**“The common grievance of the revolution”: Bread, the Grain Trade, and Political Economy in Wollstonecraft’s *View of the French Revolution***

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This article considers Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), and especially its treatment of bread shortages and the march on Versailles of October 1789, in the context of debates over political economy in the 1790s. It argues that in Wollstonecraft’s history, bread (or its absence) denotes a symbolic economy of the impeded circulation of knowledge, provision and improvement. The liberation of the grain trade, which, unlike other contemporary chroniclers of the revolution, Wollstonecraft foregrounds, is thus more than an attempt at economic reform. It marks Wollstonecraft’s larger effort to co-opt a chaotic narrative of revolution to that of improvement, and economic and political liberty. The role of the mob, however, brings to a head the problems faced by philosophical historians such as Wollstonecraft in accommodating commerce to their narratives of improvement, and opens out wider ambivalences over the futures of both political economy and liberty.

The final chapter of Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794) [hereafter *View*]surveys the growth of French interest, over the course of the eighteenth century, in the philosophical and political ideas which constitute the “progress of reform,” of which the Revolution, Wollstonecraft wants to claim, is a product. Particular praise is reserved for the Physiocrats, called the “economists” in accordance with contemporary parlance, who “carrying 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” (226). If Wollstonecraft’s next publication, her *Letters Written During a* *Short Residence in Sweden*, *Norway, and Denmark*, is marked by recurring doubts about commercial progress, here she speaks as a supporter of the economic reforms associated with free trade. Indeed, economic freedoms, Wollstonecraft’s *View* has suggested, should go hand-in-hand with progress towards political liberty itself.

Wollstonecraft is not generally discussed as a thinker on economic issues, but her history of the French Revolution, with its account of French attempts at economic reforms, and its championing of Physiocratic liberties of trade, appeared at a crucial moment in the history of political economy. Wollstonecraft’s belief that economic liberties naturally accompanied political ones – a widespread tenet of the early Revolution in France – was, with the rise of the Jacobins, no longer to be voiced there. In Britain, meanwhile, the acceptance of a free trade doctrine which had become widely associated with revolutionary sentiments depended on its decoupling from politics, and its presentation as a purely technical matter. Dugald Stewart, in his role as protector of the Smithian legacy, found himself making precisely such moves, as Emma Rothschild has shown. Although he had praised the study of political economy as necessary for any would-be legislator, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had read the revolution as produced by the “great power” of “a great monied interest,” had declaimed against “oeconomists, and calculators,” and represented “commerce, and trade, and manufacture” as “the gods of our oeconomical politicians”: political economy’s theory of wealth generated through productive labor evidently posed a complex challenge to established traditions of political thought (209, 170, 174). Burke’s reading of Smithian political economy was later to be crucial in the debates over free trade, prompted by bad harvests and food shortages, which dominated the British political scene in the second half of the 1790s. In this context, Wollstonecraft’s praise for those whom Burke had disparaged (“Turgot and all the people of the finances”), is a provocative move. It announces, at a time when the future direction of political economy was yet to be decided, a determination to ensure that economic liberties were always to be considered as part of a larger narrative of political improvement and reform, and as such, a resistance to the establishment of political economy as a specialized science of finance detached from larger questions of human improvement and happiness. For Wollstonecraft, it was to be a “science which 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”; it would “advance by steps … to that state of perfection necessary to secure the sacred rights of every human creature”(183). That such a programmatic statement of what political economy should properly consist of is made within the pages of her history of the French Revolution suggests that, like Burke, she is alert to the economic significance of the events she recounts. Like much else which gets underway in the Revolution, however, the “science of politics and finance” is far from being in a “state of perfection”: why it is so, what obstacles lie in its way, and how it might be bettered, are part of her concern in its pages.

In its concern with economic matters, Wollstonecraft’s *View* investigates at length the possibility of folding new economic liberties into established Enlightenment narratives of improvement. As well as a history, then, the work can also be read as a test case in the possibilities for, and fate of, ‘improvement,’ a crucial term both across a range of eighteenth-century discourses, and in Wollstonecraft’s own thought. ‘Improvement’ described ambitions for personal self-betterment, social refinement or moral amelioration; more relevant to the *View*, economic activities such as manufacture or agriculture were also objects to be ‘improved’ through better tools and machines, or application of other forms of technical expertise, to heighten production. The liberation of the grain trade would have been regarded by its proponents as a further measure towards its improvement. In the Scottish stadial histories which informed the *View*, improvement is associated with the commercial society which represents the apex of human progress, but the *View* places that assumption under stress, by investigating the relationship between economic liberty and political improvement. Its desire to fold the achievement of a measure of economic liberty into a narrative of improvement is achieved in the face of the seeming collapse of the very possibility of reading the Revolution in such terms.

Indeed, Wollstonecraft is often prompted, in her role as a historian, to reflect why, despite the advances of enlightened thinking, the Revolution has produced such frequently shocking and chaotic events; the inadequacies of current “manners” is one of her answers.[[2]](#endnote-1) Her determination to read the French Revolution optimistically thus comes under significant pressure. Clearly, enlightened thinking itself is not enough to secure improvement: it must encounter, and negotiate, hostile circumstances, and preserve itself even in the face of opposing historical forces; such self-preservation might, it seems, involve a change in form. Some indication of this is given when Wollstonecraft remarks on how the Physiocrats “eluded the dangerous vigilance of absolute ministers” by disseminating “truths in the economy of finance” within the “abstract work” of the *Encyclopédie* (225). In hostile times, enlightened knowledge finds cover in alien forms. Elsewhere in the *View*, meanwhile, Wollstonecraft considers how reforms are achieved even in the absence of enlightened knowledge – in an episode which takes to its limit her faith in knowledge as the basis for historical change.

