

Political Economy in Revolution
France, Free Commerce, and Wollstonecraft's
History of the French Revolution

Sometime in the early months of March 1792, shortly after the publication of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft hosted Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, leading player in the French Revolution, in her London lodgings. Drinking tea, and also wine, from tea cups, Wollstonecraft and her visitor must have had much to discuss.¹ Talleyrand, to whom Wollstonecraft dedicated the *Vindication*, was the author of a 216-page Report on Public Education submitted to the French National Assembly in September 1791. Calling for both boys and girls to be educated, he nevertheless described a 'differentiated instruction' for girls, appropriate for their exclusion from the political world: the National Assembly's Declaration of Rights (1789) only recognised men over the age of 25 as citizens, preventing women's participation in the political sphere.² Talleyrand's argument was grounded in a claim about female bodies, whose delicacy, he suggested, showed that sexual difference is the will of nature: precisely the arguments, as presented by Rousseau, that Wollstonecraft rejected in the *Vindication*.³ Just as she had in her dedication – whose purpose was less to praise Talleyrand than to bring her work to his attention – Wollstonecraft no doubt challenged her visitor on these views during his London visit.

But other topics, too, must have engaged their attention, given ongoing events taking place across the channel, and Wollstonecraft's status, evidenced by her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, as an early supporter of the Revolution. Talleyrand was in London for three months from January to March 1792 on a specific diplomatic mission. In October 1789, as the then Bishop of Autun, and supported by Mirabeau, he had proposed that the National Assembly confiscate church property in order to meet national debts: a key move in the establishment of the French revolutionary currency, the assignats, and a measure which, as we have seen, provoked Burke's deepest fears about the revolution in political economy taking place in France.⁴ The assignats were at the heart of plans by the Girondin

minister of finance, Etienne Clavière, to establish a new, moral political economy, but were rapidly losing value; hence Talleyrand's visit to London, where, carrying letters for Lord Grenville, the foreign secretary, he sought to establish a commercial and political alliance with Britain. In a proposed extension of the Eden Treaty of 1786, which had sought to establish commerce between Britain and France 'on the basis of reciprocity and mutual convenience ... by discounting ... prohibitions and prohibitory duties', Britain was offered free trade with France's colonies in exchange for loans to bolster the assignat.⁵ Hopes of such an alliance fell by July that year. As Chapters 2 and 3 have shown, Wollstonecraft's engagement, in both her *Vindications*, was with a British political economy seen through the writings of Burke and Smith, where commercial society is understood through the lens of stadial history, and where anxieties are expressed less about the nation's political structures than about commerce's moral effects. As we have seen, Wollstonecraft's manners 'revolution' looked to private virtue to align individual lives with the public sphere and thus cement the female 'civil existence in the state' which the French Declaration of Rights had just denied. Both *Vindications* resisted the formalisation of political economic discourse as a specialised science of finance detached from larger questions of human improvement and happiness, and instead debated the significance of wealth and commercial modernity in the larger contexts of human improvement, marked by the progress of virtue, reason, and liberty. The presence of the revolutionary legislator Talleyrand in Wollstonecraft's lodgings, drinking from her tea cups, suggests the possibility of a larger horizon, and different perspectives, from which to broach these questions.

By the end of 1792, Wollstonecraft was herself in France, where she was to stay until April 1795. Here she mixed with British radicals supportive of the early phases of the revolution, as well as French reformists and intellectuals; she met the American Gilbert Imlay, gave birth to his daughter, Fanny, and wrote *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, which Johnson published in 1794. France offered Wollstonecraft a new vista for contemplating political economy, human improvement, and liberty (that recurring theme of the *Vindications*) amidst the galvanising and shocking context of revolutionary politics. Political economic debate here must have appeared less abstract, more particular, and practical, offering the tantalising possibility for theoretical positions to be put immediately into action in the fast-moving arena of the revolution. One issue in particular loomed large: the establishment of free trade in grain, a measure earlier attempted by Turgot, which

continued to be supported by the Girondist politicians with whom she and other British radicals mixed, and whose (albeit temporary) achievement Wollstonecraft was to place at the heart of her historical narrative of the revolution. The question of a free grain trade linked the turmoil of revolutionary France with political economic thought, in France and Britain, as the politicians of the day sought to enact – or resist – tenets developed by the French physiocratic thinkers who had also influenced Smith. The stakes in this debate could not be higher, in a country where large parts of the populace spent half their income on bread, where famine was far from unknown, and where in 1789 the annual average price of corn was the highest of the previous thirty years.⁶ The issue also tested attitudes to property, as the rights of property owners were pitted against the rights of the poor to subsistence, as upheld in traditional ideas of community and justice. The debate over free trade in grain, beyond pointing to the market as a solution to stockpiling and tariffs, thus posed fundamental questions about property and community, and about the extent or limits of property rights, which were the foundation of eighteenth-century political economy. A debate posing a traditional ‘moral economy’ against emergent political economy was also perceived to be about liberty: liberty of trade, but also the civil and political freedoms which many saw at the heart of the Revolutionary struggle.

Here then was a new canvas on which Wollstonecraft might continue to trace her story about human progress, and the role of reason and knowledge in the improvement of society and the advance of liberty. And, unusually among contemporary accounts of the early events of the Revolution, the historical narrative which she was to write in 1793–1794 singles out the grain trade, and demands for bread, for particular attention. Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) situated those questions of human improvement alongside an account of the growth of knowledge in the fields of political economy, government, and finance, in which the Physiocrats are singled out for particular praise. Her narrative of revolutionary events, from the calling of the Estates General, to the march on Versailles of 5 October 1789 also gives prominence to the liberation of the grain trade by the King on that occasion, under pressure from the mob and from the National Assembly. Hers is a history which attends to the experiment in free trade as a crucial part of its revolutionary narrative, presenting economic liberation, human improvement, and political liberty as complexly interconnected. But it is one, too, whose attempt to keep faith in improvement via growth in knowledge must acknowledge that the one measure of economic liberty it narrates is

achieved in part through the actions of an unapologetically named ‘mob’: the possibility, then, that change may arrive not only through the gradual progress of enlightenment but through ignorance and the ill-informed passion of ‘enthusiasm’. Here then is a test for a ‘philosophic eye’ which seeks to continue to read revolution as the advance of liberty, and which is still committed to the analytic category of ‘manners’ to determine the pace and possibility of change, even in the face of what it can also see as corruption, vanity, degeneracy, and self-regard. Even the women whose potential as revolutionary subjects motivated Wollstonecraft’s previous work are more complex agents of revolutionary change in her *View of the French Revolution*: freer and more spirited than their British counterparts, but, she fears, easily manipulated by aristocratic counter-revolutionary plots in ways they fail to comprehend. In some ways Wollstonecraft’s most ambitious and carefully crafted work, and certainly her most overlooked, *View* also risks being her most contradictory one, which repeatedly negotiates between an ideal account of the gradualist unfolding of human progress, and the chaotic history which it actually narrates, which verges on the anarchy of the immediate moment in which Wollstonecraft was writing.⁷

Wollstonecraft’s relationship to the events she narrated, as the philosophical historian of revolution, was not entirely disinterested or impersonal. Even as she celebrated free trade in grain, Imlay planned its import, alongside other commodities such as soap and iron, into France: this was the business which, as Wollstonecraft’s letters to him from this time lament, so frequently caused his absence from her and their daughter.⁸ Until the collapse of their relationship, Wollstonecraft’s hopes for the future were invested in the proceeds of that trade, the profits of which were, she anticipated, to be used to buy a farmstead in America, on which she, Imlay, and Fanny would settle. Such possibilities, perhaps, coloured the rosy-hued view of husbandry and agrarianism which occasionally make an appearance in *View*, where their supposed virtue, domesticity, and simple manners are opposed to the potential corruptions of commerce, especially where speculators and extreme accumulations of wealth are involved. But even in the present, the trade in grain made Wollstonecraft’s existence in France possible, as funds from Johnson were received via bills sent through the London merchants Turnbull, Forbes and Co, traders in flour, for whom Johnson’s co-founder of the *Analytical Review*, Thomas Christie, was a Paris agent.⁹ Until autumn 1793, when the French authorities tightened up, firms such as Turnbull’s were able to get flour into France, despite the British blockade, often in a three-way play with American firms; their mutual connection with Christie thus gave Johnson a way to get money to Wollstonecraft, as is

evidenced by a Wollstonecraft bill requiring Johnson to pay Turnbull £50 for money received from Christie as Turnbull's agent.¹⁰ In the penultimate chapter of her *View*, Wollstonecraft's 'philosophical eye' traces the journey of Louis XVI and his family from Versailles to Paris, captured by the 'mob', and she notes he is preceded by 'forty or fifty loads of wheat and flour', whose symbolic freedom was thus the flipside of his own imminent incarceration.¹¹ Perhaps she silently noted too, how her own personal liberty, and the improvement and happiness which she sought in the future, were similarly yoked to the fate of grain, which was already indirectly enabling, and which might further provision, what she sought in her own life. On the transport of grain depended, indeed, her very work as a writer and circulator of knowledge, on whose gradual increase she believed the possibility of an improved future for humankind rested.

