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THE DEBATE ON LUXURY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE
A STUDY IN THE LANGUAGE OF OPPOSITION TO CHANGE

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The translations that follow are my own, except where otherwise noted. I have not translated poetry, except when single lines are quoted, nor words and phrases whose French expression is significant for my argument. Grammar and punctuation have been updated in the translations. "Parvenus" and "philosophes" are not italicized.

INTRODUCTION

For its editor, the Encyclopédie was both an agent and a barometer of social and intellectual change. This enormous introduction to the philosophes' world was an important weapon in their campaign to "change the general way of thinking," for it presented a new, "philosophical" vocabulary. "Today, when the philosophic spirit is advancing with great strides, overcoming everything in its path, and is fast becoming the dominant intellectual force," Diderot wrote in 1755, "men are beginning to shake off the yoke of authority and to adhere instead to the laws of reason."¹ Diderot expected that these changes would transform the French language drastically. By the end of the century, he predicted, at least one-third of the words in our dictionaries of poetry and oratory would be out of date. To illustrate this problem of definition, Diderot cited the common word luxé, whose meaning everyone believed to be obvious. "But what is this luxé which we attribute so unerringly to so many objects?" This question could be answered only by means of thorough discussion, which even those most fastidious in their application of the term had in Diderot's view, failed to do, and would perhaps be incapable of doing.²

Diderot was not alone in this opinion. Helvétius believed that the contemporary confusion about luxé served as a vivid illustration of the ways in which our judgement is impaired by ignorance.³ But Diderot's use of luxé to illustrate the fluctuating meaning of words in periods of

¹ Encyclopédie, in Denis Diderot, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jules Assézat and Maurice Tourneux (Paris: Garnier frères, 1875-77), XIV, 424.

² Ibid., p. 417.

³ "De l'ignorance," in De l'esprit (first published in 1758). Oeuvres complètes de M. Helvétius (London, 1777), II, 14. See also De l'homme, sec. 6, Chaps. III-V.

intellectual ferment was a more knowledgeable one. For he saw the current confusion about luxe in the context of "the progress of reason," which he believed would transform even the vocabulary of everyday life.

The heated debate on luxury which emerged in eighteenth-century France was the result of a clash between several different intellectual frameworks, in which luxe had very different meanings.¹ The debate became a persistent literary occupation in eighteenth-century France, occasioning dozens of scholarly treatises, serious essays and articles, and even epic-length poems. Mandeville, Melon, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mirabeau, and Baudeau were major contributors. To the body of arguments with which classical and Christian writers had long condemned luxury as a public danger and a private vice, the eighteenth-century authors added a new repertoire of arguments condemning, and, more significantly, defending it. Ultimately, they came to view luxe in a totally new context and to transform its meaning.

In the seventeenth century, the subject of luxury had belonged mainly to the domain of preachers and moralists, though some students of "commerce" discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the trade and manufacture of luxuries. While the traditional moral and religious views on luxury continued to be voiced with force and enthusiasm in the eighteenth century, those who thought of it in economic or political terms were not only elaborating their own positions, but openly challenging those of the moralists. In the course of this debate, luxe came to be viewed not as a vice, but as a special style of consumer expense, the social consequences of which could be analyzed.

Why did a matter which seemingly excited very limited interest for hundreds of years, suddenly become the center of a wide and heated debate?² The most useful explanation of the surge of interest in

¹ Rather than "intellectual framework," J.G.A. Pocock uses the more precise term, "language system." See his stimulating essay, "Politics, Language and Time," in Essays in Political Thought and History (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

² The rate of increase in general literary production in the eighteenth century is much lower than the rate for books specifically devoted to the question of luxury, a figure much larger still when those books which deal with it only in part are counted. According to the composite figures presented by Estivals for books published in France,

rethinking the luxury question lies in the political and social changes of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

