

THE ABBÉ COYER AND THE CHEVALIER D'ARC ¹

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The abbé Coyer and the Chevalier d'Arc, two minor figures of eighteenth century France, have not, so far as I know, been the objects of any exhaustive study. On the abbé Coyer there exists an unpublished thesis of 1952; on the Chevalier d'Arc, apart from an article of 1878, and a certain number of articles dealing with his exile in the south of France, all dating from the late nineteenth century, there is nothing. Two minor figures, one would quite rightly conclude. And yet two figures who constantly recur in the history of economic theory and in the history of military theory, for the fact is that, although they both wrote on other matters and wrote a great deal, what they are remembered for is, in the case of the abbé Coyer, his treatise of 1756 entitled *La noblesse commerçante*, and, in the case of the Chevalier d'Arc, his reply of the same year the *Noblesse militaire*.

Born in 1707, Gabriel-François Coyer was educated by the Jesuits and entered the order teaching the humanities and philosophy for eight years, after which time he left the order and in 1741 was put in charge of the education of the young duc de Bouillon who, in his turn, entrusted his own two sons to Coyer, who accompanied them on their Grand Tour of Italy. In 1743 the Inspector General of the cavalry, the comte d'Evreux, secured his appointment as chaplain general of the cavalry. Thus he was present at the last great battle of Maurice de Saxe at Lawfeld in 1747 and at the siege of Berg op Zoom a few months later. These experiences inspired in him a great dislike of war and from then on, to the end of his life in 1782, as a friend of the philosophic movement, he wrote on economic matters, on education, and on the trade corporations, the abolition of which he proposed. They were indeed abolished by the Constituent Assembly in 1791.

He appears to have been a difficult person. It is not clear why he left the Jesuits but he certainly bore a grudge against his former colleagues and indeed against the Church. He wrote in his will "I

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 19 May 1982.

give nothing to the Church which gave me nothing." And from the anti-philosophe camp, the well-known wit, the abbé de Voisenon, has this to say about him: "He has travelled, he has come back and he would do well to go away again."

Philippe-Auguste de Sainte Foix, Chevalier d'Arc, was a bastard, a double bastard, one might say, since he was the natural son of the count of Toulouse who was himself one of the natural sons of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan. After studying at the famous Oratorian college at Juilly, he entered the army, distinguished himself at the battle of Fontenoy and obtained the Cross of Saint Louis. Two years later, in 1747, he received the praise of the maréchal de Saxe for his conduct at Lawfeld, but in 1748 he left the army and devoted himself to writing. To writing and various financial manipulations, for although he had inherited from his father, who had died in 1737, and from his aunt, the duchess of Orleans,² and moreover had a pension from the king, his tastes were such that he was rarely free from financial difficulties. In a revealing sentence of one of his earliest works, he writes: "It is easier for an individual to preserve order in his affairs than to re-establish it".³ He died in 1795 in extreme poverty.

These two men became the mouthpieces of two conflicting views concerning the situation of the nobility in the France of 1756, the year of their two essays on the subject. The aim of both of them was to help this class. The abbé Coyer looked for the salvation of the nobility in economic activity, in which he was by no means alone; the Chevalier d'Arc, on the other hand, looked towards the example of Prussia to propose a nobility linked exclusively to military activity and widely open to commoners. Let us look first at the thesis of the abbé Coyer. He suggested that the nobility should enter commerce without any loss of status. This suggestion was not new. In fact it dated back a couple of centuries. But to remain at the level of the immediate past, Voltaire in his *Lettres philosophiques* of 1734 had pointed with approval to the example of England where, he said, Lord Townsend, a minister of State, has a brother who is content to be a merchant in the City. The opposite point of view was taken by the marquis de Lassay in his *Réflexions* of 1736. What he writes is not particularly profound

² L. de Laigue, "Un petit-fils de Louis XIV", *Revue Internationale*, t. XIII (Rome, 1887).