How far does a sense of generic or formal disguise apply too to Wollstonecraft’s own work – a historical and “moral” account of the French Revolution, in the conventions of enlightenment philosophical history, which nevertheless engages, perhaps unexpectedly, with detailed matters of the “science of finance”? As Jane Rendall has shown, Wollstonecraft was familiar with the progressive histories of improvement written by John Millar, William Robertson, and others in the 1770s and 1780s.[[3]](#endnote-2) Philosophical or “conjectural” history narrated the origins and progress (terms echoed in Wollstonecraft’s title) of commercial society; conventionally it celebrated commercial modernity as a high point in the history of human society. Writing about events in the very recent past, Wollstonecraft puts the conventions of philosophical history, and its celebration of the progress of commercial society, to the test: not least as the social, moral and economic cohesion which tended to be invoked by the term “commerce” comes under pressure from, first, arguments for free trade made, and contested, most heatedly in relation to the grain trade, and which pointed beyond older verities of “*le* *doux commerce*” to the arrival of political economy; and secondly, the mob, whose manners and passions appeared unimproved by commercial society. As her “philosophical eye” documents the new historical realities, Wollstonecraft’s commitment to philosophical history comes under stress, and it becomes a question whether and how far the realities of recent French history can be contained in the analytical conventions in which she writes, and how far that convention might alter and adapt in response. Arguably, it is especially in her attention to the complexities of political and commercial “improvement” that Wollstonecraft moves beyond the established conventions of earlier philosophical histories. Where for Millar and others, the potential for moral corruption represented by commerce makes it potentially troublesome as the putative endpoint of a narrative of human progress, the debates at the heart of the Revolution over public credit, taxation and free trade gave a much greater specificity to such concerns.[[4]](#endnote-3) Pocock has argued that Burke, under stress of the French Revolution, reversed philosophical history’s account of the relation between manners and commerce (“Political Economy” 193-212). This paper argues that Wollstonecraft, by giving special attention in her revolutionary narrative to political measures taken to liberate the grain trade, 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 economists, she disseminates a doctrine of free trade in another form, and preserves the improved knowledge of enlightenment even within a historical document of violence, confusion, and anarchy.

I

It is only in its final pages that a recurring concern with economic issues which has been present throughout Wollstonecraft’s *View* is given overt form. Over the course of most of its pages, the *View*’sdiscussions of economic matters are mostly contained within a larger addressing of “political science”; the term “political economy,” where it is used, suggests as much the administering of the economy of the government, as it does a science of finance. But eventually a more discursively specific engagement occurs, as Wollstonecraft names and challenges Smith, reiterates his concerns over the consequences for the worker of the divisions of labor, whilst investing her faith for the future in the increasing acceptance of philosophical, political and economic knowledge, and offering economists Turgot and Quesnay some of her highest praise. The increasing foregrounding of economic questions in *View*’s 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” which has already been announced as “the most important, and most difficult of all human improvements” (183). Meanwhile, it is a mark of Wollstonecraft’s conviction of the centrality of economic reform to political liberty that, unlike many other commentators on the French Revolution, who offer what are otherwise often similar narratives of events, the declaration of a liberalized grain trade on October 5th 1789 is highlighted as one of the few political achievements of the National Assembly. In this, she differs from other comparable accounts of the Revolution, including those likely to be known to her, and one (in the *New Annual Register*) which she used as a source.[[5]](#endnote-4) Neither Thomas Christie’s *Letters on the Revolution of France* (1791), nor Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791), nor Burke’s *Reflections*, or Rabaut Saint-Étienne’s *History of the Revolution of France* (1792), mention the measure. The conservative *Annual Register*, which draws on Rabaut Saint- Étienne, does make much of the bread shortages, but depicts the King not, as in Wollstonecraft, sanctioning the “decree, relative to the free circulation of grain” (*View* 202), but rather, in significantly different terms, ordering “the immediate supply of Paris with provisions” (*Annual Register* 49). In these other accounts, October 5th is significant 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.

And in Wollstonecraft too, the liberalization of the grain trade is also overshadowed by the events of that day and night at Paris and Versailles, her account of which, in its insistence on an Orléanist plot motivating the popular protest, competes with Burke in its conservatism. Vivien Jones has explored the presence of novelistic paradigms in this episode, but the crunching of narrative gears at this crucial moment in the unfolding events of the Revolution, can also be read as a generic or epistemic uncertainty, as philosophical history not only encounters the unimproved mob, but also seeks to represent an act of economic liberalization. That this moment of economic liberalization is deeply connected with the actions of the mob – the act seeks to enact and enable improvement, even whilst the mob reveals its most rebarbative characteristics – only renders it all the more complex. The moment foregrounds an undecided generic question regarding the relation of the new economic science to old philosophical history from which it emerges, and hence the relation of political economy to morality, and of commerce to narratives of virtue and improvement. On the one hand, a new “science of finance” might be seen as, like philosophical history itself, a narrative of improvement: the declaration on the grain trade might then be seen as of comparable importance to the Declaration of Rights itself. But on the other, as the anxieties which finally emerge in the last pages of *View* suggest, the future of commerce as revealed by political economy may threaten or overturn progress itself. Like so 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. It is a dilemma reflected even in the very form of Wollstonecraft’s narrative, which wants to present the liberalization 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 a power-hungry aristocrat. Its generic uncertainty reflects history caught between popular progress and something like an old romance of aristocratic passion and tyranny. As in the gothic novels referenced by its account of the Duke of Orléans, it is only by release from the latter that new possibilities for history can emerge; but replacement of aristocratic plots by a meritocratic political economy is impeded by, in Jones’s phrase, the “fatal collusion” of the upper and lower classes (185). The establishment of political economy’s narrative of equitable provision via the market is thwarted by excessive, tyrannical ambition on the one hand, and the all-too-malleable passions aroused by immediate material need, on the other.