For Louis XIV and his officials, the question of luxury was part of the more general problem of increasing government revenue, a concern made livelier by wars more costly than any previously known to French history.¹ Mercantilist officials defended and promoted domestic luxury industries like silk, porcelain, and tapestries as sources of royal revenue. Louis XIV also used elegance and luxury at court as political weapons against the prestige of the old nobility. Hostility to luxury was thus bound up with clerical and secular opposition to Louis XIV's policies of war and administrative centralization. Attacks on luxury as a cause of national ruin appeared side by side with more direct political attacks on the monarchy.²

In 1704 the English writer Bernard Mandeville published a short book of doggerel titled "The Grumb'ling Hive," in which he presented some of the views of British mercantilists on luxury and the other "vices" which help society to function. Mandeville was aware that his defense of luxury put him squarely on the side of the British political reformers who were in many ways the counterparts of Louis XIV and his officials.³

The first major contributions to the luxury debate, in the 1730's, coincide with the beginnings of a period of recovery from the commercial, agricultural, and demographic disasters that had marked the

there was only a relatively gradual acceleration in the number of books published between 1710 and 1780, from 160 per year to 590 per year. See Robert Estivals, La Statistique bibliographique de la France sous la monarchie au XVIII^e siecle (Paris and the Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), pp. 346-47. The number of books on luxury, however, increased ten- or twenty-fold in the same time period.

¹ Franklin Ford, Robe and Sword, The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 12.

² This function of the luxury issue is particularly clear in the anonymous "Memoire sur les finances" cited by Lionel Rothkrug in Opposition to Louis XIV (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 249-58.

³ See below, Chap. I, and Isaac Kramnick, Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), Chaps. II and III.

previous hundred years, and especially the last three decades of the reign of Louis XIV. The upsurge of interest in luxury also coincides with the relative peace and political stability of the Fleury period after the political and financial crises of the Regency. The monetary stabilization of 1726 and a long period of relative peace also made economic recovery possible.

This phase of the debate was also a continuation of the earlier discussion of the means by which government can help to increase public wealth through commerce. It is not surprising that those most concerned with this question were government officials like Melon, or men hopeful about the reforming potential of the monarchy like Voltaire.¹ Mandeville's assertion that human greed and love for luxuries, though called vices by Christians, were essential to the sound functioning of any economy was known in France in the early decades of the eighteenth century.² Reviews of later editions of Mandeville's work, now titled The Fable of the Bees, appeared in French journals during the 1720's. But it was in Melon's Essai politique sur le commerce, published in 1734, that Mandeville's ideas were first presented in a comprehensive form to French readers. Jean-François Melon, a government official and for a time Law's secretary, was especially interested in the sources of national wealth. Luxury would in most cases increase this wealth, he thought, by stimulating industry and trade. In Le Mondain, published two years later, Voltaire expounded similar arguments in amiable verse form, stressing that luxury was an essential feature of modern civilization. Melon admired Voltaire's poem as a contribution to the discussion of the origins of national wealth, and called it "an excellent lesson in politics hidden behind charming banter."³ Mandeville's Fable of the Bees was finally translated into French in 1740, an event noted with

¹Thanks to Peter Gay's work, Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1965), this view of Voltaire's attitude toward the monarchy is now widely accepted.

²Montesquieu refers to it in the Lettres persanes (1720), for example.

³"Lettre à Madame la Comtesse de Verrue," in André Morize, L'Apologie du luxe au XVIII^e siècle: "Le Mondain" et ses sources (Paris: Didier, 1909), p. 151.

interest in a number of French periodicals. With the presentation of these works to French readers, the debate on luxury took a new form. There now existed an attractive and challenging defense of luxury with explicit foundations in philosophy and social thought. Henceforth the terms of the debate would be changed. Even the most old-fashioned censors of luxury would have to acknowledge the existence of a substantial school of apologists. Mandeville and his disciples Voltaire and Melon had put the debate on a new footing.