³ Chevalier d'Arc, *Mes loisirs* (Paris, 1755), p. 148.

but is important in so far as it expresses a widely-held prejudice. "To enrich noblemen by commerce would be to ruin the military spirit in the nobility; we would end up in France with merchants and no soldiers." "Now", he goes on, "although, in a State, commerce is the spring-board of wealth, the army is the reason for its existence, and the army is the nobility." And shortly after, in 1748, Montesquieu writes in his *Esprit des Lois* "It is against the spirit of the monarchy that the nobility should indulge in commerce. The custom which in England has allowed the nobility to trade is one of the things which has the most contributed to the weakening of monarchic government." And he continues: "Certain people, impressed by the practice of other States, think that in France there should be laws which would induce the nobility to enter trade, but that would be the way to destroy the nobility without any advantage to commerce. The practice of this country is very wise. Tradesmen are not noble but they can become so." That is to say by leaving trade and purchasing an office, for there is no surer way, says Montesquieu, of leaving one's calling than to do it well.

"The acquisition which one can make of nobility through purchase greatly encourages tradespeople to enrich themselves to this end."⁴

The abbé Coyer takes up the thesis of Voltaire and dwells at some length on the fact that maritime commerce calls particularly on the very qualities of the nobility. Indeed, under Charles IX, the nobility engaged in maritime commerce and the profession of captain of a merchant ship seemed to require the same qualities as the profession of arms: in time of war one could pass naturally from the one to the other. Coyer also mentions the ordonnance of 1629 and that of 1669. These two ordonnances had been inspired by the two ministers, Richelieu and Colbert. It is known that the cardinal was keen on attracting the nobility into trade and to reduce the number of offices.⁵ He states quite unequivocally in his ordonnance that overseas trade is compatible with nobility. This is confirmed by the ordonnance of Colbert and repeated in the royal declaration of 1701 but it is to be noted that the royal protection against derogation is still limited to overseas and wholesale trade

⁴ *Esprit des lois*, XX.21, 22.

⁵ Henri Hauser, *La pensée et l'action économique du Cardinal de Richelieu* (Paris, 1944), pp. 186-187.

and indeed remained so right up to the Revolution. Coyer does not fail to point out this dichotomy:

“Perhaps our kings have not done enough; they have got rid of only half of the phantom which spreads terror. The nobility, obliged by the law to distinguish between wholesale trade and retail trade is always conscious of a precipice at their side. These two forms of trade are divided merely by a thin line. Moreover, in order to arrive at the higher forms of trade, one has frequently to pass through the lower.”

And he continues:

“Let this law of derogation be abolished totally, let its name disappear from the monarchy. Commerce is a healthy body from which nothing should be cut away. Let us leave to the prudence and the preference of the nobility the freedom to engage in trade as it wishes, to choose one part rather than another. We shall not see it selling combs or matches on the street. What has happened and happens every day in other countries should reassure us. To restrain commerce by a law of derogation is like raising dykes along the Nile to prevent it from fertilising the land, it is like closing a mine because it is too rich.”⁶

He then goes on to praise the situation in England, where men enriched by trade become members of the highest councils of State, of embassies, attain command in the Royal Navy. It is obvious that Coyer’s thinking goes very far towards the creation of a business aristocracy, to a breaking down of the antithesis between land and trade, ideas which had been put forward by the pamphleteers of the previous century but which came up against a number of practical objections. One of the most obvious of these is raised by Grimm in his *Correspondance littéraire* when he makes the observation that overseas trade requires capital that the poor nobleman has not got. The Chevalier d’Arc makes the same point. Moreover, he adds, how is he to acquire a knowledge of the techniques of trade other than by an apprenticeship under a commoner, a humiliating experience for the poor nobleman.⁷ These and other objections are frequently raised, but more interesting and more fundamental are the remarks of Montesquieu concerning the incompatibility between a *noblesse commerçante* and monarchy such as he conceived it, remarks taken up by the marquis de Mirabeau writing in his *Ami des*

⁶ Coyer, *Noblesse commerçante* (Londres, 1756), pp. 178-179.

⁷ Chevalier d’Arc, *Noblesse militaire* (Paris, 1756), p. 60.

hommes in 1756 to assert that the system of the *noblesse commerçante* ruined the fundamental principles of monarchy. Before looking in detail at the reply of the Chevalier d'Arc, we might ask ourselves what was the position of the monarchy itself.

