

ABBÉ DE MABLY ON COMMERCE, LUXURY, AND “CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM”

BY

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*Ever since the French Revolution, Abbé de Mably has been portrayed as a forerunner of utopian communism and common ownership, and, more recently still, as a “classical republican” in the Age of Enlightenment. This article aims to reappraise Mably’s position. We attempt to show that he proposed a science of commerce in his *Droit public de l’Europe* (1746), and that his economic ideas displayed continuity and consistency throughout his lifetime. Far from being an enemy of trade, Mably sought a *realpolitik* in an attempt to strike a balance between the race for the enrichment of nations of the Moderns and the virtues and equality of the Ancients that he never thought possible to restore. The paper also examines his place in the history of economics. In particular, the similarities and differences between Mably’s ideas and those of the Gournay circle are studied, the issue of inequalities being the dividing line between them.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–1785) was born into a family of the lesser nobility. He studied theology in Lyon and Paris before embarking in 1743 upon a diplomatic career as secretary to the *ministre d’Etat* without portfolio, Cardinal de Tencin. On leaving the cardinal’s service in the late 1740s, Mably turned to writing. He worked on international law, trade, history, politics, and moral philosophy. Although he died before the onset of the events that rocked Europe at the end of the century, Mably was one of the authors most widely cited and highly esteemed by the French revolutionaries, especially during the Republican period.

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The eulogy delivered by Abbé Gabriel Brizard in 1787 and the posthumous publication in the first weeks of 1789 of Mably's *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, written in 1758, attest to the fascination he exerted over the revolutionaries. Brizard eulogized Mably's "austere and serious" style, portraying him as a virtuous Spartan castaway in a turbulent century of passions and luxury (Brizard [1787] 1794–95). In *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, Mably depicted a transitional period from absolute to constitutional monarchy, initiated by the convening of the Estates-General. He seemed to have written the scenario for the first stage of the French Revolution before the event. Although his scenario did not include the establishment of a republic in France, Mably's book did extol the Ancient virtues, as had his *Entretiens de Phocion*, published in 1763. Both works brimmed with republican terminology praising Cato, Lycurgus of Sparta, and the common ownership of property. In 1793 the Jacobins posthumously credited Mably with having "prepared" the overthrow of the monarchy and the advent of a politics of "virtue." His name is also associated with the "conspiracy of equals," a failed coup d'état in 1797 by Gracchus Babeuf, a great admirer of Mably and a proponent of "agrarian communism" (Ferrand 2014, pp. 10–12). So, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1980s, the matter appeared to be settled: like Jean Meslier, Etienne-Gabriel Morelly, and Dom Léger Marie Deschamps, Mably was an avant-garde thinker on utopian socialism and a champion of the "community of goods" (Lerminier 1833, p. 95; Franck 1848, p. 111; Lecercle 1963; Galliani 1972; Coste 1975, Ozouf 1989).

Now, in *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* ([1990] 1991, p. 131), Roger Chartier warns of the dangers of reading Enlightenment authors through the prism of the French Revolution. The revolution invented an ancestry for itself by "constructing" its own interpretation of Enlightenment philosophers on the basis of the events of the 1790s. Mably is a typical instance of this. His admiration of the Ancient republics and their virtue was showcased, while his argument for moderate reform of the French monarchy was ignored. This observation calls for pre-revolutionary authors to be interpreted in their proper context.

There has been perceptible change since the works of the Cambridge school, notably with the famous *Machiavellian Moment* by John Greville Agard Pocock (1975). That book sought to challenge the traditional tenet of the triumph of Lockean liberalism during the eighteenth century by focusing instead on "civic humanism" or "classical republicanism." Critical of the "consumer revolution," free trade, and enrichment as ends in themselves, this tradition purportedly employed a terminology of "virtue" and "civic mindedness," dismissing "luxury," and praising citizens' active participation in the exercise of power. Although prominent in the English-speaking world, this interpretative tradition was popularized only much later among French historians of the Enlightenment through works by Johnson Kent Wright (1997) and Keith Michael Baker (2001).

As Michael Kwass (2004, p. 204) highlights, these studies raise new issues, because historians of ideas have been too readily inclined "to divide eighteenth-century liberal and republican discourse into rival camps." Recently, Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson (2008) have extended this criticism of the "Cambridge" approach. By studying both English-speaking and Continental authors, they refute the claim that these discourses are mutually exclusive, and demonstrate "that what we recognize today as liberalism in fact was constituted as a conceptual hybrid both against and within republican terminology, ideas, and aspirations" (Kalyvas and Katznelson 2008, pp. 4–5).

Similarly, the present article seeks to prove that classical republicanism was not devoid of liberalism. In fact, by focusing on some authors of the eighteenth century, Kwass (2004) and John Sholvin (2006) point out that the most common position in the French Enlightenment was a discourse favorable to both free trade and increased consumption, but mistrustful of some kinds of luxury, and frequently using republican terminology to highlight the importance of virtue. Far from being antagonistic, these positions were perfectly compatible.

By bringing together Mably and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baker (2001, p. 38) implicitly tries to prove that the former espoused the latter's social contract theory. On this interpretation, Mably becomes the archetypal classical republican combating the forces of "liberalism" with "the experience of the ancients and the record of history" as his weapons. Even though Wright (1997) acknowledges that "republican" ideas and vocabulary appear, albeit very briefly, only in Mably's *Principes des négociations* (1757) and then in Mably's mature works, he does not mention the great ambiguities of these books, in which Mably's early "liberal" positions coexisted extensively with his new perspective. Wright leaves aside the management of (free) trade and the praise of commercial society contained in different editions of the *Droit public de l'Europe* and in Mably's later publications, and he appears to be uncomfortable with such a mix (1997, pp. 57–58). Wright seeks to prove that the Mably of the late 1750s supposedly became the zealot of an anti-trade and anti-liberalism policy. Istvan Hont (2008), too, deals with Mably, this time as part of the "rich country–poor country" debate: i.e., the question of competitiveness among the trading nations, which saw their production costs rise. Hont remarks on Mably's praise for domestic commerce in general and agriculture and population growth in particular (Hont 2008, p. 278). But he focuses on abandoning foreign trade as the only lasting way to combat luxury and degenerate manners (p. 280). Our own interpretation of Mably undoubtedly comes closest to Michael Sonenscher's (2008). He acknowledges that Mably was not always opposed to trade. Nevertheless, by focusing on Mably's fondness for the Ancient World, omitting the ideas on trade management added in 1764 by Mably in his *Droit public de l'Europe*, Sonenscher fails to disentangle Mably's ideal and his recommendations for modern policy, and finally concludes, like Hont, that Mably saw autarky as the best policy (2008, p. 392).

By confronting these approaches, there are two main objectives in this article. The first objective is to examine Mably's place in the history of economic ideas, in particular by unveiling the science of commerce deployed in *Droit public de l'Europe*, and the similarities and differences between his economic ideas and those of the Gournay circle. The second objective is to compare and contrast Mably's economic thought and his "classical republicanism" by showing that his economic ideas displayed continuity and consistency throughout his lifetime, his so-called opposition to trade being much more complex than it appeared at first sight.