The Experiment in a Free Grain Trade

The central role played by bread in the cultural imaginary of revolution is evident in a print by the British print satirist James Gillray, published in mid-January 1793, as Wollstonecraft settled into her new surroundings in Paris (Figure 4.1). Entitled 'The Sans Cullotes feeding Europe with the bread of liberty', it depicted, in each of its corners, representatives of European countries (Holland, Germany and Prussia, Italy, and Savoy) having the bread of liberty thrust at them on weapons or at gunpoint, whilst their pockets are picked, or they are otherwise threatened, by thin and raggedly dressed Sans Cullotes. In the centre, John Bull is similarly being force-fed liberty's bread by the opposition politicians Charles James Fox and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, sartorially associated with the revolutionary Sans Cullotes through their red bonnets of liberty and their lack of legwear. Gillray's image literalises violent revolutionary liberty as bread, but it also plays on the material needs often driving political unrest, at a time of bad harvests, high food prices, and hunger. Savi Munjal has observed that hunger was also frequently associated with a lower-class thirst for knowledge, or perhaps with the misfeeding of that hunger with (as in a 1795 Coleridge lecture) 'poison, not food; rage, not liberty': themes which Wollstonecraft would develop.¹² The scarcity of bread, real or manufactured, recurs in Wollstonecraft's history of the early events of the French Revolution, but whilst Wollstonecraft notes the presence of physical hunger, acting on the knowledge which to her mind will bring about human improvement is too often blocked by degeneracy in morals, corruption in government, and excessive refinement in manners.



Figure 4.1 James Gillray, 'The Sans Cullotes feeding Europe with the bread of liberty'

Bread, and the grain from which it is produced, was also freighted with significance in contemporary political economic discourse, as it had been from at least the 1760s.¹³ Wollstonecraft's history foregrounds the sanctioning, by the French National Assembly in August 1789, of the free circulation of grain, 'which had been obstructed by the ancient forms, so opposite to the true principles of political economy', but this action was preceded by decades of political economic debate.¹⁴ In the very first chapter of her history, Wollstonecraft singles out 'the profound treatise of the humane M. Quesnai' as producing 'the sect of the *economists*', but whilst she describes the physiocrats as the 'first champions for civil liberty' who fought against the 'despotism' and oppression of 'enormous and iniquitous taxes', her truncated and telescoped narrative conveys neither the context, detail, and complexity of the emergence of physiocratic thought in France, nor the significant backlash to those free trade reforms which were made or the counter-arguments it met.¹⁵ François Quesnay's physiocratic doctrines emerged as France regrouped following its defeat by Britain at

the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, part of a conscious and deliberate attempt to map a different course of national economic development from the British model of international commerce funded by state-backed credit and military conflict.¹⁶ Quesnay argued that agriculture offered an alternative source of economic growth and showed how productivity would be boosted if the grain trade was freed from the numerous forms of regulation and tariffs under which it laboured in France. Smith, who met Quesnay during his time in France from 1764 to 1766, was strongly influenced by physiocratic arguments; he paid tribute to Quesnay in the *Wealth of Nations*, and at one point intended to dedicate the work to him.¹⁷ As Emma Rothschild observes, 'the political economy of food has been an emblem, at least since the 1760s' of what Smith was to describe as the 'obvious and simple system of natural liberty', a system which was also accused of 'heartlessness' by those who preferred a so-called moral economy, in which authorities oversaw food distribution, especially in times of shortage.¹⁸

Attempts to establish a free commerce in grain throughout France took place whilst Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, whom Wollstonecraft lavishes with praise, was Controller-General of Finances from 1774 to 1776.¹⁹ Similar measures which Turgot had introduced as an official in the province of Limousin in the early years of the decade had mitigated the effects of famine in the region, but attempts to replicate them at the national level, coinciding as they did with bad harvests and political opposition, were perceived to be too radical, and Turgot was forced from office.²⁰ Wollstonecraft praises Turgot's 'enlightened administration': it offered France 'a glimpse of freedom, which, streaking the horizon of despotism, only served to render the contrast more striking'. But little detail is offered in her highly metaphorical, as well as personalised, account:

Eager to correct abuses, equally impolitic and cruel, this most excellent man, suffering his clear judgment to be clouded by his zeal, roused the nest of wasps, that rioted on the honey of industry in the sunshine of court favour; and he was obliged to retire from the office, which he so worthily filled. Disappointed in his noble plan of freeing France from the fangs of despotism ... he has nevertheless greatly contributed to produce that revolution in opinion, which, perhaps, alone can overturn the empire of tyranny.²¹

Turgot's failure is attributed in part to character, in part to court opposition, but Wollstonecraft nevertheless associates him with a 'revolution in opinion' which she hopes may 'overturn the empire of tyranny'. Although she gives no detail of either the economic nature of his reforms or their

contentious nature (her account contextualises his ministry within a struggle against tax burdens, rather than the attempt to deregulate grain trade), Turgot is clearly a figurehead in the revolutionary 'opinion' which will 'overturn' despotism and 'tyranny'.

But if this early discussion of Turgot eschews explicit comment on his economic policies, elsewhere, and indeed throughout *View*, Wollstonecraft presents the growth of political economic thought as not merely an exemplar, but the outstanding achievement of the Enlightenment progress of reason and knowledge, strongly linked with liberty and human progress. She praises a 'confederacy of philosophers' for drawing 'the attentions of the nation to the principles of political and civil government', and the *Encyclopédie* is noted principally for 'disseminating those truths in the economy of finance, which, perhaps, they would not have sufficient courage separately to have produced'.²² This is a striking, arguably skewed account of the *Encyclopédie* project, which sought to turn knowledge in many fields away from philosophical abstraction and into the 'workshop' of practice. Nevertheless, referring to the physiocrats in the fashion of her time as 'the economists', she asserts that they carried 'away the palm from their opponents, showed that the prosperity of a state depends on the freedom of industry; that talents should be permitted to find their level; that the unshackling of commerce is the only secret to render it flourishing, and answer more effectually the ends for which it is politically necessary; and that the imposts should be laid upon the surplus remaining, after the husbandman has been reimbursed for his labour and expenses'.²³ Such a 'novel and enlightened system', she suggests, 'so just and simple', could not 'fail to produce a great effect on the minds of frenchmen': simplicity is repeatedly recommended throughout *View* for matters of government and policy, to enable their comprehension by the public, and boost political understanding. And she goes on to attack the 'many vexatious taxes' of the French government, which 'enervated the exertions of unprivileged persons, stagnating the live stream of trade' and were 'almost insuperable impediments in the way of the improvements of industry'. Such taxes were not merely economic impediments to 'the improvements of industry', however, but were also 'extremely teasing inconveniences to every private man, who could not travel from one place to another without being stopped at barriers, and searched by officers of different descriptions ... the abridgement of liberty was not more grievous in it's (*sic*) pecuniary consequences, than in the personal mortification of being compelled to observe regulations as troublesome as they were at variance with sound policy'.²⁴ Such aligning of impediments to personal freedom of movement with regulatory impediments to commerce and industry

indicates how Wollstonecraft's understanding of the economic freedoms advocated by physiocratic doctrine was, in her mind, part of a larger philosophy of liberty whose achievement, or otherwise, might be experienced in everyday life. In this context, her suppression, in the earlier account of Turgot's reforms, of their economic detail points to how she folds the story of economic liberty into a narrative of political freedom, resisting the separation of economic measures from the broad sweep of human progress and improvement in which, in her eyes, they are properly imbedded.

Such a sense of the role and place of economic reform is suggested too by Wollstonecraft's presentation of the liberation of the grain trade within a larger political narrative. For her, it is not only an important part of that political struggle, but also, alongside the Declaration of Rights, one of the few achievements of the early revolutionary period: one which (although *View* does not relate this) was however to be short-lived.²⁵ As the full title of her work emphasises, Wollstonecraft's is a 'historical and moral view' of the French Revolution: within which economic measures may be placed, but against which they will also be judged. Wollstonecraft's yoking of economic reforms into an overarching narrative of liberty is in line too with the approach of the Girondin revolutionaries, who were ascendant during the early period of her time in France, until their fall in June 1793, and with whom she and many other British revolutionary sympathisers mixed. As Rothschild comments, '[t]o see economic freedom as a component of revolutionary freedom was indeed one of the distinguishing principles of Girondin policy'.²⁶

In telling the story of economic liberation as part of political freedom, Wollstonecraft was going against the grain of more conservative political forces in the mid-1790s. As Rothschild relates, this period saw a separation take place between notions of liberty in the economic sphere and in political life. In Edinburgh in 1793, Smith's disciple and biographer Dugald Stewart made precisely such a distinction to disentangle Smith's work, with its arguments for economic freedoms, from the accusation of political revolutionary overtones or sentiments: whilst safeguarding Smith's work from political attack, the move also contributed to the establishment of political economy as a distinct, technocratic analysis separated from broader political questions pertaining to human society.²⁷ In Paris, as Rothschild states, this bifurcation of economic and political liberties took a rather different form: for the Jacobins who came to power following the fall of the Girondins in June 1793, a commitment to revolutionary freedom did not bring with it a continued faith in the economic freedoms for which Condorcet and others had argued. Indeed, fixed food prices, the so-called 'maximum', were a key demand of the Sans Cullotes, who agitated

for the removal of the Girondins. Rothschild relates an anecdote from the abbé Morellet, a second-generation physiocrat, and acquaintance and translator of Smith, who was denounced to the authorities in September 1793 as part of a crackdown on suspected opponents to the government.²⁸ This led to an exchange with his denouncer on the question of the freedom of commerce, which he related in his *Memoirs*:

Do you not think that freedom is the only means of preventing famines and high prices for subsistence grains? Is it not the case, I added slyly, that freedom is always good, and good for everything? I saw that my praise of freedom embarrassed him, and that he did not dare to argue with it. All in good time, he said to me. But today, the anxieties are too great, and one cannot speak of that sort of freedom.²⁹