We have seen that in the preceding hundred and twenty years, ministerial declarations were made on two occasions in favour of noble involvement in trade and in 1701, under the pressure of economic difficulties, the question was widely debated by the recently revived *Conseil de Commerce*. For the first time it gave full regional representation to the merchant interest of the country by calling on deputies from the principal commercial towns to present *memoires* on the general state of trade. In this way leading merchants and government officials came together to look for a remedy to the defects of the French economy and quite naturally the social problem represented by the conflict between commerce and social status became an important subject of debate. The solutions which they proposed were familiar; confirmation by the Crown of the right to trade without derogation; the granting of some mark of honour to those who had succeeded in commercial enterprise; the ennobling of families who had remained three or four generations in trade. A joint report was submitted which aroused opposition from the towns, the nobility, and from the commissioners of the *Conseil de Commerce* itself. A great deal of what the deputies had put forward was ultimately pruned in the final draft. Nevertheless the royal declaration did go some way to tackle the social problem: wholesale trade was permitted by law to the nobility and many merchants were ennobled, but from the point of view of those who had hoped for the institution of a new hierarchy based on commerce, the royal declaration was a defeat because the very idea of a *noblesse commerçante* had been rejected.⁸ The question was raised again in the 18th century, as we have seen in the case of the abbé Coyer, but no legislation ensued. In fact the legislation of 1701 remained in force until the end of the century. The question then arises as to the reasons for the abortive character of this attempt to create a *noblesse commerçante*. Was it because the prejudices of both the nobility and the merchants were too strong? There is no doubt that this factor came into play. But why was the nobility so hostile to commerce? It is not clear. No

⁸ R. B. Grassby, "Social Status and Commercial Enterprise under Louis XIV", *The Economic History Review*, 1960.

such prejudice existed against agriculture or even industry. Maybe it was felt that there was something immoral about an activity the end of which is merely to enrich, an activity which produced nothing but which rests entirely on exchange.

The scholastic view of wealth, and beyond that the Aristotelian, was that money could not be a good in itself but only in the goods or services which it produces. Hence the notion of utility introduces itself, but the scholastic here makes a distinction between useful things which are goods in themselves, things "ex se frugiferae", which persist in their being after use, and which are true goods, and, on the other hand, sterile things "quorum usus est abusus", which perish in use in so far that their usefulness depends on the transformation of the original substance. These sterile things are not true goods since their original substance, that is to say their innate being, is annihilated. True wealth belongs therefore to the earth because it produces fruits without ceasing to be earth. Money, on the other hand, ceases to be itself, annuls its substance, and, consequently, is not a true good.⁹ What connection has this theory with the ethic of the nobility? It is obvious that the notion that the earth represents true wealth is that of a static society, whereas the multiplication of consumer goods denotes a mobile society. The legislation of 1701 appears, therefore, as primarily concerned with the maintenance of a certain social order.

It seems that the remark of Montesquieu, namely that the creation of a *noblesse commerçante* was against the spirit of the monarchy, corresponds to the interests of the monarchy. "The claim to prestige by business was, in the long run, more dangerous to royal supremacy than the old social power of the nobility."¹⁰ The nobility no longer had any political power, merely social prestige; any attempt to install a new form of aristocracy, a merchant aristocracy, to the detriment of the purchase of office could not be envisaged by the King. Nothing could be allowed which might threaten the power of the King. So it was that, in 1756, the abbé Coyer's plea for the creation of a commercial aristocracy had little chance of a favourable reception.

Of the many replies to Coyer's thesis, the most interesting is that of the Chevalier d'Arc. Interesting in so far that it propounds a

⁹ Enea Balmas, *Le Idee di Bartelemy de Laffemas* (Milano, 1960), p. 61.

¹⁰ Grassby, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

point of view concerning wealth that is utterly at variance with the spirit of the age.

