

# **'L'amitié de grands Etats est leur plus sûr appui' : the small state dilemma in Genevan political economy, 1762-1798**

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# ‘L’amitié de grands Etats est leur plus sûr appui’

*The Small State Dilemma in Genevan Political Economy, 1762–1798*

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Richard Whatmore

## Résumé

*Cette contribution examine les différentes tentatives d'écrivains réformateurs genevois de dépasser les limites de la réforme imposée par un voisin monarchique plus absolutiste et plus puissant. Alors que Rousseau estimait le gouvernement mixte incompatible avec la Genève civilisée et commerçante, d'autres, comme François d'Ivernois et Etienne Claviere, étaient convaincus, dans les années 1770, que Genève pouvait devenir une démocratie moderne. Après l'échec de la Révolution de 1782 et la mise hors-la-loi des deux réformateurs, les tentatives de créer une Genève démocratique comprirent l'établissement d'une «nouvelle Genève» en Irlande du Sud. Cependant, les espoirs se reportèrent sur la rénovation constitutionnelle en France, qui devait ouvrir la voie au changement politique dans la Cité. Claviere devint un acteur important des débuts de la Révolution française et il songea constamment à utiliser son influence française pour réaliser ses objectifs. D'Ivernois renonça à ses convictions démocratiques lorsqu'il proposa ses services à la Grande-Bretagne contre la France en 1791. En 1793, Claviere renonça lui aussi à l'idée de faire de Genève une démocratie indépendante et milita pour un rattachement de la ville à la France révolutionnaire. Ce projet ne survécut pas à la mort de Claviere, confirmant la perspicacité de la maxime de d'Argenson à propos des petits Etats.*

## Zusammenfassung

*Dieser Beitrag untersucht die verschiedenen Versuche der Genfer Reformschriftsteller, die vom absolutistischen und mächtigeren monarchischen Nachbarn auferlegten Reformen zu überwinden. Während Rousseau eine «gemischte Regierung» mit der Natur der zivilisierten*

*Handelsstadt Genf für unvereinbar hielt, waren andere wie François d'Ivernois und Etienne Claviere in den 1770er Jahren überzeugt, dass Genf eine moderne Demokratie werden könne. Nach dem Misserfolg der Revolution von 1782 und der Verurteilung der beiden Reformer führten die Bestrebungen, ein demokratisches Genf zu etablieren, u.a. zur Schaffung eines «Neu Genf» in Südirland. Die Hoffnungen konzentrierten sich jedoch auf die Verfassungserneuerung in Frankreich, welche den Weg zu einem Wechsel auch für Genf öffnen würde. Claviere wurde ein wichtiger Akteur der Anfänge der Französischen Revolution und war stets bestrebt, seinen so gewonnenen Einfluss auch für Genf nutzbar zu machen. D'Ivernois dagegen liess seine demokratischen Überzeugungen fallen und wollte sich 1791 im Dienste Grossbritanniens gegen Frankreich engagieren. Auch Claviere gab seine Idee, aus Genf eine unabhängige Demokratie zu machen, auf und setzte sich für den Anschluss Genfs an das revolutionäre Frankreich ein. Dieses Projekt überdauerte aber Clavieres Tod nicht, was die Weitsicht von Argensons Maxime über die Kleinstaaten bestätigen sollte.*

## I

Rather than looking to the myth of Venice in seeking political stability, many eighteenth-century supporters of the Genevan constitution argued that students of politics ought to look no further than Calvin's Christian Commonwealth. Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, Professor of Natural and Civil Law at the Genevan Academy, argued that while large states needed a monarch at the apex of the political pyramid, the secret of combining liberty with order in a small state was to mix democracy with aristocracy<sup>1</sup>. The result was a balance of power that made all of the sharers in the sovereignty of the state mutually dependent. In avoiding pure democracy 'le plus foible & le plus mauvais des Gouvernemens', Geneva had, he insisted, created a political edifice that was the envy of Europe. This conclusion was seconded by numerous illustrious commentators, including Jacob Vernet in his influential *Instruction chrétienne*, D'Alembert in the *Encyclopédie* and Voltaire, particularly in his *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*. What Burlamaqui called Geneva's 'gouvernement mixte' enjoyed the 'bonheur assuré' between tyranny and license, combining an established social hierarchy with a cosmopolitan commercial culture and a reasonably tolerant church. Domestic tur-

1 *Principes du droit politique* (Amsterdam, 1751), 2 vols., i, 124–133.

bulence, ignorance, faction, and external bellicosity – the accepted evils of republics – appeared to have had no counterparts in Geneva<sup>2</sup>.