For Robert Darnton, this exchange represents a confrontation ‘between the Revolution and the Enlightenment’. But it also encapsulates the fate of the free trade doctrine in the age of Revolution – politically sensitive, potentially inflammatory – just at the time when Wollstonecraft placed the liberation of grain at the heart of her history.³⁰

Morellet’s interrogation took place as Wollstonecraft, living with her newborn daughter in the seclusion of the countryside just north of Paris, worked on her own account of the French Revolution. Writing about the achievements of the physiocrats, she claims that the publication of their work in the ‘abstract work’ of the *Encyclopédie* enabled them to elude the ‘dangerous vigilance of absolute ministers’, and thus disseminate ‘those truths in the economy of finance’ which they otherwise would not have had courage to separately publish, or which ‘if they had ... would most probably have been suppressed’.³¹ Wollstonecraft’s biographers have commented on the dangerous nature of her writing a history of the Revolution, whilst in France during the reign of Robespierre’s Terror. Helen Maria Williams, who was herself imprisoned at this time, advised Wollstonecraft to burn her manuscript. What has been less clearly articulated is precisely the nature of the threat that Wollstonecraft’s *View* might have posed. Yet beneath its reading of the early years of the Revolution as part of humanity’s long progress towards freedom is an insistence on economic liberty, including the specific policy of a free grain trade, as a central plank of that freedom. By the time that she was working on her history, many of Wollstonecraft’s Girondin associates and sympathisers had been removed from power or imprisoned; in October 1793, the Girondin deputies were guillotined, an event which produced in her an ‘intolerable’ anguish which she described to William Godwin ‘more than once’ in later years.³² Jacobin

doctrine, as Morellet's anecdote relates, was in the ascendancy, and those who held different views risked being denounced, and potential death. Just as the physiocrats on whom she lavishes praise smuggled their 'truths' in the *Encyclopédie* to evade detection, was Wollstonecraft also hiding a dangerous sympathy for Girondin free trade doctrines, within the pages of a 'Historical and Moral' progress of the Revolution?

Free Commerce, Peace, and Liberty in the 1780s

It is certainly possible to trace Wollstonecraft's links – direct and indirect, personal, political, and intellectual – with an international network of philosophers, politicians, and thinkers who supported the establishment of free commerce as part of a wider political vision, from at least the 1780s and into the early years of the 1790s. As Richard Whatmore has shown, many such figures, including Morellet himself, had links to the British politician William Petty, Lord Shelburne, but the group also reached across both the Atlantic and the English Channel.³³ Some of the connections dated from the time of Adam Smith's visit to France, in 1764–1766, when he met Turgot, Morellet, and other physiocratic thinkers; others became protagonists in the early dramas of the French Revolution and had their actions or speeches related in Wollstonecraft's *View*.³⁴ Collectively, this network of thinkers and their interconnected ideas and writings illuminates the immediate prehistory and context for both the presentation of economic liberty and free trade in Wollstonecraft's *View* and the issue of the free trade in grain in France in the early 1790s. Above all, it points to the great importance placed on free commerce as part of a larger transformation of international relations, which it was possible to imagine in the years between the American and French Revolutions. This new international order, which Shelburne anticipated, would replace a mercantilist competition between nations, fuelled by war, with free trade and political reform. From one perspective, the short-lived Eden Treaty (1786), which sought more liberalised trade between Britain and France, was the only tangible political outcome of such thinking; this was what Tallyrand, emissary of the Girondist party, was seeking to extend during his visit to London in the early months of 1792. From another perspective, however, the writing and thinking of this extensive network mark an important stage of progressive political thought in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution and illuminate what was at stake for some of its protagonists.

The nature and thinking of this pro-free commerce network can be shown by mapping the connections between various members of the

Shelburne circle in the mid-1780s. The circle included Morellet, who had met Shelburne in Paris in 1771, and to whom, as well as to Smith, Shelburne attributed his 'first imbibing' the 'application of the principle of the liberty of trade to diverse questions of political economy'.³⁵ Shelburne later gave Morellet a copy of Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* on its publication in 1776. As a Secretary of State in Rockingham's ministry, and later briefly in 1782–1783 as head of his own administration, Shelburne saw the opportunity to establish a 'general freedom of commerce' whose first steps would be an alliance with France 'for free trade and political reform'.³⁶ Morellet was involved in the negotiations towards the Eden Treaty from 1782; his work on this was considered significant enough by Shelburne to warrant an annual pension.³⁷ Also in Shelburne's orbit was Wollstonecraft's early mentor Richard Price, whose 1776 pamphlet, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, summarised Shelburne's views on the conflict with America and the possibilities for peace, and Shelburne continued to instruct Price, his 'dear friend', to inculcate 'these principles', and to 'dedicate your whole time, to cry down war throughout the whole world', in 1786.³⁸ The context for this exhortation was the publication in 1786 of Condorcet's *Life of Turgot*, later translated into English by Shelburne's close friend and secretary Benjamin Vaughan; Turgot's plan, outlined in that work and promulgated too by Condorcet, was to unite nations in peace under shared principles of 'law, commerce, morality and politics'.³⁹ Three years later, Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), the work that prompted Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, listed Turgot, alongside Montesquieu and Fénelon, in a pantheon of scholars who promoted knowledge of rights and civil government:

Our first concern as lovers of our country must be to enlighten it. [...] Happy is the scholar or philosopher who at the close of life can reflect that he has made this use of his learning and abilities, but happier far must he be if, at the same time, he has reason to believe he has been successful and actually contributed by his instructions to disseminate among his fellow-creatures just notions of themselves, of their rights, of religion, and the nature and end of civil government. Such were Milton, Locke, Sidney, Hoadly, etc. in this country, such were Montesquieu, Fenelon, Turgot, etc. in France. They sowed a seed which has since taken root and is now growing up to a glorious harvest.⁴⁰

Price here offers a very particular canon of Enlightenment thinkers. Some are notable for their association with liberty (the republican Milton) or political thought (Locke, Algernon Sidney, and Benjamin Hoadly), but Montesquieu, Fénelon, and Turgot would be recognised as contributing

to the branch of civil government that was coming to be known as political economy. Price's presentation of such a tradition was echoed, with slightly different terminology, in Wollstonecraft's *View*. There, she described the 'science of politics and finance' as 'the most important, and most difficult of all human improvements', but one which would eventually advance 'to that state of perfection necessary to secure the sacred rights of every human creature'.⁴¹ Although neither Price nor Wollstonecraft here refer explicitly to 'political economy', both are characterising, and praising, practitioners of knowledge, which would later come to be named by that term.

Another figure in contact with Shelburne and British radicals in the mid-1780s was the French noble Honoré-Gabriel Riquetti de Mirabeau, who was to figure prominently in the early events of the French Revolution, and whose speeches to the National Assembly are included in Wollstonecraft's *View*, where they provide what almost amounts to a case study in the powers and dangers of political eloquence. Carrying a letter of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, whom he knew in Paris, and who was also 'fascinated by the possibility of establishing a perpetual peace', Mirabeau visited Shelburne in London in 1784, and through him met Price; Morellet was also visiting Shelburne at this time.⁴² As Price was to, Mirabeau also linked Turgot with Fénelon in his *Considérations sur l'Ordre de Cincinnatus* (1784), a work written under the encouragement of Franklin and which warned the new American republic against oppression by a newly emergent aristocratic class (Wollstonecraft later also warned of a new aristocracy of wealth). The alternative to this was 'political liberty, religious liberty, liberty of commerce and of industry'.⁴³ Included in the publication, to further expound on this vision, was a letter sent by Turgot to Price in 1778, responding to his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, as well as an abstract of Price's own *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (1784). As Whatmore comments, '[t]hese texts reiterated the pacific message of the Shelburne circle that European politics could be saved from political immorality by freeing trade and collapsing the mercantile systems of monopoly, which fuelled war or raised the prospect of debt-induced bankruptcies'.⁴⁴ If Europe is the immediate concern, however, America also figured prominently as the motivating ground of all three texts, and as a site onto which both political ideals and anxieties were projected. The new American republic was at once hailed as a land of liberty as yet free of the political and mercantile corruptions under which Europe laboured, addressed as the imagined site of further political improvement, and the recipient of warnings about the dangers certain forms of commerce represent to its liberty.

All three of these notes are sounded in Turgot's letter to Price of 1778, which also explores the connections between, in Mirabeau's words, 'political liberty, religious liberty, liberty of commerce and of industry'. Reflecting on America's constitution, Turgot warns of the danger that the still only loosely confederated states will replicate the European 'jealousy of trade', the rivalry between nations which so marks European affairs. '[S]till involved in the mist of European delusions', some of the states do not perceive that 'the law of a perfect liberty of commerce is a necessary consequence of the right of property', but where that 'sacred principle of considering freedom of commerce as a consequence of the right of property is adopted, all imaginary interests of commerce vanish. All imaginary interests of possessing more or less territory vanish'.⁴⁵ Free commerce, a 'necessary consequence of the right of property', thus magically causes territorial disputes and competition between neighbours to disappear. In line with these sentiments, in Turgot's preliminary remarks, he attacks the 'system of monopoly and exclusion which is in vogue with all your political writers upon commerce, except Mr. Adam Smith and Dean Tucker', and comments on how Britain, which has been so successful in the natural sciences, 'could remain so far inferior to itself in the most important of all science, that of public happiness'.⁴⁶ Wollstonecraft similarly, in *View*, characterised the sciences of government and finance as among the most important of contemporary knowledge endeavours, linked, as with Turgot, to public happiness. Price reprinted Turgot's Letter in his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* which, whilst having less to say that Turgot on the specifics of free trade, offered a paean to the simple life of the independent yeomen of Connecticut. This appealing depiction of the virtuous manners of the independent husbandman, as exemplified in American settlers, was to be reiterated in the writings of Girondin revolutionaries, and yoked to their vision of a republic of free and moral commerce. It was not a vision, however, which survived the fall of the Girondins in mid-1793, and it depended on the success of the revolutionary assignats, which were already suffering devaluation in late 1792, when Wollstonecraft arrived in Paris.