The defense of the utility of luxury which Mandeville and his French disciples presented generated three main responses in France. Preachers and moralists continued to voice the traditional arguments against luxury: that it was a vice which "corrupted the soul," "enervated the body," distracted men from the business of salvation, undermined family life, and regularly caused empires to decline. Some openly attacked the apologists; others only acknowledged their existence by slightly modifying the tone of their favorite arguments to suit "modern" readers. But the views of Mandeville's school also elicited a second kind of reply. Accepting the link between luxury, wealth, and civilization, this second group of antagonists attacked all three with varying degrees of severity, and instead defended a model of a simple and poor agrarian society based on ancient Sparta, the Roman Republic, the Swiss city-states, or France before the Bourbons. In the period of political conflict and general pessimism about the future of the French nation that followed the unsatisfactory Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, Rousseau's Discours sur les sciences et les arts (1750) was not the only work to doubt the worth of the new values and institutions to which French commercial success since the 1730's had given rise. Rousseau's views were echoed by contemporary essayists writing for the concours of the provincial academies. These attitudes colored the works of writers like Mably and d'Holbach, and also of many lesser authors, who did not distinguish very carefully between Rousseau's new formulation of the luxury question and that of the older school of moralists. Indeed, the two schools had much in common.

With the publication of his De l'esprit des lois in 1748, Montesquieu introduced a mode of thinking later adopted by a third group of analysts.

Accepting the need to redefine luxury as a social rather than a theological issue, they also conceived of it as a normal human desire which could not be held responsible in itself for political and moral corruption. Montesquieu, however, also pointed out that luxury is destructive in republics because it is incompatible with "virtue," the political characteristic on which republican government is based. Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois was a highly elaborated statement of the position of the earlier aristocratic opposition to Louis XIV, and to his project of royal centralization. His analysis of the relation between luxu and despotism, both in this work and in the earlier Lettres persanes, makes it clear that for Montesquieu the problem of luxury was really that of despotism. Diderot and Saint-Lambert, who wrote about luxury in the 1760's, also saw it as a political rather than a moral issue. Luxury, they observed, often did seem socially harmful. Examining it closely, however, revealed that most of the damage which critics attributed to luxury could be laid at the door of failures in the political realm. Rampant luxury was a sure sign of despotism.

In the 1750's, 1760's, and 1770's a number of economists--Mirabeau, Baudeau, and Butel-Dumont among them--contributed their views to the controversy. They continued the discussion of the economic aspects of luxury which Melon had initiated. Their greatest interest in luxury was its relation to questions of production and consumption. Dumont, who had served as an official in the Contrôle générale, succeeded in isolating luxury as a factor in the creation of national prosperity. The physiocrats, though they went to great lengths to use the term luxu precisely, shared many of the assumptions of the moralists about wealth, including a distrust of social groups whose wealth was not based on land and traditional forms of status. Luxury, for the physiocrats, became a form of private expenditure which would have harmful results if it involved the sacrifice of funds needed to maintain agricultural production. The physiocrats represented a compromise between the modernizing tendencies of the Bourbon officials, who were willing to override noble privilege for fiscal efficiency, and the social conservatism of many members of the old nobility. They claimed, for instance, that the royal taxes would yield more in a predominantly

agricultural society presided over by intelligent landed proprietors.

The 1760's marked the appearance of the first large treatises on luxury, works which continued to be published regularly in the next two decades. Earlier entries in the debate had usually been parts of works devoted to other subjects, and the vogue of separate treatises on luxury, some of them very large indeed, suggests that by 1760 it had become a common topic in literature and in political economy. In the 1760's three of these were produced in French; there were four in the 1770's and another four or five in the 1780's. During this period the provincial academies also became more interested in the debate on luxury. Essay and poetry contests were sponsored on this theme by the Academy of Montauban in 1758 (poetry), Marseilles in 1761 and 1769, the Académie Française in 1769 and 1770¹ (also poetry), the Académie des Inscriptions in 1770, the Academy of Rouen in 1772, the Académie des Jeux Floraux in Toulouse in 1781, and the Besançon Academy in 1782. The academies were also interested in the related questions of the influence of commerce on the values of a nation, and the connection between wealth, commerce, and government. Few new fundamental insights were contributed in this later phase of the debate, however; the ideas presented by Rousseau, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Melon, and Mirabeau in the 1730's, 1740's, and 1750's had established its essential outlines.