While it was unanimously agreed that Geneva had avoided the pitfalls of popular government, from the early eighteenth century a significant number of citizens began to condemn the growth of oligarchy. Certain prominent families enjoying membership of the Small Council (also called the Council of 25), it was claimed, had usurped the power of the General Council of all citizens and bourgeois and were beginning to control the Council of 200. The danger of a prince emerging from this patriciate was a central concern of leading critics of the Genevan aristocracy, from the writings of pastor Antoine Léger and Micheli du Crest to G. L. Le Sage's *L'Esprit des lois* of 1752<sup>3</sup>. An equivalent fear was that the growth of the patriciate had encouraged the growth of luxury; the resulting contagion of avarice was expected to corrupt the citizens and ultimately to dismember the state. Once more such claims can be traced to pamphlets and sermons published in the first decades of the eighteenth century, which became particularly strident after the effects of John Law's experiments with the French national debt rippled out to Geneva<sup>4</sup>. In Geneva itself demands for democracy, the assertion of popular sovereignty and the right to resist, stemmed from a belief that the General Council could be made to control the membership of the other councils and also to make the law. Such arguments led to several crises, notably in 1707 and 1734, but the patriciate was in each case able to maintain its power, with the aid of the veiled threats of external 'intermediaries'. At the head of these were the emissaries of the French crown, readily backed by overwhelming military force. It appeared to be the case that as long as France was opposed to popular governments on her borders, democrats could do little to challenge aristocratic control of the Genevan constitution. Small states had little opportunity for political innovation because, as D'Argenson put it, 'l'amitié de grands Etats est leur plus sûr appui'<sup>5</sup>. This was particularly the case after the 'guarantee of 1738', by which the Helvetic Confederation, Savoy and France promised to uphold the Genevan constitution. Its practical effect

2 As the Genevan Delolme put it in his *Constitution d'Angleterre* (Amsterdam, 1771, p. 208): 'Une Constitution populaire ... mene nécessairement au malheur, à la calamité politique, de confier les moyens & le soin de réprimer le pouvoir à ceux qui ont le pouvoir.'

3 L. Kirk: 'Genevan Republicanism' in D. Wootton, ed.: *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776* (Stanford, California, 1994), pp. 270–309; H. Rosenblatt: *Rousseau and Geneva. From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 101–158.

4 H. Lüthy: *La Banque Protestante en France de la Révocation de l'Edit de Nantes à la Révolution* (Paris, 1959–61), 2 vols., i, 275–414.

5 *Mémoires et journal inédit* (Paris, 1858), 5 vols., v, 299–300.



was illustrated by a letter of 8 March 1781 from the French foreign minister Vergennes to his ambassador the Vicomte de Polignac which warned of the consequences of the Genevan constitution being *dénaturé*: 'Il s'agit d'établir dans Geneve l'autorité légitime et de ne la pas laisser à la merci des mouvemens Populaires.'<sup>6</sup>

For democratic republicans enthused by the prospect of a return to classical values the lesson of Geneva's experience was that political arguments addressing purely local concerns were doomed to failure, so long as the state remained small in size and hemmed in by large monarchies. In such circumstances, opposition might have been expected to focus on the means of increasing the democratic element of the mixed constitution, or broadening the appeal of the established aristocracy, rather than seeking an alternative form of government. In practice, Jean-Jacques Rousseau inspired a generation of citizens who were dissatisfied with the existing political architecture but equally opposed to rule by demagogues or princes. The basis of his appeal was the promise of a non-monarchical alternative to mixed government whose political economy would maintain Geneva as a republic while making her independent of monarchical neighbours. Given such an aim, Rousseau might have been expected to formulate means of increasing Geneva's international power and, accordingly, the size of the state. Alternatively, he might have established rules of policy which made Genevan senators into Roman statesmen, creating an invincible republic embodied by the ancient maxim *Respublica non irascitur*. Rousseau, however, shared the concern of many of his contemporaries that expansive republics faced as great a danger as those small in size because the armies and generals they generated would sooner or later turn against the metropolis, as the histories of Rome and latterly Venice revealed. By contrast, Rousseau's strategy, in the *Contrat social*, was to deny legitimacy to sovereign aristocracies in mixed states and sovereign kings in absolute monarchies. He famously identified liberty with popular sovereignty and direct democracy, arguing that forms of government which abandoned them would sooner or later succumb to tyranny<sup>7</sup>. Equally notorious were the conditions in which he believed such a form of government might practically be established, something which led many to question whether he believed his own *patrie* to be beyond political redemption. Liberty was only possible where manners

6 *Correspondance complète de Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh (Oxford, 1963–1994), 51 vols., xlv, 13.