In fact he reveals himself as an enemy of the very idea of an economy of profit. It is not surprising that his treatise was rapidly given the honour of a German translation, for there is no doubt that, at least in part, he found inspiration in the example of Prussia. His principal object of rejection is the profit-making mentality which characterised his compatriots and at a time when money was all-powerful he takes up a stand against the idea that there is any virtue in the possession of money and analyses the vices which accompany it. "The Monarchy, as indeed a Republic, cannot have too many men, but it can have too much money," he writes in a striking formula and he continues to analyse; there is an ideal level of wealth below which and in excess of which circulation of money is hindered. Supposing that circulation is maintained for a time, excessive wealth becomes useless in the hands of those who possess it because of rising prices, which always increase in proportion to the quantity of money in circulation. Of course, at the other end of the social scale, those who do not possess wealth and have no means of access to it are deprived of the means of subsistence. So much for the situation in which too much wealth is in private hands. If, on the contrary, this wealth flows back into the coffers of the Sovereign and stays there, then the Monarch is in danger of becoming a despot. The Monarchy can only avoid its ruin insofar as the King needs his subjects and as they think that they need him. Once this equilibrium is lost the State ceases to function: a prince who is too rich seems to be able to do without his subjects either by the facility which he has of employing mercenaries to establish tyranny or by the ease with which he can suborn the great by appealing to their love of luxury or their ambition. Not, he adds, that we are yet at that point, but we cannot be without anxiety for the future. What, he asks, is the root cause of luxury, the worst enemy of the State, and his reply is commerce. The function of the nobility is to shed its blood to defend those who contribute to its subsistence and its well-being, and to distribute justice to the citizens under the authority of the laws which it must maintain. Whichever way one looks at it, one can see no possible connection between nobility and trade. On the other hand, tradesmen fall naturally into the third class of citizens, the third estate whose function consists in exploiting the wealth of the State: finance, land, crafts and trade.

One cannot therefore, “without offending the great axiom of monarchic government, introduce commerce into the nobility or bring the nobility to commerce.”¹¹ That means that one cannot create a *noblesse commerçante* without disturbing what he terms as “the harmonic inequality of ranks”¹² and, therefore, without vitiating the State. He then introduces a parenthesis and studies the effects of an intensification of trade. In a curiously modern passage he writes:

“Do we need a greater quantity of metal and, if money does not circulate amongst us, does not this lack of circulation come from the fact that we have too much of it? The abundance of produce is no doubt a great good, if two essential conditions are observed to ensure that this abundance is useful: the first being that all produce which concerns the necessary, subsistence, life, be those products which are the most abundant; and the second being that these be always held at a very low price and that there be no shame attached to being satisfied with them. If these two conditions are not observed, the price of produce increases proportionately to the money supply and those who are not in trade, being unable to face the increase, fall into poverty, with the result that shortly all citizens will be obliged to become tradesmen in order to subsist, which necessarily brings with it that equality amongst citizens which is so dangerous in a Monarchy. Or on the other hand, if prices of basic foodstuffs are everywhere fixed without the quantity of money causing them to rise... it will appear somewhat ridiculous to stick to this frugality, to this moderation which maintains simplicity and purity in manners.”

Or, at the very least, he adds in conclusion, “this moderation will cast a sort of obscurity on those who preserve it, an obscurity that their self-respect will force them to try to penetrate, and since the only method available to them has become trade, all citizens will wish to be tradesmen.”

The nobility whose principal function is war is characterised by a bravery which relies on the notion of honour. The aim of honour is consideration. In trade, on the other hand, the aim is interest, interest which is sacrificed by the nobility in the hope for consideration. So the message of the Chevalier d’Arc is a call for greatness in frugality of life. “Do you wish to be rich?” he asks the French nobility. “Then leave,” he continues, “this luxury which

¹¹ *Noblesse Militaire*, p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

degrades you, so to speak, in the eyes of your neighbours. ¹³ Let a gentleman dare to be great, then he will be rich.” ¹⁴ He looks to the army to provide the austerity and the pursuit of honour which he considers necessary to the greatness and the strength of the country. So, whereas the abbé Coyer pleads for the right of the nobility to enter commerce and to enrich itself like the members of the Third Estate, the Chevalier d'Arc places the emphasis on honour and consideration as being the whole wealth of the nobility. He therefore looks to the Sovereign for a certain number of concrete measures to enable the nobility to recoil, as it were, upon itself and to detach itself from the money economy which he has stigmatised. So he suggests a monopoly of officer grades for the nobility. Not that he shows any depreciation of the commoner who distinguishes himself in battle or rises through the ranks. In perfect keeping with his general outlook he finds such an individual infinitely preferable to the sons of wealthy parents who have acquired officer status through the purchase of rank. Of him he writes:

“He is a commoner, it is true, but he is brave. Honour is his treasure. He obeys only discipline, that is to say, the laws of his country. He gives his life for the tranquility of his fellow citizens. He loves his king and his country; he serves both with zeal. All he asks as price of his labours, as price of the blood which he is anxious to shed for them, is a modest subsistence. What more does the nobility offer? And if the French soldier has sentiments which can be required only from the nobility, is there so great a distance between a gentleman and him?” ¹⁵

And the Chevalier d'Arc would like to see this distance eliminated altogether:

“In a State like France would it not be advantageous to create a personal nobility which would die with the individual to whom it had been granted: it would be a worthy recompense to those who had distinguished themselves by certain glorious actions and to which soldiers themselves could aspire.” ¹⁶

From there the Chevalier d'Arc can go on to ask that the whole army be noble. The monopoly of officer rank would be insuffi-

¹³ Op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 102.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 103.

cient to give posts to all gentlemen, so he calls for the re-establishment of companies of cadets at the rate of one per regiment:

“These companies, although formed exclusively of nobility, would be subject to the same discipline as the others and would perform the same service... These companies would become a spawning ground for officers... I think that this way of providing a livelihood for poor nobility would be more advantageous to the State than to let them enter trade.”¹⁷

In this way the vast majority, even, in theory, the totality of the nobility would be absorbed into the army. Therefore, having opened up the career of honour for all noblemen, the King could, without injustice, “take away the privileges of nobility from any man who had arrived at the age of thirty without having embraced any profession, provided that this punishment be only personal and did not fall on his family.”¹⁸ And finally this passage which indicates well how the Chevalier d’Arc, having rejected the money economy, tends to replace it by an economy of service:

“The State feeds its members, therefore its members should serve the State. The citizen who is idle, and therefore useless, is criminal towards his fatherland and steals from it everything that he consumes. The gentleman is a citizen before he is a nobleman, and the only privilege which nobility brings is a choice of the important services which the State can and should expect of him. The moment when he ceases to think thus is the moment when he ceases to be noble, and to take away from him the title of noble is merely to fix him at the place which he has assigned to himself.”¹⁹

In the same way that the suggestions of the abbé Coyer remained without effect so it was that of the numerous suggestions of the Chevalier d’Arc very few were implemented and not always in the spirit of their originator. For instance, whereas the idea of the automatic granting of nobility to officers who were commoners was rejected, on the other hand, an edict of 1758 reinforced the requirement that any candidate to the post of officer should be able to furnish a certificate of nobility. This was largely due to the aristocratic reaction following on the defeat of the French by the

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 104-106.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

Prussians at Rossbach in 1757. The obvious, though simplistic, explanation for this humiliation was that the officer posts in the Prussian army were occupied almost exclusively by aristocrats. At the same time, however, the role of money in the army was considerably reduced. In the ordonnance of March 1776 certain of the suggestions of the Chevalier d'Arc were fully realised. The problem of the venality of posts in the army was finally tackled. Saint-Germain, the reforming minister of War, wrote:

"Venality in military offices is certainly the aspect which is the most destructive of the good of the service. Money gives neither talents nor merit, and both are necessary in abundance in the military calling."²⁰

Such fine phrases were not unusual in the preamble of ordonnances, but this time they were followed by effect. All posts which had been venal were to lose a quarter of their value at each change of ownership so that after four changes they became the property of the king. And by the time the Revolution broke out this process was well under way.

So it was that the suggestions of the two men we have dealt with, if they did not have immediate effect, did at least prepare the ground for future reform.

²⁰ Emile G. Léonard, *L'Armée et ses problèmes au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1958), p. 245.