Price's praise for an America defined by an industrious, independent, and frugal farmer class is strikingly similar to the picture offered in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by Turgot's distant relative, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, which was published only a few years before Price's *Observations*. Crèvecoeur, who by 1795 was living in Altona, outside Hamburg, was later to entertain Wollstonecraft as she came to the end of her Scandinavian travels in mid-1795; she notes that he is an acquaintance

of Imlay's.⁴⁷ By this point, Hamburg was a thriving centre for merchants and shipping, including those who, like Imlay and his associate Joel Barlow, were running the British naval blockade of France. Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* records her exchanging with her dinner companion declamations against the merchants of Hamburg who have made vast fortunes from these wars between nations. 'Why, madam', she records Crèvecoeur remarking, 'you will not meet with a man who has any calf to his leg; body and soul, muscles and heart, are equally shrivelled up by a thirst of gain. There is nothing generous even in their youthful passions; profit is their only stimulus, and calculations the sole employment of their faculties'. For her part, the more she saw of 'the manners of Hamburg, the more was I confirmed in my opinion relative to the baleful effect of extensive speculations on the moral character ... A man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as he advances in the chase after wealth'.⁴⁸ It is difficult not to read Crèvecoeur and Wollstonecraft's dinner observations as marking the death-knell of Turgot and Shelburne's dream of an international order defined by peace and free commerce.

Wollstonecraft and the Girondins: Free Commerce, Manners, and Republican Political Economy

Price and Crèvecoeur were not alone in idealising the supposedly simple manners of America in the second half of the 1780s. In the *Analytical Review* for September 1791, Wollstonecraft discussed *Nouveau Voyage Dans Les Etats-Unites de L'Amerique Septentrionale* (translated as *Travels in the United States of North America*) by the Girondin leader Jacques Pierre Brissot, a work which had first appeared in 1788. Brissot, she asserts, 'writes like an enlightened citizen of the world', with a 'zeal for liberty' which 'appears to arise from the purest moral principles, and most expansive humanity'. Brissot, she reports, travelled to America to 'observe men who had just recovered their freedom', and he reflects that the French, who 'have also obtained our liberty, and have now only to learn of the Americans the art of preserving it', the 'secret' of which 'will be found in their manners, or rather morals'. Brissot's motto, 'without morals, one can gain liberty but not keep it', suggests the 'absolute necessity' of securing these 'in order to settle liberty on a firm basis'. Wollstonecraft gives a few details from his book which exemplify the 'simplicity' observable in the 'manners of every class' in America, including in the 'innocent frankness' of American women, and the friendly relations which exist between the sexes, which contrast with the gallantry and coquetry, or 'sensual

effeminacy', of 'European manners'. The 'artificial polish' of the manners of the rich in France contrasts with the 'purity of morals' which still 'prevails in America', where 'domestic comfort' appears on every side to 'glad the benevolent heart', and 'industry and content ... gave a smiling aspect to the neat cottages that nestled in the most solitary wilds'. In Brissot's writing, America emerges as a country where 'his favourite theories received life by being introduced into practice', a land of 'liberty, independence, and equality'.⁴⁹ By the time that Wollstonecraft wrote her review of his work in late 1791, Brissot was at the head of the Girondin party in the French National Assembly, where, with allies and associates who included Etienne Clavière, Condorcet, Thomas Paine, and (until his death in 1791, Mirabeau), he attempted to establish a regime of free trade, and moralised political economy, to promote 'frugality, industriousness and the growth of republican manners'.⁵⁰ The republican manners sketched in Price's *Observations* on America, reiterated in Brissot's work on America, and approved in her review by Wollstonecraft, were central to this vision.⁵¹ These ideals were deep-seated: writing his memoirs in prison, in the months between his arrest in June 1793 and his execution the following October, Brissot states that if he could have chosen his place of birth, it would have been 'under the simple and rustic roof of an american (*sic*) husbandman. That is the occupation which would have made me proud'.⁵²

All this was still ahead, however, when Brissot wrote *Nouveau Voyage* in 1788. Long a political radical, and longstanding critic of the French *ancien régime*, in his *Memoirs* Brissot attributes a step-change in his political education to Clavière, a prominent member of the Genevan *représentants* party, exiled from his home since the failure of the Genevan popular revolution against the aristocratic oligarchy in 1782, which the French had assisted in repressing.⁵³ Many *représentants* had links to the Shelburne circle, and to Mirabeau, whose writings, like Brissot's, would also promulgate Clavière's vision: indeed, before taking French citizenship and developing his own political ambitions, Clavière had anticipated that it would be through Mirabeau that his ideas would have influence. Political societies also promoted Clavière's politics, including the Société Gallo-Américaine, founded in 1787, which sought to replicate American republicanism in Europe. Crèvecoeur, who was in Paris that year, having issued a greatly expanded edition of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, provided information about America to the group and was an active member, as was Thomas Paine.⁵⁴ It was replaced the following year by the Société Française des Amis des Noirs, to attack the mercantilism associated with France's finance minister, Necker, and to argue for free trade. Members

included Brissot, Clavière, Talleyrand, Condorcet, Morellet, and Dupont de Nemours, who had been secretary to Turgot during his time as minister, and who makes periodic appearances in Wollstonecraft's *View*.⁵⁵ As the society's name suggests, Clavière also opposed slavery, which he argued went against the system of liberty which he understood himself to be bringing about. Such activities enabled leading figures in what was to become the Gironde party to develop and articulate their political beliefs. Clavière served as Minister of Finance from 1792 to the fall of the Girondins in June 1793, but he struggled with the depreciating value of the assignats which were central to his political aims. It was as a last-ditch attempt to establish an alliance with Britain to shore up the assignats that Talleyrand was sent to London in early 1792, where he also met Wollstonecraft. When, in January 1793, in the first weeks of her stay in France, Wollstonecraft watched Louis XVI travel to the guillotine, it was in a coach supplied by Clavière.

The fullest exposition of the proto-Girondin reform policy appears in *De la France* (1787), initially published Brissot's name, although with an acknowledged 'debt' to Clavière's 'commercial philosophy'.⁵⁶ Arguing for an alliance between France and America to counter Britain's failing mercantile empire, it praised the morally sound life of America and criticised the unnatural growth of the French 'aristocratic' market focused on the production of luxury goods for the wealthy. America exemplified the possibility of a moral political economy, by showing how wealth might be linked to virtue. Public credit and commerce were thought both to depend on, and inculcate, trust and virtue (similar arguments had been made by Paine and Price): commerce helped to forge and sustain sociable relations between individuals, and to build trust, and hence to build the conditions for confidence in public credit. Brissot and Clavière even argued that Britain's defeat by the American colonists in 1776 was due to superior American virtue. Rousseau had previously linked the freedom of a state with the virtue of its people, as expressed in its manners; although, unremittingly hostile to commerce, he would never, as Clavière does, link wealth and virtue.⁵⁷ However, crucially, wealth was not to become excessive, as this would undermine virtue and produce inequality; commerce was rather to be used to weaken the old aristocratic order. As Girondin finance minister, Clavière looked to the assignats to create a new, more equitable social order of the moderately wealthy, a 'citizen body of moderate property owners'; in 1789, he had also proposed the melting down of gold and silver luxury goods to increase coinage and extend wealth.⁵⁸ As Brissot wrote in his *Memoirs*, Clavière's 'philosophy of commerce' sought to free commerce in order to achieve the 'prosperity of a free people': a 'moral' and 'revolutionary' political economy.⁵⁹

This new regime of moderate wealth and republican morals was conveyed both in accounts of the idealised manners of the Americans, who were showing the way, and in the critique of existing French manners. The French aristocratic consumption of luxury goods skewed the national character and corrupted the passions: the French were shallow, pleasure-seeking, and flippant, devoted to 'frivolous arts', to 'luxury', the 'art of pleasing women, and the relaxation of manners'. Their love of frivolous entertainment was exemplified in the popularity of *The Marriage of Figaro*.⁶⁰ In contrast, the life of the American husbandman was 'more virtuous, more free & more happy', in an account praised by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Brissot.⁶¹ Wollstonecraft also was to foreground morals and manners in her *View*, which offered critical commentary on French habits of living, modes of conversation, and dedication to what is termed the 'art of living'. Indeed, Wollstonecraft attributed the disintegration of the revolution to the weakness and frivolity of the national character, in terms which echo the analysis of Brissot and Clavière. For her, the French character was the site of a conflict between 'folly, selfishness, madness, treachery ... and depraved manners' on the one hand, and, on the other, a spirit of liberty released by advancing political and philosophical knowledge. Her attempt to balance such tensions produces an account which differentiates between the 'uncontaminated mass of the French nation', and higher orders 'embruted' by 'servility and voluptuousness', but the most significant historical agency is ultimately located in a 'mob' whose representation is deeply conflicted.⁶²

The attention to manners and the French national character in *View* may reflect the concerns of a proposed series of letters on 'the Present Character of the French Nation' envisaged by Wollstonecraft to be the fruit of her French stay, of which only one survives (it may be the only one written). Published by Godwin after her death and written in February 1793, only a few weeks into her time in France, the 'Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation' describes Parisians as superficial lovers of pleasure, dedicated to trivial pastimes and fleeting pleasures. France is 'probably the most superficial [nation] in the world', its people the 'most sensual'. In Paris in particular, the 'soul of Epicurus has long been at work to root out the simple emotions of the heart', such that 'simplicity of manners' is banished by 'the selfish enjoyments of the senses'. Presenting her account as an investigation into the 'stage of civilization in which I find the French', as well as the 'circumstances which have produced its identity', she notes that the 'government' fostered the sensual indulgences which have so marked the Parisians, and anticipates 'the good effects of the revolution', although she is aware these will be 'last felt' in the capital. Her

faith in a 'theory of a more perfect state', a 'cherished opinion' that 'strong virtues might exist with the polished manners produced by the progress of civilisation', is however threatened by a 'fear' that vice is a dominant cause of what she sees. Human nature itself, indeed, appears to be altered, such that she doubts '[w]hether a nation can go back to the purity of manners which has hitherto been maintained unsullied only by the keen air of poverty, when, emasculated by pleasure, the luxuries of prosperity are become the wants of nature'. Luxury has become a 'want of nature', a naturalised need, and the possibility of a return to simplicity has receded.