7 *Contrat social*, II, i; III, i: 'Je dis donc que la souveraineté n'étant que l'exercice de la volonté générale ne peut jamais s'aliéner, et que le souverain, qui n'est qu'un être collectif, ne peut être représenté que par lui-même; le pouvoir peut bien se transmettre, mais non pas la volonté ... la puissance législative appartient au peuple, et ne peut appartenir qu'à lui.'

were simple and pure, where public morals were virtuous and where hierarchical ranks or classes did not exist, all of which necessitated a homogeneous political culture. Liberty could only be maintained in a small state, size being the greatest bulwark against the growth of corruption. Once more colliding with the dominant assumption of the time, his additional demand was that the economy of the state be characterised by agriculture rather than by commerce. To many patriots this begged the question of national defence. The example of recent Dutch and British history appeared to have proved beyond doubt that a commercial state governed by a mixed political system guaranteed national security. How could Geneva stand if it embraced a more vigorous anti-monarchical creed at the same time as it abandoned commerce?

Rousseau's solution to this last problem is difficult to state because the *Contrat social*, while it raised the issue, did not resolve it. Rousseau promised, 'Je ferai voir ci-après comment on peut réunir la puissance extérieure d'un grand peuple avec la police aisée et le bon ordre d'un petit Etat' and added the note, 'C'est ce que je me suis proposé de faire dans la suite de cet ouvrage; lorsqu'en traitant des relations externes j'en serais venu aux confédérations. Matière toute neuve, et où les principes sont encore à établir.'<sup>8</sup> In a pamphlet published in 1790 the comte d'Antraigues claimed to have a manuscript from Rousseau's own hand 'destinait à éclaircir quelques chapitres du Contrat social, par quels moyens de petits Etats pouvaient exister à côté des grandes puissances, en formant des confédérations'. He also stated that he would never publish it because it threatened to 'saper et peut-être détruire l'autorité royale'<sup>9</sup>. Rousseau's ultimate solution to the Genevan problem therefore remained obscure. That inciting democratic republicanism in Geneva was impractical appeared to be confirmed after 1762 when popular opposition to the decree condemning Rousseau's *Contrat social* and *Emile* led the prominent families of the Small Council to increase their use of a legislative veto, the *droit négatif*, against the General Council. Soon after, Rousseau himself came to doubt whether an alternative to mixed government could be found for his country of origin. During the renewal of the conflict between the patriciate and its bourgeois critics in 1768, when he was told 'une de Ses lettres peut sauver la République', Rousseau advised the opponents of aristocracy not to follow the *Contrat social* after all. It was necessary in the Genevan case to accept 'un gouvernement mixte ... ou le Peuple soit libre sans être maître, et où le

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, III, xv.

<sup>9</sup> *Quelle est la situation de l'Assemblée nationale?* (Lausanne, 1790), pp. 59–60.

Magistrat commande sans tyranniser'<sup>10</sup>. Geneva was too commercial to sustain a democracy, with 'beaucoup de gens riches et où tout le monde est occupé'. Furthermore, Geneva's 'situation précaire entre trois grands Etats dont elle dépend' caused Rousseau to conclude that the democrats of the General Council would create a state that 'ne Subsistera pas vingt ans sans être dépeuplée et ruinée'. While such correspondence with Paul-Claude Moulton, François Coindet and François-Henri d'Ivernois remained unpublished, his views were certainly well known among radical circles. What is notable about the response of the younger generation opposed to the Genevan patriciate is that they continued to believe in a democratic alternative to mixed government. In formulating their ideas they turned away from certain aspects of Rousseau's classical republicanism and towards ideas sketched by Montesquieu in *De L'Esprit des lois*. The history of these plans to make Geneva a genuine democracy is the subject of this essay.