The relatively minimal notice given to the National Assembly’s attempt to liberalize the grain trade, in commentators other than Wollstonecraft, belies the significance of the issue, in both France and Britain, since the mid-century.[[6]](#endnote-5) For modern historians of the causes of the French Revolution, economic difficulties connected in part with a failure to resolve the administration of the grain trade, loom large alongside unjust taxes, continuing and oppressive feudal privileges and uncontrolled royal finances.[[7]](#endnote-6) Since the Physiocrats first argued for a system of free trade in agriculture in the 1760s, various attempts had been made in France to remove the numerous controls on the harvest, transportation and sale of grain which were widely seen to act as impediments to improved agricultural production and commerce. Even if controls were periodically removed or reduced, however, popular feeling ran strongly against the operation of a free market in grain: whatever long term benefits might be promised, the effects in the short term (including rising prices and food shortages) could be severe, even fatal; and a series of bad harvests which already reduced food supply, at a time when bread was a staple of the worker’s diet, cemented opposition still further. [[8]](#endnote-7) Even if a theoretical argument for free trade, which underlay the various attempts at reform by Turgot and others, had been won by the Physiocrats, it could not in the final instance defeat a powerful moral consensus that officials and administrators had a duty to provide subsistence for the people – bread at reasonable cost – even and especially at times of shortage. Given the importance of bread in the daily life of the worker, its provision, beyond its obvious material necessity, thus articulated an important symbolic relationship, between the people and the country’s administrators, between the poor and the rich. To place that relationship, via bread shortages, under too much stress, was thus also dangerously to jeopardize established political settlements and social order. It is thus significant that the annual average price of corn in 1789 was the highest of the previous thirty years (Aftalion, 37).

European debates on the grain trade were of course a crucial context for the development of Smith’s *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the* *Wealth of Nations* (1776): he was in France in 1764-6 during the height of the debate over Physiocracy, and planned to dedicate the work to Quesnay.[[9]](#endnote-8) As Hont and Ignatieff have shown in a classic essay, Smith understood himself to be directly addressing the need to provide even for the poorest members of society, although his description of provision via a market mechanism rather than feudal dependency was a “scandal in his own time” (Hont and Ignatieff, 2). He maintained support for his “system of natural liberty” even whilst the debate in France had been lost. In Britain, debates in 1767-72 over deregulation of the corn laws, which resulted in the repeal of antiforestalling measures, and were a moderate move in the direction of the removal of controls over the sale of corn, preceded the publication of *Wealth of Nations* by some years; Smith nevertheless included a lengthy “Digression Concerning the Corn Trade and Corn Laws” in that work, and the issue remained contentious through until the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s. Smith’s argument on the corn trade played a key role in debates over free trade Britain in the second half of the 1790s, prompted by bad harvests and food shortages, which “embroiled” all society, and directly informed Pitt’s policy making.[[10]](#endnote-9) Whilst the Britain in which Wollstonecraft grew up and lived clearly represents a different context from France, grain was nevertheless far from an uncontentious issue. Popular protests (hunger riots) against bread prices took place across the country throughout the century, including in the 1790s. As Wollstonecraft was writing the *View*, and in the years after its publication, food shortages and the grain trade remained the central context for debates over free trade and the establishment of a modern political economy. Such an establishment would involve a shift in government roles, in a retreat from an older “moral economy” of paternalist responsibilities for feeding the populace in conditions of extremis. But the construction of a new political economy also involved the depiction of a new economic subject, driven by self-interest, albeit modified by moral restraint founded on awareness of the judgment of social peers. The mob whose actions dominate and determine Wollstonecraft’s narrative, whose excessive passions exceed the careful pursuit of self-interest depicted by Smith, appears entirely outside the reach of the new political economy, however. Rather, its foundations are jeopardized, even before they are established, both by the mob’s manifestation of extreme passions which exceed attention to personal moral or economic self-interest, and by its indication of the evident failure of established forms of economic provision and social order, from which political economy might grow. If for Scottish historians of stadial history, commerce represents human society in a culminating moment of civilization, the mob threatens to wipe the slate of history, and of civilization, clean.