John Shovlin (2008, pp. 212–213) recognizes the possible links between Mably and the Gournay circle,¹ but unfortunately his study does not include the first edition of Mably's *Droit public* (1746), with its remarkable insights into commerce. Judging from his ideas—which ranged from the need for a navigation act and a positive trade

¹See Charles, Lefebvre, and Théré (2011) for more information on the Gournay circle in general.

balance, the rejection of bullionism, the insistence on a full-fledged domestic free trade, and support for agriculture and the countryside, to the use of a “history of commerce,” an emphasis on the role of politics, colonies, and peace treaties, and, finally, rivalry in the management of commerce—it can be said that Mably proposed a science of commerce that shared a great deal in common with the Gournay circle of a few years later, except, probably, with respect to slavery and inequality (see section II).

Throughout all the editions of his *Droit public* (1746 to 1764), up until *Du commerce des grains* (1775) and *De la législation ou principe des lois* (1776), by way of the *Entretiens de Phocion* (1763) and, however briefly, the *Principes des négociations* (1757), Mably progressively engaged in discussion of “civic humanism,” on the basis of his economic ideas but not as a substitute for them. Those ideas were radicalized but not abandoned in the sense that Mably never became an enemy of foreign trade, and stood by many of his early proposals for the proper management of trade. He increasingly criticized the enrichment of the few in a nation, but on economic grounds. Thanks to Richard Cantillon (1755), Mably was concerned about the effects of inflows of money and the increase in prices. But within the “rich country–poor country” debate, he is less interested by the competitiveness of manufactures in foreign markets than by the purchasing power of ordinary people on domestic markets and the exports of foodstuffs at cheap prices. Foreign trade should not be banned (especially in a kingdom with a majority of little landowners), but money inflows must be strictly controlled (see section III).

The paths of Mably and the followers of Jacques Vincent de Gournay diverged, with Mably growing increasingly concerned about inequality. Reasoning in several of his works of the 1760s to the 1770s outside the framework of communal property, Mably tried to come up with a realpolitik for modern states that might conciliate a degree of equality, significant purchasing power for citizens, and the promotion of agriculture with free trade and private property. Far from arguing against modern commercial society as a whole, Mably warned against luxury on the ground that some trades were economically unable to ensure the general well-being of the people (see section IV).

II. THE 1740S: MABLY’S SCIENCE OF COMMERCE

In *Du commerce des grains*—a short work written in the midst of the “Flour War” (*Guerre des farines*) (1775), but not published until 1794—Mably evoked his privileged relationship with Intendant of Commerce Jacques Vincent de Gournay (1712–1759), a “man full of genius” (Mably [1775] 1794–95, p. 290). He related how de Gournay’s thought had been misrepresented by his disciples, whom he likened to the physiocrats² and especially to Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (Charles, Lefebvre, and Théré 2011, p. 11):³

²According to Mably, “Thus, Monsieur Quesnay finds himself as the head of the sect which Monsieur de Gournay had created” (Mably [1775] 1794–95, p. 296).

³Turgot, in his *Éloge de Vincent de Gournay* (1759), played an important role in the construction of a “liberal” Gournay, and it is Turgot whom Mably portrayed with this “multitude of little *maîtres des requêtes* who intended to become intendants or ministers, and thought they knew everything by shouting *liberté, liberté; il ne faut que laisser faire, et se tenir tranquille*” (Mably [1775] 1794–95, p. 291).

I witnessed the revolution that occurred in Monsieur de Gournay's feelings. Having requested that he provide me with his commentary on Child, that he was not allowed to print, because it was said to be too fearless or too foreign to the practice of the council, he granted me this favor, by warning me that I would find in his work a number of things that I would not endorse, things that he condemned himself, and that he planned to change. I was wrong, he told me, to look at trade as the main part of government. Lack of money is an evil, but I was wrong to believe that we could not have too much of it. I like freedom in trade, but I do not want it to degenerate into license. These are not, my dear Cléante, Monsieur de Gournay's own words, but I can assure you that they reflect his exact thoughts. (Mably [1775] 1794–95, p. 294)

There are two important points in this passage. The first is how closely acquainted de Gournay and Mably seem to have been in the mid-1750s, and the second is a presentation of what was supposedly Gournay's true message, that of controlled free trade involving a necessary limit on the accumulation of money.

While we have only Mably's testimony for it, we know that he and his brother, the philosopher and economist Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780), were acquainted with two figures who moved around the Gournay circle: Charles Duclos (1704–1772) and Abbé Nicolas-Charles-Joseph Trublet (1697–1770). As essayists and novelists, both men played important roles in the Republic of Letters and had always harbored a special interest for the “science of commerce.” Duclos, born in Brittany like most of the circle's authors, was in contact with Gournay, François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, and Trudaine de Montigny (Charles 2011, p. 76). It is known that Mably frequented Madame de Tencin's salon, where Duclos was a regular (Vaugelade 2007, p. 161),⁴ and that Condillac, along with Duclos, belonged to the Duke of Nivernais's circle (Baguenault de Puchesse 1910, p. 15). However, the Trublet connection was Mably's closest tie with the Gournay circle: as a fellow Breton, Trublet called Gournay “my friend” and was, “as censor, involved in the dissemination of the writings of the circle” (Charles 2011, p. 76). Madame de Tencin found work for Mably and Trublet as secretaries to Cardinal de Tencin (Sareil 1969, pp. 238–239). Both men worked together for several years,⁵ and it was Mably who introduced Trublet to Rousseau.⁶ In this respect, it is highly likely that Trublet introduced Mably to Gournay, or, rather, Gournay to Mably.

Before 1747, Gournay was still Monsieur Vincent, a merchant who was yet to write or translate anything, whereas Mably was already a famous diplomat who had successfully published two books (Galliani 1981, pp. 113–114). The second, in particular, is very important for our purposes. The *Droit public de l'Europe*, a highly significant book on the law of nations, with an important essay on commerce in the second volume, ran to several editions; the first editions of 1746 and 1748 were identical in all respects, with changes being made from 1764 onward only.

⁴See also Galliani (1981, p. 116).

⁵Condillac seemed to be close to Trublet in the mid-1750s. In a letter to Formey in 1755, he wrote, “Monsieur l'abbé Trublet did not let me ignore the kind manner as Monsieur de Maupertuis referred to me in the letters he wrote to him” (Matter 1846, p. 407). In a letter addressed to his friend the diplomat P.-M. Hennin, Forbonnais explained that he met Condillac in Parma (Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Ms 1259, Forbonnais to Hennin, 20 June 1758).

⁶Trublet to Rousseau, Friday, 13 June 1760 / Letter rousjeVF0070127_key001cor of *Electronic Enlightenment*, edited by Robert McNamee et al. Vers. 2.4 (University of Oxford, 2013).

So, what is to be found in the early editions? Mably extolled the benefits of commerce, but this praise was tinged with apprehension and concern about some of the effects. Mably began chapter eleven, “Treaties of Commerce and Navigation Concluded between the Main Powers of Europe,” with “We are in too enlightened a century for us to have to prove that a Nation could be happy & flourishing without commerce. Europe felt this truth very late; the Barbarians who settled on the ruins of the Roman Empire, were good only for war, & the vices of their government made war necessary for several centuries” (Mably 1746, II, pp. 230–231).

