ordre pendant le même tems*, (Paris, 1761) ; *Corps d’observations de la société d’agriculture, de commerce et des arts, établie par les états de Bretagne. Années 1759 et 1760*, (Paris, 1762) ; *Recueil des délibérations et des mémoires de la société royale d’agriculture de la généralité de Tours, pour l’année 1761*, (Tours, 1763) ; *Délibérations et mémoires de la société royale d’agriculture de le généralité de Rouen*, (Rouen, 1763). In addition to these treatises, several smaller memoirs were printed and sold locally. Some of them can be found in the archives of the societies in the Archives Nationales.

the context of the discussion of legislative reform that took place in 1762-1763. Opposition to internal liberalization faded and the declaration on internal free trade replicating almost *verbatim* the project send by Bertin to his intendants a year ago was decreed in May 1763. Bertin was a cautious man and even if he had favored reforms in the mode of governing his administration that had many common points with those of Gournay's circle, he thought that a pause was necessary on the matter of grain trade and, instead of trying to enforce free external trade, he turn his thoughts to issues of practical agriculture during the remaining eight months of his post.⁷¹ The influence of the agricultural societies was not powerful enough to change this course. They certainly reassure the government on the attitude of the provinces as to freedom of trade, but the next move has to come from inside the economic administration to win acceptance for free exportation.

5 Toward a new politics of economic government (1763-1765)?

In December 1763, Bertin left the *contrôle général* to another man of parliamentary background: L'Averdy. L'Averdy's was a law theorist and had no training whatsoever in economic matters. Paradoxically, this helped the penetration of economic discourse inside the administration. Devoid of strong prejudices against economic discourse, he was confident in the advises of experts to shape his economic policies. However, he did not rely on the agricultural societies: Bertin was still a prominent member of the government and was in charge of the societies. Instead, he turned to individual advisers and the other existing economic institutions inside the administration: the Board of trade and the deputies of commerce.⁷²

As soon as L'Averdy took over his new responsibilities at the end of December 1763, he was immediately confronted to a host of requests for further liberalization of grain trade emanating from agricultural societies, economic writers as well as provincial parliaments.⁷³ In

⁷¹ On Bertin's opinion on free exportation, see "Observations de M. Bertin à Turgot, contrôleur général", (7 septembre 1774), A. N., F¹¹ 265.

⁷² Through the agency of Trudaine de Montigny and his father, Louis-Paul Abeille was appointed by L'Averdy in October 1764 at the salary of 8,000 livres tournois to advise him 'on several matters of commerce and industry'. See A. N., F¹⁷ 288, file 1. Dupont de Nemours, Isaac de Bacalan and Clicquot de Blervache may also have acted as advisors but not officialy, see Félix, *Finances et politiques au siècle des Lumières, le ministère L'Averdy 1763-1768*, (Paris, 1999), p. 206.

⁷³ Louis-Paul Abeille, *Lettre d'un négociant sur la nature du commerce des grains. 8 octobre 1763*, (Paris, 1763); *Réflexions sur la police des grains en France et en Angleterre*, (Paris, 1764); Pierre Samuel Du Pont (later Du Pont de Nemours), *Lettre à M*****, au sujet de la cherté des bleds en Guyenne. Paris*, (Soissons, 1764); *De l'exportation et de l'importation des grains*, (Soissons, 1764); Morellet, A., *Fragment d'une lettre sur*

the first days of 1764, he received a letter from the parliament of Besançon asking him to authorize exportation from this province in Switzerland. L'Averdy transmitted immediately this letter to the Board of Trade for advice adding four questions to it.⁷⁴ By this move, the controller general transformed a routine decision into a wide ranging questioning of the legislation on grain trade.⁷⁵ The Board did not examine L'Averdy's request at once but asked for further advice from the deputies of commerce and the deputies of the town of Paris.⁷⁶ The opinions of the two groups of deputies were in stark contrast. While the deputies of Paris were opposed to liberty, the deputies of commerce showed great enthusiasm for liberalization. Moreover, while the former criticized the point of view of the economic writers for being partial and unpractical,⁷⁷ the latter agreed with it. The ensuing session of the Board of trade where the questions of L'Averdy were discussed took place on 8th March and ended in a 'no-contest' decision. The opposition between the participants was too stark to reach an agreement.⁷⁸ The dividing line did not cross upon the principle of free trade – all were

le commerce des grains, (Paris, 1764). The parliaments of Besançon, Dijon, Grenoble, Rennes, Rouen asked for free export at least for their generality in 1763 or the beginning of 1764, see Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy*, p. 183-187.