Although *View* would later champion the liberty of commerce as exemplified in a free grain trade, in this Letter, Wollstonecraft appears less convinced of the ameliorative effects of commerce, free or otherwise. The Girondin attempt to create a new social order through commerce might lie behind her observation that a 'narrow principle of commerce ... seems every where to be shoving aside *the point of honour* of the *noblesse*'. As her review of Brissot's *American Travels* had noted, 'honour' is the 'prime virtue in a monarchy', and Wollstonecraft can hardly have mourned its demotion, nor that of the '*noblesse*'. But, perhaps as yet unconvinced by the Girondin sympathisers with whom she would mix during her time in Paris, she suggests that 'little is to be expected from the narrow principle of commerce' which is driving such change in values. And the letter ends with an uncompromising attack on the new political regime, personified in the image of the 'cold calculator' devoted to the art of self-management, who considers his 'fellow-creatures merely as machines of pleasure' and whose 'excess' of 'depravation' preserves him where other 'more respectable' figures fall into traps.⁶³ There is an echo here of Smith's attack on the 'man of system', incorporated into the last edition of his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790, and widely understood as his response to the French Revolution. The 'dregs of the old system', she fears, have remained to 'corrupt the new', and every 'petty municipal officer ... stalks like a cock on a dunghill'.

For whatever reason, Wollstonecraft's Letter was never published in her lifetime, and when she returns to manners in her history of the French Revolution, which she was to start writing in the next few months, her attitude has shifted significantly. The finely honed philosophical despair of the Letter gives way to a narrative in which there is still space for optimism. This is expressed most markedly in the sense that the achievements of the French Enlightenment, especially in the 'science of government', central to public happiness, have helped to disseminate a spirit of liberty, as well as to assemble the practical knowledge needed to achieve reform. Whilst she laments the anarchy of the mob, and fears a descent into chaos,

View retains faith – unlike the ‘Letter’ – in the possibility of gradualist improvement. What had changed in the short space of time between completing the earlier text, and embarking on the second?

Biography offers some possible answers to this question.⁶⁴ Arriving in Paris in mid-December 1792, Wollstonecraft spent her first few weeks in relative seclusion in a near-empty house, mixing little, and nursing both a cold and the emotional aftermath of rejection by the artist Henry Fuseli of her advances back home (an event which in part motivated her desire to leave London). After a period of time, however, Wollstonecraft started mixing with a British expatriate community in Paris which Todd reports was ‘embedded in French political life’ and ‘attached to the faction in power in the Convention, the Girondins’.⁶⁵ Wollstonecraft also spent considerable time with Thomas Christie, co-founder of the *Analytical Review*, who had extended stays in Paris between 1789 and August 1793, and who was part of Thomas Paine’s select circle, where Brissot also was a regular visitor.⁶⁶ According to Todd, Christie was ‘deep in politics’; he had been asked by the National Assembly to work on the English version of the proposed polyglot edition of the new constitution, but her association with Christie aside, Wollstonecraft would have met many of the political movers and thinkers of the time, as Todd asserts, at ‘salons and dinners’ in Paris.⁶⁷ Paine and Turgot’s disciple and biographer Condorcet, who was also part of these circles, were involved in committees concerned with land reform; Gary Kelly notes that reform of the centralised economic controls of *ancien régime* would have been frequently discussed ‘among the business-minded denizens of Christie’s Paris salon’.⁶⁸ As an agent to the flour merchants, Turnbull, Forbes, and Co, Christie would have had an interest in economic arguments around the grain trade; food provision was in any case one of the main political issues of the day, with grain prices and proclamations, debates, and votes relating to it reported in newspapers.⁶⁹ Wollstonecraft would thus have been immersed in social groups made up of Girondin allies and sympathisers, quickly becoming familiar with their preoccupations and the shape of their political thinking. She also could not have failed to experience the febrile political climate of Paris itself, where the availability and price of bread were hot political issues; she may even have witnessed bread riots.⁷⁰ This period only lasted for a few short months, however, as in June 1793, the Girondin deputies were arrested and imprisoned under pressure from the Jacobin clubs and demand for the establishment of fixed food prices. At this point, the group of English expats gradually disbanded, especially given the increased level of threat to foreigners following Britain’s declaration of war on France in early 1793.

One of those whom Wollstonecraft met in Paris at Christie's house, in April 1793, was of course Gilbert Imlay, whose daughter Fanny she gave birth to in May 1794. It is through the lens of the affair with Imlay that Wollstonecraft's attitude to commerce is often presented: her surviving letters to him, sent during his frequent absences on business, lament that he is 'embruted by trade' and famously attack his 'money-getting face'.⁷¹ The story often told of her hostile attitude to commerce is thus frequently intertwined with that of the gradual breaking down of their relationship, as documented by the seventy or so letters from Wollstonecraft to Imlay from this period (Imlay's letters to Wollstonecraft do not survive). Beyond this, however, the figure of Imlay enables us to plot in more detail Wollstonecraft's exposure to political and commercial affairs in revolutionary France, as well as further links to the Girondins. In the first instance, when Wollstonecraft first met Imlay in April 1793, he was involved in pitching directly to Brissot a scheme whereby through the intervention of an agent provocateur, the new French republic would be able to regain possession of New Orleans and Louisiana from the Spanish. By this point, Brissot had become convinced of the need for France to use war against its enemies to defend the revolution; the Louisiana territory would provide valuable resources. This proposal also brought Imlay into contact with Crèvecoeur's son-in-law, the Girondin foreign affairs official, Louis Guillaume Otto. In the event, neither Imlay's scheme, nor those of others making similar proposals (including one submitted by Joel Barlow in November 1793) came to anything. Imlay's involvement, repeatedly pursuing the scheme, under Brissot's encouragement, however, illustrates the close and fluid links between the expatriate English and American community of Girondin supporters in Paris, and figures at the very heart of the Girondin administration.⁷²

When it became clear that the Louisiana scheme was to fall through, Imlay turned to the project for which he is better known: importing goods into revolutionary France against the British naval blockade, the activity in which he was involved whilst Wollstonecraft was writing her *View*, and which caused the lamentations against his preoccupation with business in the Wollstonecraft-Imlay letters. This was also the reason for Wollstonecraft's trip to Scandinavia in summer 1795, in pursuit of a ship connected to Imlay's business, and the silver it carried as payment for goods, which had gone missing. Whilst it is impossible to reconstruct Imlay's affairs with any certainty, not least due to the secrecy it required, Imlay's biographer Wil Verhoeven has suggested that between 1794 and 1795 Imlay worked either for or alongside his compatriot Barlow in some

way, and that Barlow was one of the lynch-pins in the extensive network of American traders importing goods into revolutionary France.⁷³ Although this activity postdates the fall of the Girondin administration, stemming from Barlow's winning of an importation contract from Robespierre's government in December 1793, Barlow again illustrates the links between Wollstonecraft and her circle and Brissot, the figure at the heart of the Girondin regime. Barlow had made a 'haphazard', 'unfaithful, careless and inaccurate' translation of Brissot's *American Travels*, which, published in February 1792, cannot have been the edition which Wollstonecraft reviewed for the *Analytical Review*.⁷⁴ And even after Brissot's death, Barlow was again keeping the flame alive, publishing a translation of the last, revised, edition of Brissot and Clavière's *The Commerce of America with Europe; particularly with France and Great-Britain*, prefaced by a biographical sketch which included his eyewitness account of Brissot's execution.⁷⁵ The *Analytical Review* also continued to commemorate Brissot, remembering him in 1794 as a 'celebrated legislator', 'one of the ablest' and 'most virtuous supporters of the French Revolution'; and in a long review of Helen Maria Williams' *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France from the 31st May 1793 till the 28th of July 1794*, it quoted her praise of the fallen Girondins as 'illustrious martyrs' whose names should be remembered with those of 'Sydney, Russell and Hampden', linking them into a pantheon of fighters for 'the liberties of their country' which, as in Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, reached back to the English civil war.⁷⁶ Neither Brissot nor Clavière are mentioned in Wollstonecraft's *View*, although Mirabeau, who had died well before Wollstonecraft started work on her history, makes regular appearances in the work, and there are obvious reasons, relating to the nature of the political climate in France when she was writing the work in 1793–1794, why Wollstonecraft may have considered it prudent to omit their names from the historical record. Their absence there, however, should not obscure the many clear links between Wollstonecraft and the Girondin circle, and their policy of free commerce as part of a 'system of liberty' and republican manners was to have a central place in her historical narrative.