Before *L’Esprit des lois* (1748) and in line with Jean-Francois Melon (1734) and Charles Rollin (1730–38) (see Orain 2014), Mably sought to promote “soft trade” as opposed to the ravages of war and conquest. In this respect, Marie-France Piguet showed Mably’s early use of the adjective “*commerçant*” (merchant) to qualify the nouns “nation” or “power” in opposition to the “*nations guerrières*” (warring nations) (Piguet 2011, p. 167).⁷ This theme and the use of this adjective would play a major role in the Gournay circle, with Mably adopting a methodological approach that would also be developed by the circle in their pursuit of the “history of commerce.”⁸ From the downfall of Rome to the rise of the Italian republics in the Middle Ages, not to mention the Hanseatic ports and their common decline after the great maritime explorations of the Portuguese, Spaniards, and French (Mably 1746, II, pp. 231–234), this history provided Mably with a methodology for the study of commerce. More than a comparative method in the style of Charles Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, Mably constructed a science of causes, like Rollin before him (1730–38) and Forbonnais after him (1754) (see Briant 2012, p. 40; and Orain 2014). In the management of trade, attention had to be given to laws, treatises, governments, etc., and their consequences upon commerce. These foundations enabled Mably to develop his own viewpoint on domestic trade, European trade, and colonial trade (Mably 1746, II, pp. 234–235).

Let us look first at domestic trade. Mably introduced the issue in the following way: “Domestic commerce does not in itself enrich a state, since by assuming no exports it brings no money in; *yet it is the most useful*, and serves as the basis for foreign commerce” (p. 235; emphasis added). All the ambiguity of Mably’s ideas about which of domestic or foreign trade mattered most is captured in this quotation. At first sight, Mably appeared to support the “mercantilist” logic of the “two circuits.” By this logic, only foreign trade could enrich a nation because it brought in precious metals through the sale of manufactured goods (Steiner 1992, p. 113). Accordingly, everything had to be done in order to ensure a positive trade balance. The expressions “serves as the basis” and “is the most useful” may mean that foreign trade had to be able to rely on a strong domestic trade, capable of generating a large “surplus.” Now, upon closer inspection, it appears that foreign commerce was important in Mably’s scheme of things not only because it could “enrich the nation,” but also because without it, domestic commerce would languish. Indeed, Mably constantly emphasized the benefits of domestic commerce:

Agriculture & all other commerce in the hands of rural populations deserve particular attention on the part of the legislator; by activating it, one multiplies industry, wealth and men. As a consequence, Society becomes capable of forming larger enterprises.

⁷He discussed “trading powers” (*les puissances commerçantes*) (Mably 1746, II, p. 301).

⁸On this approach in the Gournay circle, see Cheney (2010 and 2011).

If on the contrary circulation is not free between the provinces of a state, nature will shower its favors uselessly upon them, the crops will perish for want of being consumed; abundance will be feared almost as much as shortage and less work will be performed in order to sell at higher prices. (Mably 1746, II, pp. 235–236)

When Mably spoke about “free trade,” he was referring mainly to domestic trade. The phenomenon of grains becoming worthless for want of being consumed at their place of production was fully understood by the philosopher. His idea was that the low price of grain, caused by prohibition, was a negative incentive to increase crops. Thus, Mably considered prohibitions and regulations on agricultural trade as a “capital vice” (p. 236).⁹ But that is not all. The foregoing quote reveals Mably’s agrarian and populationist opinions, two elements that were central to his ideal. Domestic trade was “the most useful” in the sense that the first aim of government had to be to develop the countryside. The wealth of a nation was based on having a large population, which was proportionate to whatever sustenance the kingdom could provide. The further development of a nation required the assistance of foreign trade. In this respect, Mably focused on commercial relationships among European nations: “All nations are bound together by needs. Timber, cereals, wax, tar, furs, etc. are sought in the North; France has its wines, its brandies, its salts, etc.; Spain, England, in short all the other European states hold some particular wealth, either from nature alone or that they owe to their industry” (Mably 1746, II, pp. 236–237).

Mably’s agrarianism is again apparent here. He regarded trade in the produce of the land as the most favorable trade because “[s]trictly speaking, the Nation for which the balance of trade should weigh in favor is the one with the most fertile climate” (p. 237).¹⁰ France was such a nation. After the Thirty Years’ War (1618 to 1648), in which exports had been impossible, “the foodstuffs and goods with which the kingdom was overburdened, flowed forth in profusion” (p. 240). Now, it was most important what this “surplus” (*excédent*) could leave: “A Nation that waits for others to come and buy from it must often be overburdened with foodstuffs & so neglect a task for which it is not rewarded [*& par conséquent négliger un travail dont elle n’est pas récompensée*]” (p. 243).

This idea was central to Mably’s reasoning. Without foreign trade, domestic production—and especially agriculture—would decline. In other words, if the “surplus” from farming could not be traded, the land would be neglected. This is why Mably insisted on the need to support exports by developing shipping: “The wisest of laws to encourage manufactures and cultivation of the land will be made in vain if there are no merchants ever ready to ship abroad the surplus of foodstuffs and goods” (p. 243).

This idea was preceded by extensive praise for the English Act of Navigation of 1660.¹¹ Had France adopted the same principles, “what immense riches would it not possess?” (p. 239). As Antonella Alimento has since shown, “Gournay came out

⁹Since grain exports may be a sensitive issue (Forbonnais 1754, I, pp. 94–95), Forbonnais supported domestic competition, with complete free grain trade inside the kingdom (pp. 142–143); see Cheney (2011, p. 297). This is also Gournay’s viewpoint ([1752] 2008, pp. 84–86); see Charles (1999, pp. 168–169).

¹⁰When speaking of exports, Mably refers almost exclusively to foodstuffs.

¹¹Such praise could also be found in the second edition of Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1736, pp. 151 ff.).

strongly in support of the establishment, for anti-Dutch purposes, of a navigation act modeled on the English Act of 1660” (Alimento 2011, p. 74), and it was not by chance that several of the circle’s authors published translations and commentaries on the English navigation acts between 1749 and 1758.¹² From 1746 onward, Mably clearly associated the Treaty of Utrecht (that confirmed Dutch right to trade freely in French ports) with the decline of the French navy, just as Gournay—who possessed Mably’s *Droit public de l’Europe* in two volumes in his office¹³—was to do (Gournay 1752, pp. 141ff.; see Meyssonnier 2008, pp. xv–xvi). Mably claimed that a navigation act would increase the number of vessels and sailors; he deemed it essential because “the shortest and safest route to increase the commerce of a State, is to promote its navigation” (Mably 1746, II, p. 242).

Unfortunately—and in this there was a critique of Colbert’s policy—once foreigners were allowed to trade in the ports of the kingdom at the beginning of Louis XIV’s reign, French merchants suffered: “They purchased the foodstuffs and goods of their fellow citizens more cheaply and sold a smaller quantity. It is not hard to feel what a heavy blow was struck by this behavior to the Nation; land prices fell; manufacturing was discouraged; shipbuilders and seamen, becoming almost idle, went over to neighboring powers” (Mably 1746, II, p. 241).

Thanks to the “natural advantages” (p. 242) of the kingdom, the result of such a policy was not even a negative trade balance. The domestic market, however, had not been sufficiently encouraged. Farmers, as well as industrial entrepreneurs, gained very little, and emigration increased. So, a powerful navy and a positive trade balance were important instruments—especially if the nation should sometimes wage war (p. 247)—but what mattered was what was exported. This brings us to the third kind of commerce: trade with the colonies.