⁷⁴ The Board of Trade was composed of the controller general, the Lieutenant of police of Paris, six commissioners, the intendants of trade and the intendants of finances who all had a right of vote. There were also the deputies of commerce, the general inspectors of manufacture, four representatives of the *fermiers généraux*, as well as occasional experts mandated by the royal administrations who could be consulted but did not take part of the vote. It must be added that only a small part of all these individuals actually assisted to each session of the Board of Trade, depending on the order of the day and each one's field of competence. Consequently, unless there is a precise enumeration of the participants in the minutes, which is not the case for the sessions who will be mentioned in the following, it is quite impossible to know the exact composition of each particular Board or Council of Trade. See Bonnassieux & Lelong, *Conseil de commerce et bureau du commerce 1700-1791...*; Frédéric Garrigues, 'Les intendants de commerce au XVIII^e siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 45 (1998), p. 626-661 ; David Smith, 2002, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ The questions of L'Averdy were: '1°. S'il est avantageux ou non de permettre la libre exportation à l'étranger ; 2°. dans le cas où cette exportation serait estimée avantageuse en elle-même ; quelles précautions il conviendrait de prendre pour empêcher qu'il pût en résulter des inconvénients soit actuellement, soit dans la suite ; 3°. S'il convient d'accorder cette permission dans le moment ou s'il vaut mieux la différer ; 4°. Dans le cas où il serait plus convenable de différer, si on doit l'accorder à quelques provinces frontières du royaume', cited in Félix, *Finances et politique...*, p. 191. It must be noted that authorizations of exportation for a limited time and from a limited area (*passesports*) were part of the traditional legislation.

⁷⁶ L'Averdy's request was presented January, 12. The advises from the deputies were read February, 9 but they were not discussed until the next session of the Board.

⁷⁷ 'Each author of a book on this important subject seems to surrender himself to the system he adopted and to have followed it without taking sufficient account of its drawbacks and weighing all the advantages of the opposed system ... We cannot but agree that their arguments are seducing and specious, but are the best of them without rejoinder ? And, apart from the fact that they copied one on another, they do not appear to have always put in facts what was at issue', Bibliothèque Nationale [B. N.], Manuscrits français [M. Fr.] 14296, *Mémoire et avis de messieurs du bureau de la ville ...*, ff. 4, 7.

⁷⁸ Details of this session were given in the report L'Averdy presented to the King in April: *Rapport concernant l'exportation et l'importation des grains*, A. N., 144 AP 114, dossier n° 8. See Félix, *Finances et politique...*, pp. 193-201 for an assessment of this report.

convinced that it was beneficial – but on its application.⁷⁹ On all the particular points discussed, there was disagreement: some commissioners wanted to permit export only on national vessels, others did not; some wanted to have a price ceiling limiting export, they were criticized by the others; some were inclined to tax the grain exported, others did not. Even the legal form of the law was opened to dissension for several commissioners thought it more cautious to use an *Arrêt du conseil* that could be suspended at any moment, while the others pointed out that a simple *Arrêt du conseil* would be as ineffective in 1764 as it proved to be in 1754 and asked for a more spectacular and significant legal form.⁸⁰

To escape this dead end, L'Averdy made two moves. First, he wrote and presented a report to the king summarizing the advices of the two groups of deputies and the discussion that took place subsequently at the Board of trade. Second, he asked the deputies of commerce to detail further their point of view. The deputies met his demand with great zeal and wrote no less than five more memoirs in a few weeks.⁸¹ What is particularly interesting is that while the first memoir of the deputies was written in a technical and administrative way, devoid of direct quotations from the printed writings issued in the public debate, the four additional contributions revealed the deep influence of political economy on the deputies as well as their vast knowledge of this literature.