II

Given all this, how are we to read Wollstonecraft’s history of revolution, in which the shortage of bread is a recurring observation, if an ambivalent causal factor? For Wollstonecraft, far more than other commentators, is uncertain, even coy, about a shortage of bread in Paris and France at the years covered by her history; the credence she gives to supposed court plots to produce bread shortages as a means of manipulating the populace, further undermines certainty of shortages or likely reasons for it. Even her description of bread shortage as the “common grievance” of the revolution, looks both ways: a grievance can be both a complaint justly founded in reality, and an entirely unjust one (196).[[11]](#endnote-10) Wollstonecraft is thus careful to present a far from straight-forward case for economic causes of political discontent. In this she differs from Arthur Young, who directly blames Necker’s reintroduction of government controls on the grain supply as the immediate cause of unrest and even of the revolution itself; significantly, in an account unmatched by any other source reviewed in the preparation of this paper, Young even represents concern over the mob’s response to bread scarcity as the determining factor in Louis’s directions to the nobility and clergy to join the commons, during the stand-off over the meetings of the Estates (1: 490-1, 1: 609, 1: 137).[[12]](#endnote-11) Young’s reading of this crucial moment exemplifies the political power balance of the “moral economy” as famously described by E. P. Thompson: Louis here is the “prisoner” of the crowd, although, advocate of free trade as he is, for Young this is hardly a moment to be celebrated. By contrast, suspicion, even mystery, pertains to bread shortages in Wollstonecraft, where such shortages are never fully stated as fact, but their possibility nevertheless circulates. Indeed, as we will see, in the *View*, Parisian anxieties regarding bread shortages are even questionable enough to be elaborated into a general philosophical observation on ignorance and suspicion, such that the ignorance of the mob in relation to what it desires and how it acts exemplifies the weakness of humanity in general. Arguably, Wollstonecraft’s own text participates in the state of epistemological uncertainty it identifies in the mob, both in giving credit to “romantic” aristocratic plots around which other historians skeptically skirt, and by ensuring that its own suspicions regarding a bread shortage are raised in the reader too – by leaving sufficient references to it to operate as a kind of crumb trail to a mystery which the text doesn’t quite address or solve, until it is exploded with the decree for the free circulation of grain and the triumphant procession of wheat, flour (and King) to Paris.

The coyness of the *View* on the issue of bread and the grain trade masks the specificity of Wollstonecraft’s personal, political, and professional relationships in France, where she had close links to those involved in grain importation; the symbolic significance of bread, and the mob’s desire for it, nevertheless runs through her text as a whole. Obscurity on such issues may indeed have been advisable at the time Wollstonecraft was writing, as, with the ascendency of the Jacobins in late 1793, the early revolutionary association of economic with political freedoms had been replaced by a climate in which commercial freedoms were not to be spoken of.[[13]](#endnote-12) However, on her first arrival at Paris, Wollstonecraft moved, like many British supporters of the Revolution, in Girondin circles, and would have heard much of the need for economic as well as political liberty. Such concerns were not only theoretical: Thomas Christie, co-founder of the *Analytical Review* to which Wollstonecraft contributed, and a close friend of hers, was acting in Paris as the agent of Turnbull, Forbes, and Co., London merchants who, until “the decree against the English,” which in October 1793 banned the import and sale of all merchandise originating in the British empire, imported flour from Britain to France. Indeed, this trade relationship was at least once the means for Wollstonecraft to receive money from Joseph Johnson, Christie’s publisher at the *Analytical Review*, as she was able to draw bills from Johnson through Turnbull’s account.[[14]](#endnote-13) As agent in the flour trade, Christie would evidently have had a professional interest in economic arguments around the grain trade; added to the fact that food provision was one of the main political issues of the day, with grain prices and proclamations, debates and votes relating to it reported in newspapers, it seems highly likely that economic reform was discussed in Christie’s salon, where Wollstonecraft also met Gilbert Imlay.[[15]](#endnote-14) Imlay’s notorious trading scheme, which was later to send Wollstonecraft to Scandinavia in pursuit of a lost treasure ship, also involved importation of grain, amongst other goods, into France. Although, as their relationship came under stress with Imlay’s prolonged business-related absences, Wollstonecraft later famously bewailed Imlay’s ‘money-getting face,’ less well known is her earlier complaint, in relation to Imlay’s schemes, that ‘the government is perpetually throwing impediments in the way of business’ (Wardle, 257). The desire to remove such impediments, in relation to the grain trade, would not have been an unusual sentiment to be expressed by Wollstonecraft’s Parisian friends, at least before the fall of the Girondins.

But bread isn’t viewed in a purely economic light in Wollstonecraft’s “moral and historical” account. Instead, the scarcity of bread is put at the heart of a case-study of political will, political knowledge, and the relations between thepeople, their representatives in the National Assembly, and the King. 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” (210). Political acts to promote liberty should in this model ideally be founded in knowledge, dependent in turn on improvement; however, the events Wollstonecraft has just related represent precisely the opposite: the achievement of an act of economic liberalization, as well as Louis’s ratification of the Declaration of Rights, under pressure from an ignorant mob. Whilst both of these measures had been well in train at the moment of the march on Versailles, it is clearly only the arrival of the mob which causes Louis to concede both. An ideal Enlightenment model of historical causation is thus turned upside down, as ignorance and enthusiasm produce agency and action.

Such an outcome is indeed already foreshadowed at the beginning of the chapter, in specific relation to the bread scarcity, as Wollstonecraft outlines how passions are fermented to stimulate the populace towards an ultimately unknown object:

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. – 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 (196).