From the outset, Mably was extremely wary of the Spanish form of colonization, and regarded the search for gold and silver deposits and the total subjection of large territories as an absolute error: “this way of thinking has depopulated and depleted Spain” (pp. 263–264). The Spaniards could have been wealthy “[i]f instead of wanting to possess Mexico, Peru, and Chile, they had only built establishments that would have placed the trade of all those Kingdoms in their hands” (p. 264). Mably was in favor of establishing trading posts in colonies where “our arts” should be banned in order to provide a commercial outlet for our manufactures (p. 262). In the “Colony for Trade”/“Colony for Empire” diptych (Armitage 2000), Mably stood resolutely for the former, as did Forbonnais in the 1750s (Forbonnais 1754, II, p. 22).¹⁴ Then, according to Mably, after having supported emigration, the court of Madrid “felt finally that a well-populated Castile, Aragon, etc. were a more valuable treasure than the mines of Peru and Chile” (Mably 1746, II, p. 263). The inflow and the accumulation of gold and silver were not sound pillars upon which to build a prosperous nation. What, then, of

¹²Forbonnais distanced himself from the Navigation Act; see Alimento (2013, pp. 219–220).

¹³*Inventaire Après le décès de M^r de Gournay du Cinq Juillet mil sept cent Cinquante Neuf et jours suivants*, National Archives of France, MC/et/XCVII/409. Gournay also owned a copy of Mably’s *Principes des négociations*.

¹⁴Forbonnais, too, warned that Spain had lost too many citizens with its conquests (Forbonnais 1754, I, pp. 378–379; see also Cheney 2010, pp. 124–125). He repeatedly emphasized the advantages of a large population (I, pp. 45, 61–62). See also Dangeul (1754, pp. 239, 302).

trade in precious goods? Mably referred to the Levant trade as a “ruinous” business. Instead of selling their domestic goods, Holland, England, and France bought and sold exotic “superfluities.” Although they made money, at the same time, they were “harming the progress of [their] manufactures” (pp. 256–257). Moreover, Mably argued, without the gold and silver of America, the European peoples “would have learnt to do without these superfluities [of Asia]” (p. 257), and he advised these peoples to “proscribe a luxury that little by little must exhaust them” (p. 258). In stark contrast, trade with Africa was most advantageous because French traders exchanged slaves for “foodstuffs and goods from their country such as wines, brandies, canvas and fabrics of silk and wool, etc.,” and by this means they “do not work less for farmers than for manufacturers” (pp. 251–252).

While wanting to ban Asian trade in order to promote European trade, Mably did not want to substitute domestic for foreign luxury exports. He never praised the creation of manufactures of expensive export-oriented goods. Indeed, he constantly wanted to encourage agriculture and cheap manufactured goods for domestic and foreign markets, even by introducing African slaves into Europe. In his opinion, French farmers and manufacturers should be able to buy and exploit slaves, a policy he believed would bring two major benefits: “one that the arts would no longer flourish at the expense of agriculture from which they always remove necessary men; the other that the manufacturers selling their goods at a lower price than today would relieve the people and expand their outflow” (p. 252).

If we read such a (frightful) idea as part of the “rich country–poor country” debate (Hont 1983), it can be asked whether Mably was referring here to the scramble for enhanced competitiveness: i.e., keeping wages down in order to compete successfully on international markets. The early editions of *Droit public de l'Europe* made no reference to David Hume or Richard Cantillon, and never evoked the Achilles heel of the rich nations, which foreign trade necessarily depleted due to the rise in their (labor) costs. In the previous quotation, when Mably suggested that manufacturers would be able to “expand their outflow” of goods, he seemed to refer to domestic as well as foreign markets. Apart from competitiveness (from slavery), he highlighted the increased purchasing power of ordinary people in the kingdom (“to relieve the people”) as a result of low prices brought about by having a bonded workforce.

The benefits of the introduction of African slavery to Europe were countless for Mably, but he insisted once again on the recovery of agriculture and population growth: “fallow land” would again be cultivated and the king of France would increase “the number of his subjects” (Mably 1746, II, p. 253). The justification Mably suggests for such a project provides insight into his admiration for the Spartans and what he believed a society's objectives should be:

I shall not dally to refute what is being said against slavery. Since morality allows it in the Colonies of America, it must allow it among us, whenever policy, which knows its utility, should want to establish its use. Let it not be thought that it is degrading for humanity to have slaves; the freedom that each European believes he enjoys is nothing less than the power to break his chains and give himself to another master. Need produces slaves, and they are that much more unfortunate in that no law provides for their subsistence. What truly demeans men is begging. (pp. 250–251)

The general idea, first suggested by Melon ([1734] 1736, pp. 53–56),¹⁵ may be summarized as follows: the lot of free workers was worse than that of the slaves. In bondage, men were at least sure that their survival would be ensured. Mably suggested assigning the slaves to the “most arduous and meanest work of society,” and, by this means, “[c]itizens, by abandoning to them a part of their jobs, would serve the state more usefully in another class” (p. 250). There are several important points here. Mably, the moralist, did not hesitate to brush aside the moral arguments against slavery. Or, more precisely, since 1746, Mably had been suspicious of what, since Benjamin Constant (1819), has been called the “liberty of the Moderns” and has been laudatory of the “liberty of the Ancients”: although commerce was necessary, it did not emancipate individuals, whereas slavery enabled citizens to exercise their rights and create a virtuous and populous society. So, in the first edition of *Droit public de l’Europe*, Mably clearly anticipated his future ideas about “classical republicanism.” In the 1764 edition, he put forward the same ideas, considering simply that “this means would be insufficient to populate countries where the number of men dwindles day by day” (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 480; also see Oudin-Bastide and Steiner 2015, p. 86).

Mably sometimes praises the “love of poverty” of the Lacedemonians (1749, p. 26), an austere life in which, however, all basic needs are met, but—and the idea runs throughout his works—he could not abide the misery and the inequalities among free citizens. All his thought, from 1746 to his death, can be summed up in his hatred of inequality—except for slaves. While Forbonnais considered that the Atlantic slave trade had to be encouraged, with Africans being removed from their “ferocious manners and barbarian laws” (Forbonnais 1754, I, p. 383), it was mainly to the benefit of the home country. This time, in a “rich country–poor country” line of reasoning, he wanted to lower the prices of colonial goods in international competition. He did not suggest that slaves should be used in Europe in order to increase the purchasing power of free citizens and relieve their poverty. So, while Forbonnais and Mably both sought to minimize the cost of labor, it was not for exactly the same purpose (see section IV).

In 1748, Mably published a new edition of *Droit public de l’Europe*, which was identical to the 1746 edition, and the following year, 1749, his *Observations sur les Grecs*. Pierre Briant, in *Alexandre des Lumières*, points out that Mably often used the same words and expressions in *Droit public* and in the *Observations*, and that both books were closely related in their description of Antiquity (Briant 2012, p. 535). This is also true of the role and place of agriculture and the arts.