The concerns voiced by the authors of these treatises on luxury, and the questions posed about it by the academies, suggest that the advance in commercial prosperity, disturbingly accompanied by economic and political crisis, sustained interest in the debate. The beginnings of this period of more general public preoccupation with the subject of luxury coincide with the peak in eighteenth-century commercial growth. It was now over a generation since the French economy had begun to recover from its low point after the death of Louis XIV. But this prosperity did not continue to increase. In the last twenty years of the Old Regime, commerce merely remained at the levels achieved during the course of the century. In some rural areas, serious famines occurred.²

¹The contest yielded no winners, so it was held again.

²See below, Chap. I.

The political tensions of the Old Regime had also begun to intensify by mid-century. The revival of the Jansenist controversy led to another clash between king and parlements in the 1750's; the Parlement of Rennes exposed the weakness of royal authority when it refused to register a tax edict in 1764.¹ The massive opposition to Maupeou's financial and legal reforms and the popular revolts against Turgot's freeing of the grain trade in 1776 were causes for doubt about France's political destiny. The nearly unbroken series of military defeats which the Seven Years War brought, culminating in the loss of nearly all of France's colonial possession in 1763 were examples of the literal decline of an empire.

At issue in the eighteenth-century debate on luxury then, were such fundamental questions as the utility of wealth and the desirability of a complex commercial civilization. Commerce, social change, and luxury were nearly synonymous in eighteenth-century France. In the absence of a developed industrial system, most French foreign trade consisted in luxury goods--items of fashion like cloth, jewelry, and snuffboxes, wines and perfumes, and colonial goods such as coffee, chocolate, and sugar, all of which were still viewed as luxuries in the eighteenth century. Writers like Werner Sombart have shown the close connection between luxury consumption and the rise of commercial capitalism.² The vast majority of the population of Europe was too poor to participate in the market economy at all. What surplus existed was concentrated in a remarkably small number of hands. This luxury, Fernand Braudel points out, was characteristic of societies whose growth was limited, societies without significant industrial resources. It was an inevitable reflection of great differences in social levels.³

¹John Lough, An Introduction to Eighteenth-Century France (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), p. 183f.

²In Luxus und Kapitalismus (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Hum-
bolt, 1913), trans. W. R. Ditmar, Luxury and Capitalism (Ann Arbor:
The University of Michigan Press, 1967).

³Fernand Braudel, Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme (Paris:
Armand Colin, 1967); English trans. Miriam Kochan, Capitalism and Material
Life 1400-1800 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 23, 124.

This sort of luxury was a relatively new phenomenon in the eighteenth century. The delicate cuisine which delighted Voltaire in Le Mondain was probably a product of the Regency. In the 1780's, a Parisian wrote that people had only known how to "eat deliciously for a half-century." The ceremony of the elegant meal, elaborately set and with several courses, did not reach France or England until the eighteenth century.¹ Among those who displayed such luxury were urban families enriched in recent generations through business investments, government loans, and office-holding. But it was hard to see what benefit the mass of small peasant farmers and day laborers in the countryside derived from this new wealth, for they made few gains in the course of the century and especially suffered in the famines of the 1770's and 1780's.

To all but a small number of resolute optimists, these phenomena were sources of confusion and worry. People wondered whether commerce and luxury had caused the decline of the Roman Empire and if they would inevitably bring the destruction of any nation devoted to them.² Others focused on the political causes of decline. Everyone considered whether commerce, towns, and newly rich families were not bound to destroy the fundamental values of French society. Writers since the Roman Republic had warned that luxury made men lazy, corrupt, immoral, and degenerate. By the seventeenth century, however, economists had begun to argue that luxury was essential to national power and prosperity. The Toulouse Academy acknowledged a dilemma when it posed for its 1781 concours the question "Quels seroient les moyens de borner le luxe dans une monarchie, et de réprimer son action continuelle sur les mœurs sans nuire à l'industrie?"³ The winner of a similar contest sponsored by the Academy of Marseilles in 1773 urged the abolition of all foreign commerce. He admitted that luxury was essential to commercial strength, but thinking

¹Ibid., pp. 125, 139.