In the second report, the deputies gave their two main references on grain trade: *The Essai sur la police générale des grains* by Herbert and the article 'Grains' written by Quesnay

⁷⁹ The first question was answered with an unanimous 'yes' and the reasons given echoed the report of the deputies of commerce: '1°. Le blé se soutiendrait toujours à un prix raisonnable, et qu'en conséquence l'agriculture recevrait de nouveaux accroissements. 2°. Que l'excédent de nos récoltes ne serait pas perdu dans les années fécondes. 3°. Que la libre importation nous apporteraient des blés dans les années stériles. 4°. Qu'en conséquence, les laboureurs supporteraient avec beaucoup plus de facilités, les impôts dont le malheur des circonstances a obligé de les charger'. But while two participants concluded for complete freedom of trade on these grounds, 'Tous les autres commissaires ont pensé qu'il serait nécessaire de prendre des précautions lorsqu'il s'agirait de permettre la libre exportation des grains, mais sur le plus ou moins d'étendue de ces précautions, il y a eu diversité', *Rapport concernant l'exportation et l'importation des grains*, A. N., 144 AP 114, dossier n° 8, ff. 17-18.

⁸⁰ *Rapport concernant l'exportation et l'importation des grains*, ff. 18-19.

⁸¹ They are in the Bibliothèque Nationale bound in a single volume (M. Fr. 14295). Titles are (in the order in which they are classified in the volume): *1^{er} Avis des députés du commerce sur les quatre questions proposées au Bureau du commerce le 12 janvier 1764*; *2^e avis des députés du commerce sur les quatre questions proposées au Bureau du commerce le 12 janvier 1764*; *Mémoire joint à l'avis des députés du commerce. Les avantages de la libre exportation prouvée par les faits*; *1^{er} supplément au premier mémoire*; *2^e supplément au mémoire*; *Mémoire particulier d'un des députés du commerce. MM. les commissaires du Roy assemblés au bureau du commerce le 12 janvier 1764 ont désiré qu'on leur fournit des observations sur les questions suivantes*. All the memoirs were undated but they were made after the session of the 8th march on L'Averdy's request and before the session that settled the issue on the 17th June. In the last but one of these memoirs, the deputies referred to 'the session of the board of trade that took place on the 8th of this month' (that is March), *2^e supplément au mémoire*, B. N., M. Fr. 14295, f. 84.

in the vol. VII of the *Encyclopédie*.⁸² Not only the deputies used data taken from these texts but they did not hesitate to quote directly from them.⁸³ More importantly, they espoused the methodological principles on which the reformers based their plea for free trade. The first supplement to the original memoir provided extensive calculations to show that liberalization is both necessary and salutary for the economic health of the kingdom. They relied on several sources: they backed the evaluations of ‘modern writers’ with the authority of Vauban and Bodin to prove the depopulation of the kingdom.⁸⁴ This strong emphasis on calculations was criticized by several of the commissioners of the Board of trade who were not used to them, nor confident about their reliability. However, the deputies were not impressed. Instead, they calmly respond, echoing political economists: ‘Quoy que dans la séance du bureau du commerce tenu le 8 de ce mois, plusieurs de Messieurs les commissaires de sa majesté n’ayent pas paru goûter quelques calculs que les députés du commerce ont crû devoir présenter a l’appuy de leurs reflexions, on pense que les calculs sont le langage des matières oeconomiques, et qu’ils présentent des vérités certaines. En voicy quelques résultats dont l’examen peut servir a se désabuser, on a combattu les opinions opposées a l’exportation des bleds à l’étranger.’⁸⁵ In addition to this, the memoir provided an extensive and almost complete bibliography of writings advocating free trade in grain up to 1763.⁸⁶

The influence of these reports on the decision to liberalize free trade can be traced through the correspondence of L’Averdy. L’Averdy himself was not immediately impressed by the arguments of the reformers. As he wrote to Miromesnil, President of the Parliament of Rouen, a few years later: ‘I was called a weak man for having taken one a month to decide in

⁸² *2^e avis des députés du commerce ...*, ff. 12-14 and 19-20. See also *Mémoire particulier d’un des députés du commerce...*, f. 94.