## II

The formation of a democratic republicanism which moved beyond the *Contrat social* can be seen in the writings of the leading *représentants* of the late 1770s and early 1780s, prominent among whom were the newly elected procureur-général Jacques-Antoine du Roveray, the financier Etienne Clavière, and the young avocat François D'Ivernois. As with previous radicals, their specific aim was to restore the sovereignty of the General Council, holding that the only means of achieving this end was to destroy both the patriciate and the culture of luxury which underpinned it, which they labelled a 'constitution liberticide'. Following Rousseau, they held that the *salus populi* could only be asserted by ensuring that all of the citizens enjoyed the liberty of making their own laws, in addition to being able to exercise an absolute right to resist tyranny and reassert their sovereignty<sup>11</sup>. In their view this was imperative because the Genevan aristocracy was debasing the republican manners which were the currency of stability in small states. In encouraging luxury and excessive self-regard they had sown the seeds of revolution by weakening the forces which cemented Genevan society together. Against the *Contrat social*, however, they argued that the further commercialisation of Geneva was, far from being an impediment to

10 *Correspondance complète*, xxxv, 92–93, 101.

11 J.-P. Brissot (with Clavière and D'Ivernois): *Le Philadelphien à Genève, ou lettres d'un Américain sur la dernière révolution de Genève, sa constitution nouvelle, l'émigration en Irlande, etc, pouvant servir de tableau politique de Genève jusqu'en 1784* (Dublin, 1783), pp. 66–67; François D'Ivernois: *L'histoire des révolutions de Genève dès la réformation* (Geneva, 1856), pp. 91–100.

democracy, actually a necessity in maintaining a popular republic. The problem was not commerce itself, as history revealed numerous examples of successful commercial republics, from Tyre, Carthage and Marseilles to Florence, Venice and Holland. If the forms of commerce compatible with republican virtue were identified and pursued, and if moderate wealth became the norm among citizens once the aristocracy had been removed, the evils of excessive wealth and acute poverty could be avoided in perpetuity. *Honnête aisance* would become the norm. Independent citizens would be less in danger of succumbing to corruption. Their fierce patriotism could be combined with their wealth in the defence of the republic. Such notions of a stable republic owed a great deal to Montesquieu's notion of 'commerce d' économie', the 'pratique de gagner peu, et même de gagner moins qu'aucune autre nation, et de ne se dédomager qu'en gagnant continuellement'. Impossible among peoples, such as the French, among whom luxury was established, the *représentants* were encouraged by Montesquieu's argument that 'les plus grandes entreprises' were undertaken in those states which subsisted by *commerce d'économie*<sup>12</sup>. They were thus convinced that the problem of Geneva's geographical situation could be overcome by creating a state able to defend itself against the large monarchies which surrounded it. The barrier was of course the creation of such a democratic republic in the first instance.

The internal politics of such a manoeuvre appeared to be resolving themselves in favour of the *représentants* as in January 1782 they were successful in elections to the legislative councils and initiated further legislation to ameliorate the civil condition of the *natifs*. On April 7 the Small Council renewed their use of the *droit négatif*, by now the key instrument of aristocratic control, to veto the proposed reforms. In place of the traditional pacific outcry, direct action was taken by the *natifs* who occupied the Hôtel de Ville. The *représentants* took advantage of the uprising, taking control of the Small Council and they went on to initiate the process of revising the constitution. In the name of security, they also created a Committee of Eleven, of which Clavière was a member, to harness the popular revolutionary spirit. Knowing that the success of the revolution depended upon its acceptance by the military powers surrounding Geneva, the range of arguments marshalled to convince France to accept a democratic republic on its borders was broad indeed. Although Clavière wrote on 26 April to his fellow financiers, the Cazenove brothers of London, expressing the view that 'il faut espérer

12 *De L'Esprit des lois*, XX, iv.



que notre petitesse fera mépriser ce qui se passe entre nous', he cannot have genuinely believed it to be the case<sup>13</sup>. Rather, the *représentants* placed their hopes in an appeal to what they called the 'real interests' of France while additionally seeking to threaten the French court by diplomatic manoeuvres in London.