²These were the subjects of the concours of the Montauban Academy and of the Academy of Besancon. See Antoine-François Delandine, Couronnes académiques (Paris, 1787).

³Ibid. My emphasis.

the price too high to pay, he urged a return to rustic poverty.¹

Most of the critics of luxury questioned the value and possibility of progress and of national wealth. They viewed their society as a declining one and compared it to Rome in its final days. They condemned luxury as the cause of the "confounding of the social ranks," the decline of morals and family life, the movement of wholesome rural people to immoral cities, the decline in the French population, and the decline of French military greatness. They saw with dismay in demographic, social, and economic changes signs of the imminent or eventual collapse of their society. The proponents of luxury, however, supported commercial and industrial growth as highly desirable; the social changes provoked thereby they judged to be quite harmless in themselves. Social disorder was a problem which political reform could solve. They denied that cities were demoralizing or that French society and culture were in decline. The opponents of luxury were in general pessimists, and the apologists optimists about the present and future of their world; the anti-luxury writers, in spite of their great diversity, held a conservative, static model of society, while their opponents accepted more fluid models. But the processes which we term "urbanization," "economic growth," and "bureaucratization," denoting common and somewhat predictable developments, were not clearly understood in the eighteenth century. The heated debate on whether these changes meant destruction for their civilization took instead the form of a quarrel about the advantages and dangers of luxury. This term stood for an old subject, familiar to every eighteenth-century man with a classical or Christian education; thus a debate on issues far transcending the precise meaning of luxe could be contained within its accustomed framework. Luxury became a significant issue both because its connotations were religious, economic, and political, and because its meaning was still so imprecise that it was part of the conceptual worlds of many different French groups.

¹André Liquier, Quelle influence le commerce a-t-il eue dans tous les tems sur l'esprit et les moeurs des peuples? (Marseilles, 1777).

CHAPTER I

THE LUXURY DEBATE AND OPPOSITION TO CHANGE

The attacks on luxury which emerged in the debate were in part reproductions of ancient and conventional ideas. The corrupting influence of luxury was a theme developed by the early Church Fathers and a standard topic for sermons.¹ Roman writers beginning with Cato the Elder had associated luxury with political decline. Luxury had been blamed for "confounding the social ranks" since the late middle ages. The debate on luxury was thus to some extent a stylized literary discussion, providing a standard theme on which men of letters could exercise their talents and display their classical learning. A good number of rhymed pieces on luxury were written in rigid classical form, elegantly larded with quotations from Horace, Juvenal, and Seneca; even in the more practical-minded 1770's and 1780's, several academies presented luxury as a topic for concours de poésie, a format which invited a purely literary response. These traditional literary themes, associating luxury with corruption and decline² added to the resonances of the debate. To discuss luxe was to be faced with the issue of corruption. All who wrote about luxury had to confront the question of the nature and fate of their civilization: were the changes which administrative centralization and commercial prosperity brought to their society signs of decay, or of growth? It is not surprising that a concern with crisis and decay is found among the luxury debaters; many of them were afraid that their own age was one of drastic decline in every aspect of life, from manners and morals to the wealth, size, and even the health of the French population. Optimists, found primarily among the defenders of luxury,

¹Henri Baudrillart, Histoire du luxe privé et public depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours (Paris: Hachette, 1881), II, 420f.

²See Chap. II, below, for the history of the word luxe.

admitted the power of the pessimistic view by arguing strenuously against it.

Modern social and economic historians view the eighteenth century as a period of gradual but distinct economic and demographic recovery and progress, in contrast both to the crisis-torn seventeenth century and the faster-paced transformation of the nineteenth. It was certainly an era of political and social change, in which fundamental assumptions and institutions were threatened, not only as a result of commercial and demographic growth, but also because of the policies of the monarchy itself. These developments and the ways in which the luxury debaters viewed them are the subjects of this chapter.