Mably felt outright hostility to Alexander and his conquests for forming an empire impossible to govern. He admired Ancient Greece with its small city-states, but Athens even before Alexander had become too expansionary, with degenerate manners and bad habits. By contrast, the Sparta of Lycurgus had served as one of his models since 1749.¹⁶ Lycurgus tried to divert the citizens from “the taste for wealth and the love of luxury, always bound together, and always followed by inequality of Citizens; because they lead some to tyranny and others to servitude” (Mably 1749, p. 23). We thus come to the important notion of inequality of wealth, which Mably condemned here.

¹⁵The idea was also suggested later by Linguet in his *Théorie des lois civiles* (1767, p. 30).

¹⁶But not the Gracchus brothers, those ambitious demagogues who finally helped the aristocrats more than the people (see Sonenscher 2008, p. 394).

But the basic inequality, or true slavery, that of the Helots, was either played down, the exactions against them occurring long after the time of Lycurgus (p. 84n.a), or ignored, except when the Helots rebelled against their masters after an earthquake, at which time the Athenians helped the Spartans restore law and order, to Mably's approval (pp. 84–85). In Mably's mythology, then, under Lycurgus, the luxurious arts disappeared, and the Spartans worked the land and engaged in the useful arts in relative equality (pp. 24–28).

In the 1740s, the pieces were in place, and Mably held consistent opinions until his death. He strengthened some trends already present in essence in his *Droit public*: foreign trade was useful (mainly of foodstuffs), especially if it reinforced domestic trade, navigation, and population; great influxes of money were dangerous because the rise in prices tended to diminish the purchasing power of the majority and, even if it is of less importance in Mably's reasoning, it tended to diminish also the competitiveness of the nation. It was obvious that domestic trade should be free, priority should be accorded to agriculture and the useful arts over luxury goods, and the inequalities of free men had to be addressed.

III. A RADICAL CHANGE AT THE TURN OF THE 1760S? MABLY, CANTILLON, AND MONEY

If we follow Wright's reasoning about Mably's ideas on commerce, "these beliefs [in the benefits of trade] had changed by 1751 at least. But it is only in *Principes des négociations* and in the final revision of the *Droit public de l'Europe* that Mably proceeds to a direct attack on commercial ideology" (1997, p. 58). While, as will be seen, it is true that Mably became increasingly involved in criticizing the wealth of nations, Wright's claim is clearly excessive.

Chapter seventeen, "Of Treatises of Commerce. Digression on Luxury," of Mably's *Principes des négociations* (1757) begins with the importance of commerce management for modern states and the different situations they must face (Mably [1757] 1794–95, p. 196). Without mentioning the Navigation Act, he recalled, as in 1746, the importance of promoting the subjects of a kingdom over foreigners in trade (pp. 195–196), and continued by extending his first ideas on the issue.

He praised a "man of genius," Hume, and his *Political Discourses* (1752), arguing that foreign commerce is unnecessary to peoples who do not usually have contact with the outside world. However, for modern states, which must sometimes wage war, trade is useful and even necessary, because it "procures incomes for the state proportionate to its ordinary needs, and abundant resources for extraordinary cases" (Mably [1757] 1794–95, p. 198). Then Mably emphasized:

From these principles which, I believe, must be unquestionable, it must be concluded that the commerce best suited to enrich the largest number of citizens, because it is the best placed to give significant aid, should be the most protected by the government. It is the commerce of farmers which merits the principal attention of statesmen. If their industry is not encouraged, there may well be several cities that have flourished through manufacturing, but the whole body of the nation will always be badly constituted. The majority of citizens will just get by, living in poverty. (p. 198)

Contrary to what Hont claims,¹⁷ such ideas are not really new. In fact, since 1746, Mably had insisted on the importance of agriculture and population growth, and he was already concerned by misery among the citizenry, especially in the countryside. What was new was the implicit criticism of manufactures and the enrichment of the few. And, contrary to the claim by Hont again, it was in 1757 that Mably stated more explicitly than in 1746 that “the balance of commerce is favorable to a state” (p. 198). But he was quick to wonder, “[I]s this enough to make it powerful? Surely not” (p. 199). If a positive balance is favorable because it provides incomes in order to import foreign goods, because it encourages agriculture, and lastly because it provides resources to defend a nation’s borders (p. 200), Mably was not unaware that exports could also bring a lot of money into the kingdom. Now, the accumulation of wealth among a small group of citizens leads to the consumption of luxury goods and services in cities:

It is a scant advantage to earn through its commerce several millions over its neighbors, if the government does not have the art to have them circulate throughout the body of the nation, so that they bring life and abundance to all its members. These riches will fall into the coffers of a number of citizens, if they are greedy, it [wealth] will be in the state as if it were not; if they are prodigal, it will produce luxury. (p. 199)

The necessary consequence of this was “to make labor more expensive” and “to increase the price of goods” (ibid.). So, luxury “must therefore damage the progress of commerce, the art of which is to procure a greater flow by selling more cheaply” (p. 200). Mably never specified whether he was dealing with flows inside or outside the kingdom, or both. The passages concerning “labor” apply to both domestic and foreign trade, but there is a suggestion Mably was thinking more about domestic commerce, because he was particularly concerned about the resulting “impoverishment” of citizens in a (luxury) kingdom (p. 201). Nevertheless, he argued that “luxury, far from being favorable to commerce, is, on the contrary, a symptom of its imminent decadence” (p. 201). And there we have it: “luxury.” Unfortunately, Mably combated luxury with economic arguments alone—which Wright is forced to acknowledge¹⁸—within the “rich country–poor country” debate.

In the chapter “Of Money” in his *Political Discourses* (1752), Hume suggested that a surfeit of money generates inflationary pressure and high wages, leading the nation to lose its competitive edge on international markets. Manufacturing industries then relocated from high- to low-wage areas: i.e., to “poor countries.” But once the new industry enriched the poor country, the same shift towards countries with lower wages and lower subsistence costs would repeat itself. Hume’s *Political Discourses* were translated into French by Abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc in 1754, and Hume’s argument generated huge interest among French theorists (Charles 2008). But Mably did not reason along quite the same lines as Hume, and, in fact, he drew more heavily on Cantillon’s *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* than on Hume.

¹⁷In 1757, “instead of watching the balance of trade, Mably recommended, one must pay attention to agriculture and population growth” (Hont 2008, p. 278).

¹⁸“Mably’s first move, however, differed somewhat from what we might expect ... Mably introduced what he advertised as a purely *economic* argument against ‘luxury’” (Wright 1997, p. 59).

Even if several versions of Cantillon's manuscript circulated before its publication (Brian and Théré 1997, pp. ii–iii), Mably did not refer to this work before 1757. But, more interestingly, the publication in 1755 was probably due to the entourage of Gournay (p. iii), and the same Gournay, according to Abbé André Morellet, “encouraged the reading of *l'Essai sur la nature du commerce en général*” (Morellet 1821, p. 37) through a period when Mably was probably close to the intendant of commerce.