We saw at the start of this section that the idealisation of the simple manners of American settlers was part of the ideological vision of those who became the Girondin revolutionaries, and the buying and selling of American land is an activity which again links to Imlay and Barlow. Imlay's hugely popular *Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792) fed the appetite of a European reading public avid to soak up its depiction of 'a transatlantic asylum of perfect equality and

pastoral bliss', a vision also offered in his novel *The Emigrants* (1793).⁷⁷ Imlay's European adventure, then, was in part funded by selling a dream of America to the British. Prior to setting up in the importation business, Barlow, to whom Wollstonecraft remained cool, despite a close friendship with his wife, was involved in selling such a dream even more explicitly to the French. As Verhoeven details, Barlow had first come to France through his involvement in a scheme of questionable legality, in which as an agent of the obscure Scioto Association, Barlow sold American land to would-be French emigrants, who arrived in Ohio only to discover that the land which they thought they had bought was not theirs, and that the promised town of Gallipolis was a meagre settlement of log cabins.⁷⁸ Brissot, Clavière, and Wollstonecraft all anticipated, with varying degrees of certainty, emigrating to a new life in the States: Brissot oversaw a land purchase there on behalf of Clavière, in the years immediately prior to the Revolution, and was planning to settle in Philadelphia when the events of 1789 brought him back to France; Wollstonecraft, as mentioned above, anticipated settling with Imlay and her sisters on an American farm, on the profits of Imlay's business. There is a marked contrast between such dreams, both personal and political, and the dirty reality of the business dealings (whether Barlow's land scheme, or the importation business), which might facilitate them. For Wollstonecraft, who died in childbirth in 1797, Brissot who was guillotined in 1793, and Clavière, who stabbed himself in the heart in prison, the day before his trial, the dream of life in America would never become a reality. But in Spring 1794, however, as Wollstonecraft was completing her *View* and preparing for the birth of her daughter, Barlow moved to Hamburg, the 'honey-pot' centre of north European war trade, where in a year he amassed a fortune in his import business.⁷⁹ He later returned to the States and, in 1807, moved into a mansion on the banks of Rock Creek, between Washington and Georgetown.

Wollstonecraft's History of the Revolution: The Grain Trade, Political Will, and The Mob

Wollstonecraft's 'Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation' shows the centrality of 'manners' to her first attempt to understand the early years of the French Revolution. This attention to manners, present also in her earlier *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was carried forward into her major work of this period, the *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. Wollstonecraft's attention to the failings of the French national character – the 'headstrong' French are

condemned for their vanity and theatricality, for their 'fatal presumption', despite their 'polished manners' – enables her to explain in part why the progress of knowledge by French Enlightenment philosophers has not yet succeeded in bringing about political improvement.⁸⁰ If, as she claims in her Preface, the Revolution was the 'natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection', and 'sincerity of principles' is 'hastening the overthrow of the tremendous empire of superstition and hypocrisy', she also needs to explain why such processes have been so impeded as events on the ground would suggest.⁸¹ A focus on manners enables her to show the effects of political structures on human personality and behaviour, both before and during the Revolution. The French character is shown to have been corrupted by the *ancien régime*: by the tyranny and oppression of the monarchy and the court, and by laws which were overly complex and impeded understanding. Hence the character failings which were evident in the behaviour of many of those who played leading parts in the National Assembly, where vanity, enthusiasm, pride, and ignorance were all in play, preventing the straight-forward achievement of political economic reform: 'ignorance and audacity have triumphed, merely because there were not found those brilliant talents, which, pursuing the straight forward line of political economy, arrest, as it were, the suffrage of every well disposed citizen'.⁸²

Wollstonecraft finds it all too easy to show the difficulties of political economic reform in this context. Narrating the failure of the Assembly to take measures to address France's deficit during Necker's time as Finance Minister, Wollstonecraft suggests that an 'able, bold minister, who possessed the confidence of the nation' might have proposed confiscating property and using it as security for a loan to serve the nation's needs and service its existing debt. Such a measure was of course later taken, with the confiscation of church and emigrant property, but Wollstonecraft's point is that it took 'the eloquence of Mirabeau', with its play on human passions, to achieve, whereas reason alone 'would have done the business', and 'men, attending to their own interest, would have promoted the public good, without having their heads turned giddy by romantic flights of heroism'.⁸³ Reason, and specifically reason in the guise of informed and sensible judgement about political economy, would have made the vagaries of eloquence, dependent on arousing emotional response in its listeners, unnecessary. The significance of this particular issue is underlined by Wollstonecraft's comments earlier in the discussion, on the importance of governments being regular in their demands for taxes: 'the manner of levying taxes is of the highest importance to political economy, and the

happiness of individuals', and she argues, in line with physiocratic doctrine, that taxes should be laid on 'land, the mother of every production'.⁸⁴ The episode presents physiocratic political economic principles as the best means of achieving happiness and justice, ideally achieved through a version of reason which, given that it can depend on individuals looking after their own interest, bypasses the potential danger of oratorical appeals to passion. All of this, however, is expressed in the subjunctive: what ought to happen, not what actually has. The impediment to the enactment of the kinds of measures which are necessary to the 'happiness of individuals' is not the absence of knowledge, but failures of character. If political economic reform is hamstrung by the inadequacy of the characters of the time, how will it be achieved?

Wollstonecraft's *View* is thus at once a historical narrative of revolutionary events up to October 1789, and a philosophical account of obstacles preventing the unfolding of liberty, in which political economic knowledge plays a central part. Where Price's 'Discourse on the Love of Our Country' looked to 'civil government' for improvements in liberty, Wollstonecraft asserts that improvements in the human condition would ideally follow from progress in the sciences of 'politics and finance', the 'most importance, and most difficult of all human improvements'.⁸⁵ Her description of what sounds like a 'science' of political economy makes clear how, far from being an abstract or technocratic endeavour, it directly addresses the consequences for human happiness of governmental acts and policies, as well as taking its cue from human need and from human nature. It thus 'involves the passions, tempers, and manners of men and nations, estimates their wants, maladies, comforts, happiness, and misery, and computes the sum of good or evil flowing from social institutions'. Fully developed, such a project will 'secure the sacred rights of every human creature', the goal which Wollstonecraft has been invoking throughout all her major writings to this point. Its progress, however, is 'retarded' by the 'vanity and weakness of men': a restatement of the problem of the impeding of knowledge by manners, which risks humanity being caught in a vicious circle of political tyranny and ignorance.⁸⁶ How then is liberty to be gained and rights secured, in a country where corruption's effects are systematic and structural? In a rare positive remark on Britain, Wollstonecraft suggests (as Brissot and Clavière had, following book three of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*) that dissemination of knowledge, and hence liberty, follows the growth of commerce and the development of a mercantile middle class, but here agricultural and aristocratic France lags behind.⁸⁷ If the growth of knowledge and liberty is associated with commerce, here is another

reason for free commerce, another justification for freeing the grain trade in particular. There is then much riding on the politics of the grain trade which her narrative traces, which thus carries a symbolic as well as practical significance. But how to kick-start this liberating process, given the existing constraints?

These concerns set the stage for the climactic events of Wollstonecraft's history, described in the last of its five books: the march on Versailles of 5 October 1789 and, importantly, the King's granting of the free circulation of grain. Wollstonecraft, who sees that the 'science of politics and finance' could secure the 'wants, comforts and happiness' of all, would want to read such an act as the expression of the growth of knowledge and the spirit of liberty. But instead it is presented as produced by a complex, ambivalent concatenation of events, involving a 'mob' which has quite possibly been manipulated by court counter-revolutionary conspirators, suspected of spreading rumours of a bread shortage in order to provoke the protestors in a way that would then justify a crackdown. Wollstonecraft's willingness to contemplate such court conspiracies is shared with other revolutionary sympathisers: many believed that 'court factions would stop at nothing to contain political opponents – even conspiring to storm or starve Paris'.⁸⁸ But her attention to the role of the mob also means that the act of liberation, the freeing of the grain trade, is produced at least in part by mob pressure, not enlightened knowledge; it thus threatens the very model of historical causation which otherwise sustains both her narrative and her hopes for the future. A theory of the growth of knowledge advancing political emancipation is thus challenged by the reality of actual events. Wollstonecraft's history thus tells the story of the liberation of the grain trade as an episode in the ongoing unfolding of liberty, whilst at the same time placing the 'scarcity of bread', 'the common grievance of the revolution', at the heart of a problem of historical causation and impeded political will.⁸⁹

Wollstonecraft's 'moral and historical' account of the Revolution thus views bread in more than a purely economic light: the scarcity of bread is at the heart of a case study of political will, political knowledge, and the relations between the people, their representatives in the National Assembly, and the King. The possible liberation of the grain trade, a step on the path to broader political liberty, depends on its outcome. But whilst the Versailles chapter ends with an extended discussion of the 'will of the people', which is 'supreme' in theory, but which, 'in the infancy of society, and during the advancement of the science of political liberty' should be somewhat checked by 'the progress of that science', the events

Wollstonecraft relates represent precisely the opposite: the achievement of an act of economic liberalisation, as well as Louis's ratification of the Declaration of Rights, under pressure from an ignorant mob.⁹⁰ Whilst both of these measures had been well in train at the moment of the march on Versailles, it was only the arrival of the mob which caused Louis to concede both. And, as Wollstonecraft makes clear, the Parisian mob's will, far from being founded on knowledge, is both readily moulded, and a function of material neediness:

A scarcity of bread, the common grievance of the revolution, aggravated the vague fears of the Parisians, and made the people so desperate, that it was not difficult to persuade them to undertake any enterprize; and the torrent of resentment and enthusiasm required only to be directed to a point to carry every thing before it. Liberty was the constant watch word; though few knew in what it consisted.⁹¹