The Parisians’ desire for a highly specific material thing – bread – is here generalized into an unspecific desire for “objects indistinctly seen or understood”; their political will, far from being founded on knowledge, is presented as entirely artificial, and readily moulded, as well as being a function of material neediness. Physical vulnerability has turned the mob into political playthings. This observation replays the theme of the opening of the chapter, in which the political sentiments of officers guarding the royal family at Versailles are manipulated through feasting and drinking; and it is echoed in the King’s eventual submission to political demands under the threat of his general vulnerability. As is clear in Wollstonecraft’s comments elsewhere on the need for the “comforts” which enable improvement, bread’s absence is indicative of the problem of the impeded political knowledge of the people; but it also kick-starts a process which, however compromised, with its “men pursuing with ardour objects indistinctly seen or understood,” offers a rephrasing of the pursuit of improvement which, almost despite itself, is sublime. In their need for bread, the Parisians 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. Enthusiasm fermented by ignorance hardly amounts to an ideal Enlightenment prescription for historical or political change, yet Wollstonecraft’s ambivalent phrase leaves open the possibility that such a “fermentation” has a positive outcome. The Parisians’ passionate pursuit of material betterment thus recasts, in quite different form, a desire for improvement present in Wollstonecraft’s own revolutionary sympathies. The word ‘enthusiasm’ does important work here: distantly evoking the religious question of denoting whether and how the word might be made flesh, and signifying the assertion of inspired self-authorization against a perceivedly oppressive or misguided institution, it denotes (and solves) a problem analogically related to that which occupies Wollstonecraft here – of giving form to a knowledge not yet known or manifested.[[16]](#endnote-15) The enthusiasm of the Parisians, so negatively coded here, is also closely related to what we will see is the self-authorising public speech of their orator at the National Assembly.

In the absence of enlightened knowledge, and at a moment of political suspense amidst revolutionary fervour, the absence of bread thus plays a highly significant part in the circulation of political feeling, the generation of historical action, and eventually in a (revolutionary) act of economic liberation. Placed as it is at the end of her book, as the last major episode in the Revolutionary events of 1789, the Versailles march takes place at a moment of political stasis. The National Assembly, continuing to await the King’s sanctioning of the Declaration of Rights, is aware of his tendency to “subterfuge” and “profound dissimulation,” but until the mob effect action to move him politically and physically, can do nothing to ameliorate the central obstacle which he represents. Such a sense of paralysis extends too to Wollstonecraft’s own account, which, as “philosophical history” is peculiarly situated in relation to the events it narrates. However much Wollstonecraft’s “philosophical eye,” with its generalized and abstract knowledge, 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” (213). By narrating the short-comings of French “manners,” her narrative thus shares them: faithfulness to the historical record means that a “philosophical” truth – the “truth” of political knowledge, embodied in arguments for free trade – can’t fully be seen. The impingement or blockage of a free trade argument, both in this chapter and in the work as a whole, makes evident the impediments to improved knowledge necessary not just to economic liberties but to political ones too.

Bread then is caught up in a symbolic economy of the impeded circulation of knowledge, provision and improvement, to which Wollstonecraft’s own narrative too is bound, and in which liberalization is needed on all fronts. In her hedged position on the free circulation of grain, Wollstonecraft is herself caught up in the larger problem of the improvement of knowledge, and hence manners, on which liberty depends. These problems are both general (political improvement requires enlightenment), and specific to the French character, as Wollstonecraft depicts it (its tendency to intrigue, its susceptibility to rumour). Further, historical uncertainties are so pervasive that they infect Wollstonecraft’s account too, although she resists the many unknowns of the revolution more than, for instance the *Annual Register*.[[17]](#endnote-16) Such are the determining conditions in which the philosophical “eye” must operate, and which modifies the “true record” of the historian. Such are the conditions too in which a liberalization (political, economic) must be achieved – its achievement subject to the same delay and suspension which dogs, for instance, the Declaration of Rights itself, caught between the reformist declaration of the Assembly and the sanction of the king. It will be the actions of the mob, putatively motivated by an absence of bread, whether real or not, as well as by aristocratic power politics, which mobilizes the force of historical action, springing the trap of suspension which has been placed on events, and on Wollstonecraft’s narrative too – though bringing in train problems which foreshadow those of the Terror.

III

There is no hint of the *View*’s dependence on the role of the mob in Wollstonecraft’s ‘Preface,’ which announces that the revolution was the “natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection,” and that “sincerity of principles” is “hastening the overthrow of the tremendous empire of superstition and hypocrisy” (7). To maintain this reading, Wollstonecraft looks beyond the “abilities or intrigues of a few individuals” and “short-lived enthusiasm” to envisage a quite different collective historical subject in “the uncontaminated mass of the French nation,” distinct from those “embruted” by servility and voluptuousness. Revolutions are thus presented as expressions of collective character, but the same duality which informs the collective political subject in the “Preface” (divided as it is between agents of reform, and degenerate impediments to it), is repeated in Wollstonecraft’s account of the Versailles protestors, who on the one hand are denigrated as a mob, and on the other represent, at best – in the political speech of their orator at the National Assembly – the mobilization of popular political will. Wollstonecraft is uncompromisingly clear that the marchers are “strictly speaking a mob,” and “not to be confounded with the honest multitude, who took the Bastille,” but she also notes their mixed nature: the mob contains both honest women and the “lowest refuse of the streets,” both women and armed men (196-7). This duality is later given geographical and temporal expression, as, on arrival at Versailles, Wollstonecraft asserts that the unarmed women go to the Assembly, whilst the armed proceed to the Palace; correspondingly, for Wollstonecraft, events at the Assembly can be read as a proto-typical act of popular political expression being met with concessions by governing representatives, whilst, like other commentators, she is uncompromising in her account of the violence, confusion and disorder of the attack on the Palace. This double character of the mob in the *View* is properly read not as contradiction or ambivalence, but as structurally required: the mob represents the dangers of uneducated political actors or sentiments, as announced by the “Preface,” but also the potential of the “sovereign” will of the people: realized in the storming of the Bastille, and the object of all the exhortations towards the future improvement of Europe (100). Just as the National Assembly is caught in a moment of political hiatus, so too are the mob suspended between what they are and what they might be. The appearance of the mob, “famished,” but only “half famished,” equally suggests a corresponding betweenness in the uncertain and unknowable presence or absence of bread, caught between an absence suggested by the near-starving mob, and a presence which for free trade supporters would be secured by liberalization of the grain trade.