Pessimism and Conservatism

The pessimism of so many of the luxury debaters was both a reaction to these changes and an atmosphere through which change was perceived. Pessimism was the product of minds which saw society as inherently static, modifications as dangerous departures from a natural order, and wealth as permanently limited so that the comfort of new men or classes must occur at the expense of the old. For many of the disputants, especially those who denounced luxury as the cause of unwanted innovations, the model of political and social order was France before the administrative reforms of Richelieu and Mazarin. They found most "natural" a densely populated rural society. Conscientious peasants worked the land under different kinds of ties to seigneurs who lived on their estates the year 'round as the chief local administrators. The monarch recognized "merit," by which the debaters usually meant "nobility," and rewarded it with offices, pensions, and power. Urban social structure might be more complex, but each social rank knew "its place" and was content to remain in it. New forms of wealth and new political formations inevitably appeared as fundamental assaults on this order.

To minds who saw the old institutions as the only acceptable ones, the changes of the eighteenth century seemed to bring disaster; repeated military failures, political conflict, rural poverty, and depopulation could be the only outcome. Such assumptions about the proper social

order appear in the "radical" thought of Rousseau, Mably, and Holbach, as well as in the work of Montesquieu, Mirabeau, Diderot, and scores of politically and intellectually conservative moralists, journalists, and preachers. Distrust of change united philosophes with anti-philosophes, disciples of Rousseau with fashionable priests and their respectable congregations. In the luxury controversy an alliance emerged among men of extremely different philosophical schools alike only in their rejection of change and distrust of the innovators of their age.

The debate on luxury brought into focus themes of decay and degeneration which were an important strand in eighteenth-century thought. A long tradition connected luxury with the decline and fall of empires. The connection which Seneca and Tacitus had drawn between luxury and the decay of Roman imperial greatness was a commonplace well before the eighteenth century. It is used repeatedly by seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century dictionarists in the sample sentences designed to illustrate the correct use of the word luxe. Though Montesquieu made luxury only an incidental cause of Rome's destruction,¹ and Saint-Lambert argued that both Rome and Athens were victims of political forces rather than of luxury,² the weight of opinion blamed luxury for the decline of Rome, as of Athens, Carthage, and other rich commercial nations. A cluster of writers in the second half of the century argued that commerce, wealth, and luxury seemed incompatible with national power; only rustic simplicity and austerity would provide brave armies and dedicated patriotic legislators.

The intendant Gabriel Senac de Meilhan wrote in 1787 that "ancient history presents an endless succession of poor and courageous nations which conquer richer countries, are poisoned by the suc mortel des richesses, and within a short time are conquered in turn by other

¹Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur et de la décadence de l'Empire romain, Chap. X.

²Believing it written by Diderot, Assézat and Tourneux included Saint-Lambert's "Luxe" for the Encyclopédie in Diderot's Oeuvres complètes (1875-77), XVI, 9-10, 19-20. See Herbert Dieckmann, "The Sixth Volume of Saint-Lambert's Works," Romanic Review, XLII (April, 1951), 112, n. 7, for a discussion of this article's authorship.

peoples."¹ As long as Rome was a poor agricultural country, she was strong and prosperous, but with the introduction of wealth, her decline began. Agriculture languished, farmers abandoned their lands and migrated to the cities to become lackeys for wealthy gentlemen, population declined, the old virtues were undermined, patriotism diminished, and Roman military greatness was eclipsed: luxury had conquered her. As the economist Jean Auffray explained in 1762:

Examine the records of the most flourishing Empires. . . . The Romans, those conquerors of the earth, were the victims of this monster [luxury] and of the barbarians. . . . As long as the Romans had austere manners, her population was plentiful, her armies numerous and formidable. Luxury and effeminacy were the immediate cause of the decline and the fall of this vast Empire.²

The Abbé François-André Pluquet, author of a two-volume treatise on luxury (1786), thought that Roman luxury alone was sufficient to bring about her destruction, and would have done so even without the impact of the barbarian invasions.³ The austere and patriotic Roman general Belisarius portrayed by Marmontel, hoping to restore his country's political and military greatness in its declining days, earnestly proposes the abolition of luxury, "father of cupidity" and seed of the ruin of Rome and of all empires.⁴

Mably applied the same lesson to Athens in Entretiens de Phocion; the sumptuousness, delicacy, and magnificence introduced into Athens under Pericles resulted in venality and corruption in public life.⁵ Jaucourt blamed Pericles' encouragement of festivals, theatrical performances, and "la passion des arts de luxe" for the corruption of the Athenians.