Physical vulnerability has turned the mob into political playthings, an observation which is later echoed in the King's eventual submission to political demands under the threat of his own vulnerability. As Wollstonecraft says elsewhere, 'comforts' are needed for other improvements to follow, so bread's absence is indicative too of the general problem of the impeded political knowledge of the people. But the mob's desire for bread also prompts the philosopher-historian to meditate on motivation in general, and on how fermented passions motivate a populace towards an ultimately unknown goal:

It seems, indeed, to be necessary, that every species of enthusiasm should be fermented by ignorance to carry it to any height. Mystery alone gives full play to the imagination, men pursuing with ardour objects indistinctly seen or understood, because each man shapes them to his taste, and looks for something beyond even his own conception, when he is unable to form a just idea.⁹²

Here the possibility that Wollstonecraft contemplated in the account of the National Assembly's financial management discussed earlier, that trusting to 'reason' and men 'attending to their own interest' would be sufficient, appears unreachably remote.⁹³ The alternative depiction of motivation presented here is distinctly double-edged. On the one hand, enthusiasm fermented by ignorance hardly amounts to an ideal Enlightenment prescription for historical or political change. On the other hand, given the obstacles to actions founded on existing political economic knowledge which she has already described, pursuing 'with ardour objects indistinctly seen or understood' would appear to be the inevitable condition of all

seeking political improvements. In their need for bread, the Parisians might thus exemplify the human condition in relation to political improvement, in general: experiencing need and desire, but lacking the knowledge to attain their goal, they are spurred on by fermented passion. Of course, the potential outcome of such process might be the anarchy into which Wollstonecraft fears that France has tipped at the time of her writing; her insistence that improvement follows the gradual advance of knowledge is an attempt to contain such dangerous, potentially excessive, passions. Yet her depiction of the eager pursuit of objects playing in the imagination, just beyond conception, seems to concede that there is something compelling about the involvement of the passions in political and philosophical pursuits, as the sublime phrasing indicates, and to suggest, too, that the imagination might step in to bridge the gaps which are beyond the reach of reason and knowledge. As Burke had observed in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), we are moved by obscurity and the unknown. Cast in the pejorative form of the unruly mob, the embodiment of an inchoate force of desire, passion, and frenzy, what the imagination represents here must clearly be kept at bay. Yet its potential to resolve, transform, and recast the difficulty and obstacles in the way of human self-betterment would be one of the themes of Wollstonecraft's next work, her *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*.

At this moment in her historical narrative, however, the political stasis of early October 1789, a moment of suspense amidst revolutionary fervour, is broken by action generated by the absence of bread (or fears of its scarcity), and an act of economic liberation follows. At this moment, as Wollstonecraft relates, the National Assembly was awaiting the King's sanctioning of the Declaration of Rights, as well as his approval of their freeing of the grain trade. Aware of his tendency to 'subterfuge' and 'profound dissimulation', it can do nothing to address the central obstacle which he represents until the mob effect action. Wollstonecraft's own account, bound to its nature as philosophical history, is arguably impinged or blocked too; however, much her 'philosophical eye' can see the need for the progress of the 'science of liberty', her 'duty' as a historian, as she says at the end of the chapter, is to 'record truth'.⁹⁴ Faithfulness to the historical record means that a 'philosophical' truth, the 'truth' of political knowledge, embodied in arguments for free trade, can't be fully articulated. Not only the Parisians, then, but the National Assembly and Wollstonecraft too are caught up in an impeded economy, where the circulation of knowledge, provision, and improvement is blocked, and in which liberalisation

is needed on all fronts. It is the actions of the mob, putatively motivated by an absence of bread, whether real or not, which mobilise historical action, springing the trap of suspension which has been placed on both events and Wollstonecraft's narrative, though bringing in train problems which foreshadow those of the Terror.

Carefully examined, Wollstonecraft's account of the Versailles events reveals a certain narratorial sleight of hand, which, without explicitly saying so, and in however compromised a way, shows the role of the mob in securing a free grain trade. This is a result which, given her earlier, ambivalent, meditation on the productive power of enthusiasm, offers the best possible outcome to the mobilisation of an ignorant, manipulated rabble. In a significant moment in Wollstonecraft's narrative, an unnamed 'orator' acts as the representative of the people, and voices their 'grievances' to the National Assembly, asking for a 'continual provision of subsistence'; he also notes the people's concern over the delay in the formation of the constitution – a factor which, having been lamented lengthily by Wollstonecraft herself in the previous chapter, adds to his authority. According to a republican tradition of rhetoric, such a speech in the public space of the Assembly could be construed as an important moment of the political self-affirmation of the people.⁹⁵ The Assembly's response to his speech is that a free trade in grain has been requested from the King. Whilst Wollstonecraft maintains her orator's anonymity, other accounts name him as Stanislas Maillard, a key figure in the storming of the Bastille. Wollstonecraft's suppression of his identity as a political actor gives him further authority: unsullied with a political past, unburdened by an individual identity, he is merely and straightforwardly a representative of the people. In her account, the orator behaves with dignity when reprimanded for calumny against the clergy; and the extended account offered in the *New Annual Register*, which Wollstonecraft used as one source for her work, of the riotous behaviour of women at the Assembly (occupying the president's chair, drinking, interrupting business) is entirely absent.⁹⁶ For Wollstonecraft's reader, this moment might then be read as a rare but exemplary instance of direct communication between the people and their representatives, and one in which, given the Assembly's response, the demands of the people are met by the politicians. But such a reading is only possible if the compromised character and origins of the mob are repressed. Here, Wollstonecraft aids her reader, by earlier asserting that, on arrival at Versailles, unarmed women went to the Assembly, whilst the armed proceeded to the palace. If the mob, via their orator, here appears to enact an exemplary moment of popular petitioning, it is only by forgetting

the other reading which shadows this one: of the political efficacy of combined ignorance and physical threat.

With its scene of massed, starving protestors demanding subsistence, Wollstonecraft's Versailles chapter asks to be read in relation to E. P. Thompson's 'moral economy': the responsibility of authorities to oversee grain supplies to ensure provision for the populace in conditions of extremis. It is precisely such a 'moral economy' which would be overturned by the establishment of a free grain trade.⁹⁷ Other critics have read what can appear as authorial high-handedness in Wollstonecraft's harsh characterisation of the mob, as ignorance about the operation of such a moral economy as Thompson outlines.⁹⁸ But popular protests – food riots – were far from uncommon in eighteenth-century Britain, and Wollstonecraft, whose father was briefly, if unsuccessfully, a farmer, might be expected to have been familiar with this context.⁹⁹ In fact, what Wollstonecraft represents in this episode is both a crowd making precisely such demands for subsistence, and the incorporation or transition of those demands into quite a different economic register. Whilst the mob's orator asks, in exactly the terms of the 'moral economy', for a 'continual provision of subsistence', he is answered by an assurance about free grain trade. The same exchange is repeated when a delegation of women petitions the King directly on the same matter, and he responds by sanctioning a free grain trade. In each case, the petitioners appear to believe that their request has been directly granted, when in fact this might be far from being the case: the women, for instance, kiss Louis' hand and return to their peers exultant at his charm and condescension. Where, in previous decades, attempts to establish a free grain trade in France ran into trouble because of their very evident departure from a moral economy provision, Wollstonecraft arguably narrates the establishment of a free grain trade under the cover of compliance with a request for such a provision and shows how a free grain trade is greeted as a moral provision.

This management of the transition between a moral economy and free trade shows one means of bridging ignorance and knowledge, superstition and enlightenment. If the mobilised, petitioning mob is ignorant and enthusiastic, they are met by a National Assembly which, on this matter at least, is already enlightened. Suspended between ignorance and enlightenment, the people can only ask for bread in the old language of feudal provision, but they are met by a new language of free trade. Bread too, as a political object, is suspended between two directions, both looking back to an era of feudal provision and forward to an era of free trade. The political protests, petitions, concessions, and even violence accompanying the

arrival of that era, meanwhile, also usefully distract from the detail of what many of Wollstonecraft's readers may well have perceived as the rare (and, as it would turn out, temporary) achievement, amidst the revolutionary turmoil, of a welcome measure of economic reform.¹⁰⁰ But if some form of economic liberalisation is achieved here, the political will of the people is curiously sidelined. On the one hand, their political voice is justified, in that their demands brought about the conditions within which the King was made to act. But on the other, they prove easily duped and manipulated, as they fail to see that what they are granted does not exactly equate to what they demanded. Wollstonecraft's case study of popular political will is thus, at the same time, an examination of mass ignorance. In an insight quite as ironic as her earlier observation on the motive power of ignorance had promised, Wollstonecraft shows how popular political will, so compromised by enthusiasm, proves a sideshow – whilst also being efficacious – to the real political work of establishing economic liberty.

Beyond the Grain Trade: Commerce and the Future of Improvement

Wollstonecraft's decision to highlight the declaration of a liberalised grain trade in October 1789 is unusual among historians of the early phases of the French Revolution. Other accounts of the events at Versailles, including those likely to be known to her, offer what are otherwise similar narratives of events without mentioning the measure: it is absent from Thomas Christie's *Letters on the Revolution of France* (1791), Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), Burke's *Reflections*, and Rabaut Saint-Étienne's *History of the Revolution of France* (1792). The conservative *Annual Register*, which draws on Saint-Étienne, makes great play of the bread shortages, but depicts the King not, as in Wollstonecraft, sanctioning the 'decree, relative to the free circulation of grain', but rather, in significantly different terms, ordering 'the immediate supply of Paris with provisions'.¹⁰¹ In these other accounts, 5 October is significant only for the march on Versailles which preceded the attack on the royal bedchamber of the following night: the event which, since Burke's *Reflections*, was established in the mind of the British reading public as the most resonant emblem of the Revolution itself.