⁸³ They reproduce *verbatim* some of the maxims of Quesnay that would become famous a few years later thanks to the propaganda of his disciples: “la nonvaleur avec l’abondance n’est point richesse [...] l’abondance permanente avec cherté est opulence [...] la cherté avec pénurie est misère”, *2^e avis des députés du commerce ...*, ff. 19-20.

⁸⁴ The deputies made a complicated calculation of their own to prove that foreign countries could not buy a significant portion of French grain and put the kingdom to starvation. The reference to the unproductive *petite culture* opposed to the more efficient *grande culture* and the data provided are taken from Quesnay’s article ‘Grains’. The other calculations seemed to be based on Vauban’s data. See *1^{er} supplément au premier mémoire*, ff. 5-7 and ff. 68-73.

⁸⁵ *2^e supplément au mémoire*, f. 82. Compare this with the ‘Foreword’ to the physiocratic work, the *Philosophie rurale* issued in February 1764, p. xx: ‘la science économique est approfondie et développée par l’examen et par le raisonnement ; mais dans les calculs, elle serait toujours une science indéterminée, confuse et livrée partout à l’erreur et au préjugé... Les calculs ne peuvent être attaqués que par des calculs, comme les jugemens ne peuvent être réformés ou confirmés que par les jugemens ; et quoique les méprises y soient fréquentes, il n’y a qu’eux cependant qui puissent nous conduire et nous fixer à la certitude’.

⁸⁶ *Mémoire particulier d’un des députés du commerce...*, ff. 130-131.

favor of the export in the Council'.⁸⁷ The other commissioners were even more reluctant since two months after the session of the Board of Trade of 8 March a decision was not reached yet.⁸⁸ It took another a month and a half to settle matters, during the session of 17th June.⁸⁹ The edict was finally issued in July and its content strongly underlined the influence of the work of the deputies. First, as advised by the deputies the figure of 12 livres 10 sous per quintal as the upper price ceiling of export was chosen, despite the opposition of no less a figure than the former controller general Bertin.⁹⁰ Second, the grain exported must be carried on French vessels as recommended by the deputies of trade.⁹¹ Third, as suggested by the anonymous deputy, export is limited to the principal ports and towns that have a bureau of registration.⁹² The preamble of the edict written by L'Averdy showed the marked influence the discourse of political economy had acquired inside the administration. While Bertin's preamble of the 1763 declaration still considered grain as a subsistence and insisted merely on its benevolent effect on the 'welfare of the people', L'Averdy switched emphasis to the economic value of the product of the land in the wealth of nation along lines delineated by Herbert, Quesnay and many others.⁹³ The men who were at the head of economic administration had been convinced by the method of discussing and evaluating economic policies popularized by economic writers in the public debate. These methods which had been used by the deputies of trade gained a more permanent and institutionalized place inside the

⁸⁷ L'Averdy to Miromesnil, 6th september 1767, in *Correspondance Miromesnil*, T. V, p. 43.

⁸⁸ 'Vous savez quant à l'exportation des bleds, qu'on s'en est le plus sérieusement occupé : la question est pendante au Conseil de commerce, je l'ai rapportée devant le Roy ; S. M. n'a pas encore indiqué le jour qu'il y sera délibéré. Il a été fait des copies des rapports pōur tous les membres du Conseil.' L'Averdy to Miromesnil, 3rd May 1764, in *Correspondance Miromesnil*, T. III, p. 261. Miromesnil replied a little later : 'je suis pas surpris que le projet de permettre l'exportation des grains soit difficile à conduire avec succès', Miromesnil to L'Averdy, 27th may 1764, in *Correspondance Miromesnil*, T. III, p. 268.

⁸⁹ L'Averdy to Miromesnil, 18th June 1764, in *Correspondance Miromesnil*, T. III, p. 295.