The concern of Hume and Cantillon was how to slow the decline in trade of “rich countries,” or how to become a “rich country” again. Hume proposed a system of international division of labor in which “poor countries” specialized in simple but labor-intensive manufacturing products, whereas “rich countries” developed the production of goods with a skilled labor force (Hont 1983, p. 276; 2008, pp. 243–246). Cantillon, on his own, put forward some counter-forces: for instance, a strong merchant navy tends to lower transport costs and could offset the high price of labor (Cantillon [1755] 1997, pp. 131–133; Hont 2008, pp. 265–266). When money flows into a country, thereby increasing prices, the prince might also try to remove an amount from circulation (Cantillon [1755] 1997, p. 102). But Cantillon himself considered that it was a difficult means to implement, and that it was, anyway, an expedient, because “according to the natural order of human things, the State must fall by itself” (p. 103).

Mably agreed with the description of the symptoms, but did not endorse the “remedies” proposed by Hume and Cantillon. In fact, he was rather vague in 1757. He did not propose to reduce production costs in order to relieve foreign trade for further cycling, but neither did he propose to prohibit foreign trade. He suggested that “perhaps policy would require only some commerce to be encouraged and protected only to a certain extent” (Mably [1757] 1794–95, p. 201). A few lines later, he specified what kind of “commerce” should be encouraged in order to prevent the “rich country–poor country” cycle:

How much more preferable were the principles of the Duke of Sully concerning commerce to Colbert's! ... Should the lands of a kingdom be better cultivated, should a kind of abundance reign among the lowest order of citizens, it will not be noticed.... But should a manufacture invent new superfluities, and samples are displayed in the palaces; the minister, who protects it, is praised as a great man, and perhaps he has only opened a new wound for the state. (Mably [1757] 1794–95, p. 202)

Later on, Mably explicitly accused the manufacturers, the merchants of the trading companies, and the financiers (pp. 195–202) of being the wealthy few who produce luxury and the downfall of trade. So what is clear, since 1746, was Mably's growing praise for agriculture and his growing distrust of the manufactures of luxury goods, either for the domestic or foreign markets. Both enriched the few, and resulted in the decline of the real wealth of a nation: that is, a relative equality among citizens. A healthy policy would organize economic activities around agriculture and the useful arts in the countryside: the prices of foodstuffs would be low and the purchasing power of peoples would be high. These positions were stated most plainly in the revised version of his *Droit public*, in which he concentrated on the flow of money into the kingdom.

Mably had published the *Entretiens de Phocion* in 1763, a book that drew heavily on his civic humanism. A fictitious dialogue supposedly found in Italy, the work

exemplifies the “republican” side of Mably’s thought, where poverty and the virtue of the Ancient republics are magnified, while excessive wealth is the source of all vices and bad manners (see, for instance, Mably [1763] 1794–95, pp. 184–186). It represents Mably’s ideal, but the book does not deal with modern states and modern politics, unlike the new chapter eleven of the 1764 edition of *Droit public*.

In this revision, Mably deleted certain passages in which the benefits of commerce were too highly praised. He also accused great wealth of engendering “all the vices” (Mably [1764] 1794–95, pp. 519, 526), and he advocated “love of the homeland and of glory” against “the love of money” (p. 522). The new edition unquestionably placed greater emphasis on the problems caused by enrichment, but Mably tried to combine commerce and his “classical republicanism.” Even if he suggested that “commerce is a kind of monster that is destroyed at its own hands” (p. 515), his reasoning was not really alien to that of 1746 and 1757.

In 1764, Mably maintained his positions in favor of a navigation act (p. 475), concerning the damage caused by the Asian trade (p. 486), or in favor of colonies for trade and against colonies for conquest (p. 496). He still believed in the advantages of implementing African slavery in Europe, although he judged that this “resource” would not be sufficient to restore the population of the continent (p. 480). Commentators, both old and new, have failed to note that Mably held on to these early ideas. Neither have they studied or cited the long passages on the management of commerce that Mably *added* to the book in 1764. By introducing the famous chapter eleven, the philosopher raised some new questions, compared with the 1746 edition, that say a great deal about the contents of his supposedly “anticommercial” posture when it came to *realpolitik*:

How can we hope to expand trade by presenting it with impediments? If you are not always ready to transport your foodstuffs abroad, why would you not be often overloaded by them? Why would the cultivation of your land and your manufactures not languish? I do not speak here of the thousand other inconsistencies that one remarks in the administration of commerce: sometimes sacrifice is made to the finances of the prince, sometimes to the personal wealth of a few traders or companies. (p. 478)

This echoes all Mably’s ideas on trade management since 1746: internal free trade, foreign trade that strengthens domestic trade, mistrust of finance, etc., but also his ambiguous views about the role that manufactures—which are mentioned here—should play.

The following pages recalled, once again through Cantillon, the self-canceling tendency of commerce. Insisting on the inflationary pressure engendered by the flows of gold and silver through mining and foreign trade in luxury goods, Mably was less interested in the consequences of the balance of trade (and competitiveness) than in purchasing power within the kingdom (pp. 513–516). Prices had risen faster than the citizens’ wealth: “foodstuffs have not kept their former proportion with money” (p. 513), and the population had grown poorer (p. 516).

But the question here was not so much ‘how to remain rich?’ or ‘how to become rich again?’ as ‘what was the real wealth of a nation?’ Cantillon described the cycle of rise and fall, adding that “an able minister has it always in his power to renew the rotation” (Cantillon [1755] 1997, p. 107). As rightly emphasized by Hont (2008, p. 279) and Sonenscher (2008, p. 389), Mably was not persuaded by the exploitation of trade cycles: “the right policy needs a more lasting basis” (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 520).

But here, the commentators have not hesitated to write that Mably's solution "was the abandonment of foreign trade and the establishment of a closed trading state" (Hont 2008, p. 280), or that Mably now provided an "anticommercial" policy, and "concluded, after some initial hesitation, that 'foreign trade is not necessary in any state and is always harmful'" (Sonenscher 2008, p. 392). While it is true that Mably did write this (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 529), he did not "conclude" with it: there are a dozen *new* pages after this quotation on the proper control of foreign trade in modern states.

First, just before this sentence, the philosopher reaffirmed—in new paragraphs compared with the 1746 edition—the primacy of agriculture¹⁹ and the need for internal free trade to avoid shortfalls in consumption and price collapse,²⁰ highlighting his ideas on the arts: their progress should not be encouraged and their goods must be "strong and not beautiful" (p. 526). In this way, exports of manufactured objects would decline, and the state would be able to increase rural employment (*ibid.*).

Second, a few lines after having said that foreign trade is always harmful, he corrects himself:

Foreign commerce will be harmful for the republic, when it exports more goods from its manufactures than foodstuffs from its countryside; the reason for this is simple. The products of this commerce will be shared by a small number of men, they will abruptly introduce luxury into the cities, new and more sophisticated factories will be invented and very soon the state will have more money than it should. By exporting the simple foodstuffs of its lands, the products of such commerce will be shared in some way into as many parts as there are citizens.... The countryside became populated; and these new citizens, ... will prevent the state from being engaged too readily in luxury. (p. 531)

If, in a kingdom or a republic composed mainly of small landowners, foreign trade were limited to foodstuffs, then the danger of an endless cycle of rise and fall would be limited. Mably did not really investigate the issue of what we now call the "money supply," but even in 1746, he already considered great inflows of money to be a dangerous thing. Over the years, he radicalized his position: foreign trade *must* not bring a lot of money into a nation; this was why it had to be limited to the export of foodstuffs. But how could one be sure these exports would not produce a (too) positive trade balance? The management of such a policy was a subtle and complex matter, and Mably agreed with Cantillon that it could not readily be known when money became more abundant than it ought to be for the welfare of the state (p. 517). He proposed that "the state is rich enough, when it possesses the necessary money for domestic circulation; and Cantillon has calculated that this amount should be approximately equal in value to one third of the annual rent of the landowners" (p. 533; see also Cantillon [1755] 1997, p. 73). This idea did not in any way mean that foreign trade did not exist: "With regard to the amount of money required to conduct a trade with foreign countries, it seems that no more is required than circulates in the state when foreign trade is balanced" (Cantillon [1755] 1997, p. 75). However, exporting agricultural products

¹⁹"There can never be excess in the favors that the government will grant to this precious portion of the state" (p. 525).