As we have seen in Wollstonecraft's account, the liberation of the grain trade is more than an attempt at economic reform: it marks a larger effort to yoke a chaotic narrative of revolution to that of improvement, and economic and political liberty. By giving special attention to political measures taken to liberate the grain trade, Wollstonecraft finds a way of co-opting

the often chaotic narrative of revolution, with all its vulnerabilities to historical accidents and contingencies, to that of reform and improvement, and uniting, if fleetingly, economic and political liberty. In doing so, like the physiocratic economists whom she praises, she disseminates a doctrine of free trade in another form and preserves the improved knowledge of enlightenment even within a historical document of violence and anarchy. As well as a history, then, her work can also be read as a test case in the possibilities for, and fate of, 'improvement', as suggested by 'moral view' of 'progress' announced in her work's full title. Its concern with the grain trade is thus in many ways quite distinct from the debate which was shortly to come to the fore in Britain in 1795–1796 (immediately after *View*'s publication in 1794), when a period of acute grain scarcity prompted political debate over legislative intervention in the domestic market for grain, part of larger discussions over poverty and poor relief.¹⁰² Smith's arguments were used by both sides in these exchanges, in an episode which did much to establish the authority of Smithian political economy at a time when the future direction of political economic thinking was still in flux.¹⁰³

Wollstonecraft's account of the liberation of the grain trade is a case study in the difficulty of bringing about the changes which would further the causes of liberty and human happiness: for her, the ultimate ends of political economy. Like much else which gets underway in the Revolution, however, the 'science of politics and finance', in which she invests such hopes, is far from being in a 'state of perfection'. Like many things in Wollstonecraft's revolutionary history, commerce is at a historical hiatus, suspended, like the mob itself, between two possible futures, of improvement or degeneration, liberty or oppression. At stake too is the relationship between philosophical history, Enlightenment's genre of human progress and improvement, and the new discourse of political economy. On the one hand, a new 'science of finance' might be seen, like philosophical history itself, as a narrative of improvement: the declaration on the grain trade might then be considered, as Wollstonecraft's staging invites, as of comparable importance to the Declaration of Rights itself. But on the other, criticisms which emerge in the last pages of *View* over other elements of political economic thinking suggest that the future of commerce as revealed by political economy may threaten or overturn progress itself. Arguably, Wollstonecraft's very foregrounding of an act of economic liberalisation presents an undecided generic question regarding the relation of the new economic science to the philosophical history from which it emerged, and hence poses too the question of the relation of political economy to morality, and of commerce to narratives of virtue

and improvement. This is a dilemma reflected even in the very form of Wollstonecraft's narrative, which wants to present the liberalisation of the grain trade as the culmination of popular political protest, but is thwarted by the possibility that the popular movement is itself motivated by the plots of aristocrats. It is only through release from such aristocratic conspiracies that new possibilities for history and a meritocratic political economy can emerge. The establishment of political economy's narrative of equitable provision via the market thus risks being thwarted by excessive, tyrannical ambition on the one hand, and the all-too-malleable passions aroused by immediate material need, on the other.

The difficulties of integrating economic improvement into philosophical history's narrative of human progress come to the fore in *View's* final chapter. An increasing foregrounding of political economic questions in its final pages seems to acknowledge that the future of improvement, if it doesn't lie in revolution, is bound up with the progress of both commerce and a 'science of politics and finance', already announced as 'the most important, and most difficult of all human improvements'.¹⁰⁴ For Scottish philosophical history, commerce brings improvement in manners, knowledge, and hence liberty, but, as Smith himself was aware, the division of labour, keystone of the fully articulated capitalist system of economic production, caused members of 'the labouring poor' to become 'as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become'; their 'dexterity' at their particular trade is acquired 'at the expense of ... intellectual, social, and martial virtues'.¹⁰⁵ Wollstonecraft repeats Smith's worry that the division of labour debases 'whole knots of men' who are, 'turned into machines', with 'every noble principle of nature ... eradicated by making a man pass his life in stretching wire, pointing a pin, heading a nail, or spreading a sheet of paper on a plain surface'.¹⁰⁶ Where Smith looks to education to mitigate these effects, Wollstonecraft shows how this arrangement enables 'a keen speculator to become wealthy', attacking the debasement of the lower classes in the process of giving 'convenience' to the 'luxury' of the upper classes, in a 'cast-like division'.¹⁰⁷ And countering Smith's critique of the time wasted by the worker who 'saunters' from one task to another, she asserts that '[t]he time which, a celebrated writer says, is sauntered away, in going from one part of an employment to another, is the very time that preserves the man from degenerating into a brute'.¹⁰⁸ As these comments make clear, the division of labour which Smith placed at the heart of his political economy causes commerce to threaten the virtuous cycle of enlightenment, and the very narrative of enlightened improvement. But Wollstonecraft also aims her fire more broadly, beyond the specific doctrines of Smithian political

economy. She is critical of the merchant who ‘enters into speculation so closely bordering on fraudulence, that common straight forward minds can scarcely distinguish the devious art of selling any thing for a price far beyond that necessary to ensure a just profit, from sheer dishonesty, aggravated by hard-heartedness, when it is to take advantage of the necessities of the indigent’.¹⁰⁹ The ‘necessities of the indigent’ invites her reader to consider her remarks in the context of the grain trade, and to reflect whether it might be an opportunity for such profiteering, or a guard against it. Above all, Wollstonecraft warns against the ‘destructive influence of commerce’ when it is carried on by men made ‘eager by overgrown riches to partake of the respect paid to the nobility’. The worst effect of commerce, she asserts, in an echo of other radical writers of the time, is that it ‘produces an aristocracy of wealth, which degrades mankind’, so that ‘savageness’ is exchanged for ‘tame servility, instead of acquiring the urbanity of improved reason’.¹¹⁰

Alongside her praise of the physiocrats, then, Wollstonecraft retains significant reservations about what Imlay, in his *Topographical Description*, termed ‘aggrandized commerce’.¹¹¹ Periodically in *View*, she offers a glimpse of her favoured alternative: moderate agrarianism, defined by ideals of husbandry, domesticity and contentment, and independent living on the land. It is a vision that looks back to Price’s praise of the independent farmers of Connecticut, refracted by Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, but on which, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Wollstonecraft puts her own stamp. At the same time, even whilst *View* represents her closest extended engagement with political economic thinking, little attention is paid to areas of policy other than the grain trade: the issues of the French national debt and the confiscation of church property are only relatively briefly addressed, and the assignats are unmentioned.¹¹² The specific nature of these omissions, as much as the criticisms of the final chapter, tell us much about Wollstonecraft’s understanding of what political economy might be: a way of addressing the needs and wants of humankind so as to address ‘the most important end of society, the comfort and independence of the people’.¹¹³ This is a formulation which asks for a return to the territory of manners: how might the political organisation and administration of society and commerce be such that an ‘independent and comfortable situation’ might be attainable by the many, if not all? In this context, it is a telling indictment of the French, for Wollstonecraft, that they had ‘no word in their vocabulary to express *comfort* – that state of existence, in which reason renders serene and useful the days, which passion would only cheat with flying dreams of happiness’.¹¹⁴ In a glance at Burke, whom as we saw in Chapter 1, yoked a defence of monastic life to the ‘toleration’ of ‘trades and employments’

which were recognised as ‘servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations’, Wollstonecraft comments that ‘whilst lazy friars are driven out of their cells as stagnate bodies that corrupt society, it may admit of a doubt whether large work-shops do not contain men equally tending to impede that gradual progress of improvement, which leads to the perfection of reason, and the establishment of rational equality’.¹¹⁵ ‘[A]ll associations of men render them sensual, and consequently selfish’, she comments: the quest remains for a way of life, aside from monastic stagnation or the dehumanisation of the factory, which might secure rational improvement, independence, and comfort.

At the very start of *View*, in her Preface, Wollstonecraft attempts to distinguish between the ‘uncontaminated mass of the French Nation’, whose response to the flowering of Enlightenment philosophy prompted the overthrow of tyranny, and a specific class of people, more closely associated with monarchy and aristocracy, who were corrupted by ‘servility and voluptuousness’.¹¹⁶ Yet the presence and actions of an ‘uncontaminated mass’ prove elusive over the subsequent pages, which, whether in the complex presentation of the mob, or in the self-regarding and often ignorant National Assembly, too often show only evidence for failures of circumstances or character. The remarks of Wollstonecraft’s final chapter suggest that the subject in political economy is similarly embruted, to use a Wollstonecraftian word: by the division of labour, by factory life, by the pursuit of wealth, by moral decline and by mental decay. Rather than a historical progress, we appear to have come full circle: or rather, still to be struggling to imagine the shape of an alternative future which will release us from the trap of the present. As the next chapter will argue, Wollstonecraft’s attempt to sketch such alternatives, beyond the ruins of revolutionary hopes, and outside the remit too of a political economy whose future direction she deprecates, will return to the possibility of comfort, domesticity, and independence, in a vision of agricultural independence, and in a territory mapped out by manners. For Brissot and Clavière, a moral political economy had always been about manners and sentiments, and liberty was preserved through manners and morals. These, increasingly linked to a vocabulary of comfort and happiness, and a turn to domesticity as a context for both, are what Wollstonecraft rescued from the collapse of revolutionary ideals, as her quest continued for the conditions in which political improvement might be realised.