Wollstonecraft’s representation of the mob – a term also widely and unapologetically used by other radical writers – is arguably more complex than that of other writers on the revolution, who nevertheless concurred on the dangers of its combination of “heated” passions and suspicious irrationality.[[18]](#endnote-17) For Paine, the Parisian mob is a “class” present in all European countries, produced by the “ill construction” of governments; the violence seen in Paris, he suggests, is comparable to that of the London Gordon riots in 1780 (Paine, *Rights* 34). The Birmingham riots which forced Joseph Priestley from his home prompted the *Analytical Review* to bemoan the “debasement” of the human mind caused by unceasing manual labor, and the liability of the uneducated to “be misled by the arts of the malicious” (175). Arthur Young intriguingly, makes the people’s tendency to “madness and folly” a central consideration of his argument against regulation of corn prices. For Young, Necker’s pre-revolutionary interventions here were ill-advised not because of the effect they had on grain prices directly, but because of the way prices operate within the “perceptive economy” of the market place. The role of the government, Young asserts, is to prevent such “apprehensions” of shortage as might affect grain prices**,** for, in a curiously self-fulfilling mechanism, such apprehensions “never take place without creating the reality in a great measure” (489). Like Wollstonecraft, Young links mob ignorance with the achievement of measures not fully realized or known: for Young, the mob fantasy of scarcity, however misplaced, has the wonderful ability to bring about what is wished for, a characteristic which Wollstonecraft, attempting to combine ignorance with improvement, might surely have envied. But Young’s logic here depends on the secretive operation of economic power which, whilst acknowledging the people’s psychic and emotional participation in their economic situation, operates to maintain their passive receptivity. It also means that the people’s suspicions of secret dealings in the grain trade (they believe prices rises are due to forestalling measures by “monopolists” storing supplies against future price rise) are actually brought about: Young advises that if there are fears of shortages, government should act secretly and privately to secure supplies – thus confirming the whole cycle of suspicion and apprehension. In effect, whilst a supporter of free trade, Young wants it to be underwritten with the assurance of provision associated with an older “moral economy”; his defence of free trade is thus significantly swayed by the need to manage the mob’s economic sensitivities.

Young illustrates his argument further by contending that the “scarcities” which so intruded themselves on national political life so as to precipitate, he claims, the king’s intervention in the stand-off between the three estates, were in fact purely “ideal”: there were no such scarcities, only a perception thereof (137). The importance of managing the people’s perceptive economy could not be starker: the mob, fuelled by “imagination,” “madness” and “folly,” whose apprehensions have created the very thing which they feared, have brought about a substantial alteration of the body politic. This is a version of popular political participation which is a travesty of Wollstonecraft’s ideal of the political efficacy of enlightened principles: a politics of ignorance, not knowledge. For Wollstonecraft to read the events at Versailles along similar lines would be to admit a defeat of her Preface’s interpretation of revolution as enlightened progress, and to concede the presence of the chaotic power of mob violence even before the Terror which these events nevertheless foreshadow. It is against this possibility that her counter-reading of the Versailles march must be managed.

Wollstonecraft’s account of this central moment in the revolutionary events of 1789 differs significantly from that of other commentators, so that, whilst, in the wake of Burke and others, she shares in the horror of the attack on the royal bedchamber, she also pays deliberate attention to the king’s sanctioning of the liberalization of the interior grain trade. For Burke, as has been widely noted, the events at Versailles are presented as a fragmentary, shocking episode, a sensational psychosexual drama lacking any sense of the detailed political or economic context for the events: there is no mention of bread shortages, no sense of an on-going political stand-off, silence on the representations of the demonstrators at the National Assembly. Even the *New Annual Register*, which Wollstonecraft knew, gives a much vaguer account of the securing of free grain trade: although it is much more detailed than Wollstonecraft on the bread shortage, in its account Louis simply asks for the food supply to be attended to. And where, like others, Wollstonecraft recounts the enforced removal of the king to Paris, she also mentions that he is preceded in the procession by 40 or 50 loads of wheat or flour (217). If for the mob, the flour symbolizes a simple, even superstitious, equation of the king with provision, Wollstonecraft’s detail also emphasizes how bread has been an underlying concern throughout the episode.

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 in the mobilization of an ignorant, manipulated rabble. In the most significant of Wollstonecraft’s inclusions, 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 public speech in the public space of the Assembly could be construed as an important moment of the political self-affirmation of the people.[[19]](#endnote-18) 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 clearly identify him as Stanislas Maillard, a key figure in the storming of the Bastille. Wollstonecraft’s suppression of his history as a political actor gives him further authority: unsullied with a political past, unburdened by an individual identity, he is instead 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 *Annual Register* of the riotous behaviour of the women at the Assembly (occupying the president’s chair, drinking, interrupting business to the extent that the session is brought to a close) is entirely absent.[[20]](#endnote-19) 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 is repressed. If the mob here appears to enact an exemplary moment of popular petitioning, it is only by forgetting the other reading which shadows this one: on the political efficacy of combined ignorance and threat. The duality of the bifurcated representation of the mob’s character and actions is thus the duality of these simultaneously present interpretations.