²⁰"A nation in which domestic trade is obstructed by barriers, must experience the disadvantages of poverty and misery in the midst of abundance, that should exert its strengths and its welfare" (p. 525).

did not mean that the kingdom increased the amount of money in circulation. In other paragraphs added to the same chapter eleven of *Droit public* in 1764, Mably explained that “the art of commerce is to sell enough of its superfluous foodstuffs or goods abroad to buy those needed from foreigners without breaking the bank [*pour acheter des étrangers, sans se ruiner, celles dont on a besoin*]” (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 473).

In this new passage, Mably recognized the necessity of both exports and imports,²¹ and it is probably why he never concluded that a foreign trade in foodstuffs would lead to a large positive trade balance (and a great increase in money supply). But even the latter was not always harmful; in another new passage, Mably stated that “[t]he general rule is that foreign trade becomes pernicious as soon as it provides enough wealth to produce luxury” (p. 528). In an agricultural kingdom with few inequalities, a little positive trade balance will not produce luxury, will not destroy commerce and the purchasing power of the majority, and is, finally, acceptable and even useful.

For Cantillon, however, the amount of one-third of the annual rent could be reduced if banks and paper money were introduced, a possibility that he judged not very advantageous (Cantillon [1755] 1997, p. 83). Mably was more radical. He thought that banks, public debts, and other paper currencies were “cures” worse than the disease.²² If the amount necessary for domestic circulation was not enough, it was because the government had broken its trust (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 533). To increase the money supply by paper money would encourage people to constantly seek to consume more, which would tend to increase prices even more (pp. 515 and 533).

IV. COMMERCE AND THE QUEST FOR EQUALITY: MABLY’S REALPOLITIK

At first sight, many of Mably’s ideas seem consistent with those of the leading authors of the Gournay circle. For instance, Forbonnais and his cousin Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul stressed the importance of agriculture and manufactures of “first necessity” in the countryside, as opposed to the “less useful arts” of luxury in cities (Forbonnais 1753, pp. 18, 127n.a; Forbonnais 1754, I, pp. 59–60, 107–108; see also Dangeul 1754, pp. 23–24, 60–65, 305; see also Orain 2010). More specifically, these authors criticized the consumption of superfluities by plutocratic elites, whereas the source of “good” luxury lay in trade in manufactured goods (Shovlin 2006, p. 46; 2008, pp. 211–212). However, they did not speak exactly the same language as Mably.

Forbonnais and Dangeul were convinced that it was income earned from foreign trade that stimulated economic growth (Hont 2008, p. 271; see also Alimento 2011). While he acknowledged that, in the long run, foreign trade “generated significant money inflows [that] had a self-canceling tendency” (Hont 2008, p. 273), Forbonnais did not really believe in the Hume–Cantillon prophecy, and, if it did come about, the

²¹Sonenscher is forced to recognize this: “Although, Mably wrote, it was impossible for nations to isolate themselves” (Sonenscher 2008, p. 373).

²²Mably never considered interest rates in his works.

“rich country” would always be able to lend the excess money abroad. Although Dangeul was concerned by inflation—and in this respect the “rich country–poor country” cycle—caused by public debt (Hont 2008, p. 270), Forbonnais’s position was a little different from Dangeul’s. In “natural circulation” (*circulation naturelle*), banks, paper money, loans at interest, etc., were unnecessary and did not exist (Orain 2014, p. 480), but in modern states, “composed circulation” (*circulation composée*), where trade was the only useful way for the state to enrich itself, entailed lower production costs. One means to achieve this was to reduce interest rates, and in this regard Forbonnais was favorable to an increase in the money supply. Unlike his cousin (and unlike Mably), he did not see paper money and public debt as inflationary (if they were well managed).

That said, Forbonnais recognized the necessity to minimize the cost of labor in order to make exports competitive on the international market (Forbonnais 1754, I, p. 282). Contrary to Mably’s ideas, these exports had to consist essentially of manufactured goods: “The more a nation has of home-grown foodstuffs of first necessity to export abroad, the farther away its working population finds itself from the possible and perfect ratio with its current income” (Forbonnais 1767, I, p. 56).

Mably and Forbonnais both thought that agriculture and population were very important, but not for the same reasons. For Mably, a country had to export foodstuffs, whereas for Forbonnais, agriculture and natural resources should be maximized in order to keep the price of foodstuffs, and so wages, down, and to sell and export a large quantity of manufactured goods. Forbonnais, then, was much more prepared than Mably to accept inequalities. When Forbonnais (1753, pp. 171–172) argued that the state “is not rich through the great fortunes of a few subjects, but when everyone is able to spend above real needs,” his aim was less to combat poverty and begging than to stimulate effective demand. For Mably, though, the concentration of wealth led to luxury, and so to the associated problem of inequalities. The emphasis fell once again on the need to redistribute income from trade (Mably [1764] 1794–95, p. 532): “If a country has laws preventing citizens from being too poor or too rich, if the spirit of thrift and modesty resulting from it ensure public safety, [the citizen] can almost recklessly own riches that would make awful havoc in a state where the natural equality of men was less respected” (pp. 528–529).

The very idea of laws that could “prevent citizens from being too poor or too rich” was entirely foreign to the Gournay circle in general. The distance between the latter and Mably’s egalitarian outlook was revealed four years later when the *Journal de l’agriculture, du commerce et des finances*, at that time controlled by Forbonnais and Abbé Yvon, reviewed Mably’s antiphysiocentric opus, his *Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes sur l’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1768). In this challenge to Lemercier de la Rivière’s work, Mably suggested that land ownership was nothing but a later human construction, an arbitrary institution that appeared after the birth of the earliest societies. From the principle of equality among men, a completely different system arose, that of “community of goods.” Mably drew on the example of Sparta or the Jesuits of Paraguay to show that societies in which land ownership did not develop had thrived (Mably [1768] 1794–95, pp. 7–8). In such institutions, the state or community owned the land and the harvests. Each person’s faculties defined the division of labor, and those who tilled the land were simply its beneficiaries.

Confronted with this line of argument, the journalist of the *Journal de l'Agriculture*, who supported Mably's antiphysiocentric approach, "[found] it difficult to adopt his feeling concerning property" (*Journal de l'Agriculture*, April 1768, p. 7). While he acknowledged that private ownership of land could corrupt "civil manners," he was highly critical of the Spartans and the "most oppressive" laws of Lycurgus (p. 13). Moreover, the journalist highlighted the healthy emulation that resulted from land ownership, which "gives activity to souls, and thereby contributes to making societies flourish" (p. 10). If too much wealth sometimes caused the fall of governments, inequalities gave us the desire to "possess, acquire and multiply our pleasures." They have "the honor of having banished idleness and sloth from this world" (pp. 17–18).