¹Gabriel Senac de Meilhan, Considérations sur les richesses et le luxe (Amsterdam, 1787), I, 65.

²Jean Auffray, Le Luxe considéré relativement à la population et à l'économie (Lyons, 1762), pp. 7-8.

³Traité philosophique et politique sur le luxe (Paris, 1786), I, 288-89.

⁴Jean-François Marmontel, Bélisaire (Paris, 1767), pp. 130-53.

⁵Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Entretiens de Phocion, in Collection complète des oeuvres de l'Abbé de Mably (Paris, 1794-95), X, 70-71.

Athens became a cultivated and pleasure-loving state, but one incapable of governing itself.¹

The luxury debaters were worried about military as well as political and moral decline. Great empires had been defeated before by the armies of more austere, virtuous, and warlike nations. Was luxury responsible for the dismal French military record of the eighteenth century? The Swiss avocat Jean-François Butini evoked the danger of "poor but warlike" enemies capable of overpowering richer nations.² Holbach feared the effects of luxury among officers, ordinary soldiers being protected by poverty from its dangers. "Shall we expect the warlike virtues in a people weakened by abundance, enervated by luxury, for whom money is the sole passion?" he asked. He doubted that military chiefs who had led soft lives from childhood could bring to the battlefield the vigor military life demands. "In a country where luxury reigns," he concluded, "vanity is more important than glory; thus all honor consists in the possession of wealth. . . ."³ Soret, author of a 1756 Essai sur les mœurs, worried that luxury and material interests were incompatible with military success. French armies might be readier to run from the enemy in order to protect their possessions.⁴

Decadence in political states seemed inevitable. D'Alembert, for example, believed that "empires, like men, have their growth, decline and death."⁵ He wrote: "There is a profoundly meditated history which has as its object the development . . . of the causes of the growth and decadence of empires."⁶ "Barbarism lasts for centuries," he wrote

¹"Athènes," in Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres (36 vols.; Geneva, 1778), III, 840.

²Traité du luxe (Geneva, 1774).

³Paul Thiry, baron d'Holbach, La Politique naturelle, ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement (London, 1778), p. 248.

⁴Georges-Jean Soret, Essai sur les mœurs, in Oeuvres de M. Soret (Paris, 1784), II, 102.

⁵From Eloge de Montesquieu, quoted in Henry Vyverberg, Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 141.

⁶Réflexions sur l'histoire, quoted ibid., p. 143.

in the Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia. "It seems that it is our natural element; reason and good taste are only passing."¹ Montesquieu and Jaucourt (in his article "Gouvernement" in the Encyclopedia) asserted that governments of all kinds have an inherent tendency to decline.

Diderot spoke of the décrépitude of his own century. In his Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé "L'Homme" he wrote that the ideal society lies somewhere between barbarism and this state of corruption. The problem, though, is how to remain in the comfortable middle state, for "Alas! The social state has perhaps journeyed toward this deadly perfection which we enjoy with nearly the same inevitability with which white hair covers our heads in old age."² In the Lettres persanes Montesquieu attacked the degenerate morals, political corruption, frivolity, and hypocrisy of his age. Grimm in a letter of 1757 was still more pessimistic. The eighteenth century may see itself as the high point in civilization, he observed, but it is merely revealing a prejudice common to all ages. We should not be fooled by our enlightenment, which is very precarious, he warned, for every nation in history has enjoyed a short period of brilliance as a prelude to its destruction. "I am therefore very far from imagining that we are on the brink of the age of reason, and indeed I almost feel that Europe is menaced by some sinister revolution."³

Even periods of prosperity like their own could not dispel the debaters' vision of decadence, for comfort and riches were its favorite disguises. Writing of the bad effects of luxury in his own day, the Parisian literary man Sabatier wrote:

L'esprit national s'éteint par les maximes [of luxury]
L'honneur, qu'ont adoré nos pères magnanimes,
N'embrasse plus nos coeurs de son souffle brulant;
Frivoles, nous n'aimons que les talens sans force;

¹ Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Discours préliminaire de L'Encyclopédie, ed. F. Picavet (Paris: Armand Colin, 1929), p. 124.