With its scene of massed, starving protestors demanding subsistence, Wollstonecraft’s Versailles chapter also asks to be read in relation to E. P. Thompson’s “moral economy” argument. Other critics have read what can appear as authorial high-handedness in Wollstonecraft’s harsh characterization of the mob, as ignorance about the operation of such a moral economy as Thompson outlines (see Kelly 165; Landes 148-51). In fact, what Wollstonecraft represents in this episode is both a crowd making precisely such demands as Thompson has described, and the incorporation or transition of those demands into a quite different economic register. For whilst the mob’s orator asks, in exactly the terms of the “moral economy” crowds, 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, this chapter narrates the establishment of free grain trade under the cover of compliance with a request for such a provision. Where Young had argued that free grain trade must maintain an assurance of moral provision, Wollstonecraft, rather differently, shows how a free grain trade is greeted as 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 mobilized, 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. But if some form of economic liberalization 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 Assembly and especially the king were made to act. But on the other, they prove easily duped and manipulated, even redundant, as the measures they effect are already in train, and as they fail to see that what they are granted does not 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 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.

IV

Wollstonecraft’s determination to present, within her revolutionary history, the National Assembly’s securing of a measure of free trade, demonstrates her commitment to economic, alongside political liberties, and her sense of the dependence of improvement and progress to the establishment of both. But if a free grain trade is here one liberty among many to be secured in the progress of improvement, her attitude to political economy in general is more complex. As has been noted, the *View* ends by foregrounding specific criticisms of Smithian political economy: its dependence on a division of labor which reduces a workforce to, in the words of the *Analytical Review*, “mere pieces of mechanism” (175), its erosion of “every noble principle of nature” to enable a “keen speculator to become wealthy,” and its production of an “aristocracy of wealth” (233-35). Against this, as elsewhere in her writings, Wollstonecraft poses a vision of moderate agrarianism: a fantasy of rural living whose comfort and leisure will produce the improvement in manners which will in turn secure the larger political liberties sought, prematurely, by the Revolution itself.[[21]](#endnote-20) Wollstonecraft’s sympathy for agrarianism and moderate commerce allies her with such figures as her mentor Richard Price but also with sentiments expressed by Imlay, whose novel *The Emigrants*, which appeared in the yearthey met, offered a sentimental account of farming life on the American frontier.[[22]](#endnote-21) Indeed, as she wrote her *View*, Wollstonecraft anticipated moving with Imlay and her sisters to a farm in America, which would be bought with the proceeds of Imlay’s latest plan to import goods into France.[[23]](#endnote-22) As a supporter of the rights of property, Wollstonecraft’s position falls short of the redistributive, communitarian radical agrarianism of William Ogilvie or Thomas Spence.[[24]](#endnote-23) But it is nevertheless in line with an important strain of radical thinking which, suspicious of the tendencies of commercial capitalism to accrue large amounts of wealth, to corrupt the morals of the wealthy and those who sought wealth, and to exploit workers, looked instead to moderate commerce founded on agriculture; in this it drew on a long-established association of virtue and agrarian independence, and suspicion of wealth, in republican thought. Wollstonecraft’s support for the Physiocrats, so unequivocal in the *View*, suggests a perception that its programme could be allied with the future establishment of a moderately wealthy, agriculturally-based society, from which wars, luxury and the corruptions of urban living have been excluded: a society quite distinct from that which other forms of political economy appeared to sketch, including the pursuit of wealth through war and proliferating credit. However, many Physiocratic proposals, including enclosure and the replacement of small farmsteads with bigger units capable of large-scale production, suggested a capitalist agricultural programme at odds with Wollstonecraft’s more sentimental vision of agrarian domesticity; her support for Physiocracy thus points to a desire to turn the argument about liberalized trade in her direction, as well as illustrating the fluidity of contemporary debate on such matters.[[25]](#endnote-24)

By ending her philosophical history with an engagement with Smith, Wollstonecraft appears to recognize that the economic future is increasingly at odds with the bucolic agrarianism expressed in the few moments of lyrical reverie in her text. Unlike a figure such as Paine, who praised commerce as “the greatest approach towards universal civilization that has yet been made by any means not immediately flowing from moral principles” (Paine, *Rights,* Part Two, 82), her conclusion also indicates the difficulties of integrating economic improvement, as envisaged by Smithian political economy, into philosophical history’s narrative of human progress. According to Scottish philosophical historians, commerce brings improvement in manners, knowledge and hence liberty, but, as Smith himself was aware, the division of labor, a keystone of the fully-articulated capitalist system of economic production, threatened the well-being and “improvement” of the workers by reducing their leisure and hence opportunity for education. Smith’s innovation thus threatens the place of commerce in the virtuous cycle of enlightenment, and the very narrative of enlightened improvement is threatened. Burke’s recognition of this prompts his comparison, in *Reflections*, in the context of his denouncement of the National Assembly’s attack on monastic property, of the life of the monk and that of the “many wretches” doomed to work “from dawn to dusk in … servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations”; for Burke, the “toleration of such trades and employments” is a finely balanced capitulation to the needs of wealth distribution (271). In this light, the economic basis of Wollstonecraft’s agrarian dream, in which leisure and “idleness” ensures a “polishing” of manners, at best unclear, at worst appears founded on a system in which the labor of one class provides the comforts, manners and improvements of another. If that dream enabled the progression of a comfortable, leisured class towards the improved knowledge needed to secure political liberties, it risked doing so at the cost of leaving another class behind.