The differences in principles between Mably and the heirs of Gournay are apparent here. But it would be wrong to believe that Mably proposed to restore such common ownership in modern states. We agree with Sonenscher (2008, p. 392) that virtue and trade are compatible in Mably's thought, but, contrary to what Sonenscher suggests, not only in a hypothetical future of a "federal system of republican government" in Europe. Although Mably was alarmed by the injustice that the physiocrats were trying to legitimate, he recognized nevertheless that "in every state where property is once established, it must be considered as the foundation of order, peace, and public safety" (Mably [1776] 1794–95, p. 109). Better still, he went so far as to assert, in his mature works, that he

would be very upset if you could suspect me of jeopardizing the citizens' property. Once the community of property no longer subsists, and men have agreed to a division, I know there is no law more sacred than that of property. I must enjoy my fortune, and all the strength the public has must answer for my enjoyment, if we want to assure public tranquility. (Mably [1775] 1794–95, pp. 273–274)

Mably abandoned the idea of a community of property all the more easily in modern societies because he recognized its restoration was henceforth impossible; it would never happen "without causing greater disorders than those we would be trying to avoid" (Mably [1768] 1794–95, p. 12). In a modern politics of international relationships between nations, the question then became how to find means of remedying the evils of social inequality without abolishing private property and commerce altogether.

This article does not set out to draw up all the economic ideas contained in Mably's *Du commerce des grains* (1775),²³ but to briefly show that in this work, his reasoning does not really differ from that of the period from 1746 to 1764. In 1775, Mably was still favorable to domestic free trade for grain, and although it can be said that he was against grain exports, once again, this was mainly for economic reasons. He believed that external liberalization of the grain trade led to an increase in gold and silver flows into the kingdom that produce upward pressure on the price of goods and destroyed commerce as a whole:

I agree with you [physiocrats] that, in order to create a happy State, agriculture must flourish; but I believe that rural prosperity is due to principles other than those of the Economists. ... Even if you imagine a hundred ways to somehow invigorate the

²³See Ferrand (2013).

countryside, I will find them all bad as long as they provoke complaints and murmurs from the majority of the citizens. ... You want to enrich landowners by ruining everyone; there is nothing more ridiculous. (Mably [1775] 1794–95, pp. 257–258)

Having shamefully enriched a few landowners, farmers, and grain merchants, the price increase that followed this freedom should finally have been abandoned because it had failed to produce the planned effect: the comfort of the most numerous rural classes. Mably thought that freeing the grain market would solve matters, but he admitted that he was wrong after the devastation caused by the first (1764 to 1770) and second (1774 to 1776) liberalization of the grain trade. However, he did not completely abandon his initial ideas on the issue: “But I beg you, my dear Eudoxe, to pay close attention to one thing, which is that I would subject the grain trade to less strict rules in a country where there are many more landowners than in ours, and which was not inhabited almost entirely by men who live only from their work” (ibid., p. 273).

This is a crucial point, as it was not the external liberalization of the grain trade in itself that was harmful, but the fact that it enriched a small number of citizens who spent their wealth in the luxury of the cities, increased prices, and then destroyed the purchasing power of the vast majority of the citizens. The institution of free exports might prove a good policy for agriculture, as Mably initially thought, but only on condition that most inhabitants were landowners and that a navigation act were implemented.

Lastly, the ending of *Du commerce des grains* provided a long excursus on what Gournay's thought had become:

He [Gournay] understood that trade is not the State, but only a part of the State; that all classes of society tend to have opposing interests, and that a politician's skill lies in consolidating them so that the one will not flourish at the expense of the other. He judged that there can be salutary constraints in commerce, and that his interest, naturally, must sometimes be quite different from that of the merchants. (Mably [1775] 1794–95, p. 292)

If Mably and some authors of the Gournay circle shared certain ideas about the science of commerce, the same Gournay became a sort of justification for Mably's own position. In wanting to set “limits” on free trade, to consider commerce in the way a “statesman” and not a “merchant” would, and to limit the enrichment of nations, Mably's aim was to present a Gournay who was different from Turgot's Gournay (p. 292). Was this the true Gournay? Maybe, but moreover, it was the true Mably, who outlined his lifelong position in *Du gouvernement et des lois de Pologne* in 1770. To his fictitious interlocutor, who may have been surprised by Mably's strong encouragement to improve commerce in Poland, he answered that “you are accustomed to hear me blaming commerce,” but “I have the honor to respond that commerce is necessary to all peoples that are not savage, and who want to emerge from their barbarity. I will praise it when free of pomp and luxury it serves simple needs and is not irritating for our passions” ([1770] 1794–95, p. 234).

V. CONCLUSION

Although he embodied an ideal, Mably was anything but a utopian. He never abandoned realpolitik, and, as seen in his “economic testament” of *Du gouvernement et des*

loix de Pologne, he was perfectly aware of the benefits and limitations of commerce for modern states. So, by introducing a terminology of “civic humanism,” losing confidence in the wealth of nations after 1760, Mably pursued, throughout his life, an analytical fight against the enrichment of the few over the well-being of the many. In his opinion, “luxury” was not only the enemy of manners, it was primarily the enemy—through purchasing power, and, to a lesser extent, competitiveness—of commerce! That is to say, it was the enemy of commerce in the service of the people: the promotion of agriculture with a free domestic grain trade, of simple arts, of rural manufacturers, of the navigation of French sailors, of trade at cheap prices, etc.

The present study shows that while Mably became more radical in his ideas about trade by reinforcing his praise of agriculture and increasingly criticizing enrichment, his thought was characterized by the coexistence of a language that promoted certain types of commerce and civic humanism, blurring the boundaries between liberal and republican traditions.

Even if Forbonnais and Dangeul were aware of the dangers of some kinds of luxury, cautious about the consumption of financiers, and even advocates of limited inequalities, it was in order to increase the wealth of nations. They could not accept Mably’s “republican” discourse of the 1760s to the 1770s. However, Mably’s analyses and methods on commerce preceded and then supported many of the Gournay circle’s trends. This can be seen with some of the policies promoted by the circle: a navigation act, free domestic trade but restricted foreign trade, a special focus on agriculture, “useful” arts, rural population growth, etc. This is also true for the “history of commerce” and the need to include commerce in (geo)politics. And herein lies another major sticking point with the physiocrats. Mably did not believe in economic principles that were valid at all times and in all places. On the contrary, he suggested how some general ideas could be applied to countries and circumstances, precisely as the Gournay circle did (see Charles 2006). So, both the physiocrats, by reflecting on commerce with a “natural order” of eternal laws, and the Jacobins, by having created wise men straight out of Antiquity in the eighteenth century, radicalized the dividing lines. Our goal has been to try to show that it is not so much Mably who changed his mind, but rather the debates that shifted: moderate praise for (free) trade and limited wealth appeared as a prohibitionist and anticommercial posture in the 1770s, at the same time as praise of the virtues, glory, and common ownership of the citizens of Ancient Greece became an appeal for a republic of equals in 1793, although Mably was always hugely distrustful of democracy and an advocate for modern times of a moderate monarchy of small landowners.

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