² Denis Diderot, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1969-73), XI, 628.

³ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Correspondance littéraire, quoted in Vyverberg, Historical Pessimism, pp. 150-51.

Une brillante écorce
Couvre un tronc chancelant.¹

Boureau-Deslandes, an authority on the history of philosophy, cited Roman history to make the same statement; the sources of decadence and ruin may lie hidden behind wealth and brilliance. Everything in life, he said, is arranged in such a way that it grows to a certain point and then begins to decline. The line separating the final period of growth and the first step toward decadence is imperceptible. "Thus, what is called a thriving state could well be entering its period of decline, or at least the period in which originate the dissensions and disorders which will eventually enfeeble it."² Luxury, peace, and abundance persisted during the dictatorship of Sulla, though power had never been so arbitrary or despotic, nor had the Roman Republic been so dangerously divided.³

If the pessimists found much evidence to support their views, those more optimistic often sounded uncertain and defensive. A 1783 revue in the Journal de Monsieur took a very cautious position on the question of decline: "But, though we are less robust than our forefathers, have we not gained in art and in industry what we have lost in vigor?" Though the author had no intention of denying the destructive effects of luxury on his compatriots, he meant only to point out that "we are far from seeing this empire destroyed."⁴ The baron Saint-Supplix wrote his L'Homme désintéressé (1760) to prove that France was "not in a period of decadence as so many writers have claimed." Certainly there are abuses which need to be corrected, but this can only come with time.⁵ The pessimism of the luxury debaters was hard to ignore.

¹André-Hyacinthe Sabatier, "Le Luxe," in Odes nouvelles (Paris, 1766), pp. 94-95.

²André-François Boureau-Deslandes, Lettre sur le luxe (Frankfort, 1745), p. 16.

³Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁴"Discours contre le luxe," Journal de Monsieur, II (1783), 139-40.

⁵Sebastien-Alexander Costé, baron de Saint-Supplix, L'Homme désintéressé (Paris and Brussels, 1760), pp. 2-3.

The debate on luxury in the eighteenth century began both as a discussion of methods for stimulating a depressed economy, and as a focus for opinions about the changes which commercial growth and government activity had effected. The debate came to center on the social value of commerce and wealth. The debaters wondered whether commercial opulence was compatible with traditional aristocratic values and social hierarchy; they suspected that urban abundance must necessarily be obtained at the expense of the rural farming population. Behind this suspicion of wealth and economic advance are the fears of men conservative by doctrine or temperament and disturbed by the disruption of what they considered a natural social equilibrium. Their hostility toward commercial and financial profit was based on a static conception of wealth and thus of society. If the financier or merchant rises, the noble must fall; if cities become more opulent, the countryside must become progressively impoverished; if Paris increases in population, it must be at the expense of the provinces; if eighteenth-century men had comforts of which their ancestors never dreamed, it was because they had sacrificed their ancient mores and the happiness accompanying simplicity. Wealth, plenty, and luxury were masks of poverty and signs of approaching decadence. The economic and social changes of the eighteenth century were evidence of decadence. Even the optimists among the luxury debaters were not always immune to the fears of their compatriots.

Luxury and Modernization: The Monarchy
as an Agent of Change

Detractors saw luxury as the cause of these ominous developments. Luxury had promoted the "confounding of the ranks"; the ancient social hierarchy was being destroyed. Money now counted for everything, birth or "merit" for nothing at all. "Parvenus," wealthy men of obscure lineage, had become much more numerous, and paraded their newly acquired luxuries in the large cities. A social order so undermined could certainly not prosper. Indeed, the opponents of luxury found evidence of decline in French arts and letters, and strong signs that morals were becoming corrupt everywhere in France. French armies could no longer win battles. Poverty and depopulation, especially in the countryside,