These questions about the relationship of political economy, the genre of economic improvement, to philosophical history, the genre of human progress, feed directly into Wollstonecraft’s complex representation of the mob as causal agents in revolution. The plurality of her attitudes to the mob indicates the plurality of ways of writing not just revolution, but the relation of economic subjects to history (or of subjects to economic history). Wollstonecraft was careful not to write a history of revolution founded on the purely economic cause of bread shortages, as this in turn would imply a purely economic solution in trade liberalization, and would construct the mob simply as economic consumers and subjects. But equally, neither did she write an account which pandered to the passions of the crowd for a moral economy of provision. Vivien Jones has argued that Wollstonecraft’s writing of the enlightened female subject in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be read as an attempt to counter the projection of woman as the “object against which the progress of civilization” just as much as that of “corruption, can be measured” (183); a similar attempt to square the circle of economic and political improvement, together with reservations about political economy’s account of both, is evident in Wollstonecraft’s dual presentation of the mob as both object of improvement and agents of it. But the double identity of the Parisians as both a mob, and as a problematic expression of mass political will is finally expressed most memorably in Wollstonecraft’s ambivalent formulation of enthusiasm as “sublime” agency. If, in such a formulation, philosophical history’s broken narrative of causation and progress is recast in Romantic form, the ironies of aesthetic contradiction provide some refuge from, or consolation for, fragmented Enlightenment certainties.

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2. **Notes**

   Wollstonecraft’s letter, “Introductory to a series of Letters on the Present Character of the French Nation,” written in early 1793, announces this analytic preoccupation with manners, as construed by Scottish thinkers ( 6: 443-6.) For a reading of Wollstonecraft’s writings, including *View*, as a radical deployment of a critique of manners, see O’Brien, chapter 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Rendall demonstrates Wollstonecraft’s participation in a tradition of Scottish philosophical history, but she does not consider how far Wollstonecraft exceeds or tests that tradition. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. See, for instance, Dwyer, who argues that Adam Smith’s revised 1790 edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* reflects widespread contemporary anxieties about the moral corruption of the middle classes by the passions unleashed by commercial society. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Wollstonecraft’s use of the *New Annual Register*, noted in Todd’s edition, was first asserted in a hostile review in the *British Critic* 6 (1794); 29- 36. See Jump 103. O’Brien points out that Wollstonecraft’s account bears little comparison with the “constitutional Whiggism” of the *New Annual Register*, however, or indeed to other contemporary narratives of the revolution, who largely lacked her philosophical approach (192-3). For the *Analytical Review*’s response to the Revolution, see Rigby 63-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. For one account of the grain trade debate within debates on property ownership see Sonenscher, “Property.”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Among the vast secondary literature on the causes of the French Revolution, see Aftalion, Doyle, and Sonenscher, “Nation’s Debt” and *Before the Deluge*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Police of the grain trade was withdrawn between May 1763 and July 1764, re-established following bad harvests; then again withdrawn, only to be reintroduced between 1769-1774. The ‘guerre des farines’ (1775) ended Turgot’s later attempts at economic reform. See Hont and Ignatieff, 15-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. For Smith’s travels, see Ross. For Physiocracy and Smith’s relation to it, see Hochstrasser and Fox-Genovese. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. See Sherman and Rothschild. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Compare the *New Annual Register* for 1791 (1792), 16: the “general exclamation was for bread.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. Like Young, the *New Annual Register* for 1790 suggests that Necker’s interventions could have produced scarcity: his “multiple precautions” brought on “the calamity they were designed to avoid,” 127-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. See Rothschild 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. See Cameron 121-3 and 128-30. Christie’s connection to Forbes, Turnbull and Co is made clear in a letter from Tom Paine, quoted in Rickman 238-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Young describes the prevalence of discussions on such topics, prompted by newspaper reports and political debates: see for instance 1: 625. Kelly speculates about business discussions in Christie’s salon, 166. Todd suggests that Wollstonecraft would have witnessed bread riots in Paris, 215. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. See Pocock, “Edmund Burke.” For Pocock, enthusiasm is “the nearest thing to a revolutionary consciousness” in English history. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. See for instance, the *Annual Register* for 1790, 49-50, which claims that, so “irregular and confused” are the narratives of the day that it is “hardly possible in some instances to trace, what was the preceding or the subsequent act; and we must trust more to opinion than knowledge for placing them in their proper and natural order.” [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Wollstonecraft also, once, uses the French term for the populace: ‘canaille,’ literally ‘pack of dogs,’ 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. See Pocock, “Edmund Burke” 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. *Annual Register*, 49. This account also offers a much less dignified account of Maillard’s speech, as well as one less focused on provision of subsistence: Maillard is interrupted by the women, “inveighs” against aristocrats for causing bread shortages, and complains of insults to the national cockade. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. See *View* 229-30. In Wollstonecraft’s novel *Mary*, the protagonist divides her estate into small farms; *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* calls for the establishment of ‘decent farms’; and in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, Wollstonecraft praises farms in north Norway. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Price’s *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (1784) suggests it is better for Americans to be “plain and honest farmers” than “opulent and splendid merchants.” See Price, 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. See Todd 231. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. On radical agrarianism and the revolutionary critique of property, see Sonenscher, “Property” and Hampsher-Monk. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. See Hochstrasser. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)