⁹⁰ See *Observations de M. Bertin à Turgot, contrôleur général*, 7 septembre 1774, A. N. F¹¹ 265. *Mémoire particulier d'un des députés du commerce...*, ff. 112-116.

⁹¹ *Mémoire particulier d'un des députés du commerce...*, ff. 112-116, see also *Avis des députés du commerce sur le libre commerce des grains, intérieur et extérieur 26 octobre 1769*. A. N., F¹² 715, f. 16.

⁹² See art IV of the edict. The whole text is in *Recueil des principales loix relatives au commerce des grains, avec les arrêts, arrêtés et remontrances du parlement sur cet objet et le procès verbal de l'assemblée générale de police tenue à Paris le 28 nov. 1768*, (Paris, 1769), pp. 58-64.

⁹³ 'The free export and import of corn and flour [is] proper to animate and extend the cultivation of the land whose product is the most genuine spring and the most tangible of the wealth of a state', in *Recueil des principales loix...*, p. 59.

administration as the government recruited some of the reformers at a high level of the economic administration.⁹⁴

On the whole, the discourse of political economy had gained a new status inside the administration. It was now possible not only to mention the writings of political economists but the most notable of these were used as authorities during the process of policy making. The methods of arguing and policy proposals that had been put forward in the context of the public debate were now considered valid and included in the administrative process of discussion and selection of economic policies. The dream that the administrators and writers from Gournay circle had made in the 1750s was coming true: the public debate had overcome the obstacles put by administrative traditions and vested interests to win recognition at the highest level of the state.

6 Concluding remarks

The history of grain trade liberalization shows the necessity of reconsider the agency of public opinion in the second half of eighteenth-century. In *L'ancien régime et la révolution*, Tocqueville posited the separation that existed between, on the one hand, philosophers and economists, the makers of public opinion and, on the other end, administration, the policy maker:

“Tandis qu’en Angleterre ceux qui écrivaient sur le gouvernement et ceux qui gouvernaient étaient mêlés, les uns introduisant les idées nouvelles dans la pratique, les autres redressant et circonscrivant les théories à l’aide des faits, en France, le monde politique resta comme divisé en deux provinces séparées et sans commerce entre elles. Dans la première on administrait ; dans la seconde on établissait les principes abstraits sur lesquels toute administration eût dû se fonder. Ici on prenait des mesures particulières que la routine indiquait ; là on proclamait des lois générales sans jamais songer aux moyens de les appliquer : aux uns, la conduite des affaires ; aux autres la direction des intelligences.”⁹⁵

This division between those who governed the state and those who direct public opinion was, according to him one of the reasons that drove France to 1789. To a large extent,

⁹⁴ Such as Abeille who was appointed as economic advisor of the controller general in October 1764, inspector general of the manufactures in 1765, and finally Secretary of the Board of Trade in 1768. Clicquot de Blervache, another pupil of Gournay, was also appointed as inspector general of the manufactures in 1766. Dupont de Nemours and Morellet were also asked to provide advises on economic policy by the controller general or Trudaine de Montigny. See Morellet, *Mémoires*, p. 165

⁹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, (Paris, 1988), p. 256.

the narrative of the historians of public opinion, Baker and Furet in particular, reproduces the analysis of Tocqueville positing a stark opposition between those who created the concept of public opinion as a mode of critique of the power of the state, and those who were in charge of this power.

As I have shown here, this historical interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the fact that public opinion as a political concept has its origins in the will of part of the French government to lessen the role of the traditional politics of financiers and courtiers in designing economic policies. As shown above, political economy played a central role in the founding of public opinion because of its political status: by nature, debates about state finances, and almost every issue of political economy touched the subject, concerned the public domain. Thus, by breaking the politics of secret, Gournay, Malesherbes and the others challenged the traditional process of policy making in order to rationalize it. Public opinion was less a weapon they would use to undermine public authority than a tool to reform it. It is in this perspective that public opinion became a political force that helped the enlightened members of the government to convince the state machinery to implement free trade in grain. There was indeed a period, brief but intense, when the administration embraced the new politics of economic government and believed that they could rely on them to escape the influence of traditional lobbies and reform successfully the French state.