*Représentant* contact with France had in fact begun as early as January 1780, when Clavière and Du Roveray visited Paris with the intention of using Necker's influence to obtain Vergennes's neutrality during any future upheaval. Vergennes's opinion was expressed numerous times during the following twelve months, directly to the *représentants* and also via his *chargé d'affaires*, Gabard de Vaux: 'Le Petit Conseil a-t-il pu penser que le Roi conserverait quelque affection pour un Etat dont les chefs avaient subi le joug d'une multitude qui fait tout ce qu'elle peut pour déplaire à Sa Majesté?'<sup>14</sup> The *représentants*, and D'Ivernois in particular, responded with the argument that they were not seeking Rousseau's 'pure démocratie ... qu'ils ne formèrent qu'une société d'agriculteurs et de soldats uniquement occupés de leur défense'. Rather, their 'sage démocratie', founded on 'une société tranquille, industrielle et commerçante', offered to provide France with a barrier to her enemies that would be of far greater strength than patrician Geneva. A 'gouvernement sage et populaire' would be comprised of citizens 'chacun défendrait les siens propres et le ferait avec un courage vraiment républicain'<sup>15</sup>. When Vergennes held fast to his opinion that a democracy on the borders of France directly contradicted the interests of his state, D'Ivernois attempted an appeal direct to Louis XVI. His *Tableau historique et politique des révolutions de Genève dans le 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle* was dedicated to the King and reiterated the claim that a Genevan democracy loyal to France would supply a far stronger bulwark against the enemies of the French state. He also, in desperation, cited Grotius' argument that 'il n'y a point de différence entre les peuples libres et un véritable roi' to try to persuade Louis that there was little to separate Geneva's 'république, libre, indépendante et souveraine' from the Bourbon monarchy<sup>16</sup>.

More practically, Du Roveray visited London in May and petitioned Charles James Fox in particular, in the hope of establishing an alliance against France and a guarantee of British protection. His timing could not have been worse as peace negotiations with France and North

13 J. Bouchary: *Les Manières d'Argent à Paris à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1939), 3 vols., i, 22.

14 O. Karmin: *Sir Francis D'Ivernois, 1754-1842* (Geneva, 1920), p. 65.

15 *Lettres et Mémoires* (Geneva, 1780), pp. 62-69.

16 *Tableau* (Geneva, 1782), pp. xi-xvii.

America made the British unwilling to risk antagonising their ancient rival within her own sphere of influence. Time finally ran out because Vergennes, citing the guarantee of 1738, caused French, Savoyard and Bernese troops to invade Geneva at the beginning of June. The rebels scattered, recognising that without the support of a larger state armed resistance was futile. When Brissot asked Clavière why he had not chosen to stand and die as the republicans of old, he made the important point that modern republicans behaved differently:

Des sauvages, des peuplades belliqueuses peuvent préférer de s'ensevelir tous dans une mort commune; mais un peuple commerçant ne fait que calculer ses jouissances, et ceux d'entre nous qui se distinguent par leur vociférations sont encore plus hypocrites que frénétiques.<sup>17</sup>

A modern republican citizen did not sacrifice his life wantonly but fled to prevent the destruction of the city and then bided his time. For the moderns there were weapons besides force of arms and one of the most potent, commerce, only gradually took effect. On 2 July the gates of the city were opened. With Vergennes in control, a settlement was imposed that confirmed the existing aristocracy and increased the powers of the Small Council. Clavière, Du Roveray, and thirty others, escaped by boat, crossed the Savoy frontier and found sanctuary in Neuchâtel, under the authority of Frederick II of Prussia. In their absence, on 21 July, they were declared *infâme* and banished from Geneva. Exactly four months later, the Council of Two Hundred decreed that Clavière and Du Roveray be exiled in perpetuity.

### III

In the light of their defeat, rather than following Rousseau and accept the need for a mixed government in Geneva, the exiled *représentants* reaffirmed their democratic republicanism. They developed new solutions to the Genevan problem. The first was to create a New Geneva elsewhere, a small republican city which would draw the best citizens from the old patrie and ultimately lead to the patriciate's destruction or at least impoverishment. Families of radicals who had campaigned to make Geneva a democracy therefore finally abandoned direct attempts at internal revolution. European sovereigns, interested in the wealth-creating opportunities promised by a Genevan colony, offered land to the *représentants*, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Elector Palatine and the Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg. So great was the concern for 'bonnes mœurs républicaines' that support from such sources

17 Brissot: *Mémoires 1754–1793*, ed., C. Perroud, (Paris, 1910), 2 vols., i, 293.



was rejected; republics had to be protected from the corrosive moneys of princes. On the invitation of Lord Mahon, Clavière, D'Ivernois and Du Roveray carried their hopes to Ireland, whose size and manners they believed would suit a commercial colony of exiled republicans. Irish landowners were obsessed with the positive effects in a Catholic country of what the Duke of Leinster called 'the first Protestant colony on earth'<sup>18</sup>. D'Ivernois returned from Dublin in November 1782 with assurances that a combination of London government and Irish privy council funds were available to establish a colony of *émigré* watch-makers at Waterford. Clavière was quickly convinced of the merits of the scheme. In a letter to Amy Melly of 12 December he envisaged a community of industrious republican citizens, and even began to see advantages in the failure of the Genevan revolution:

par la nature de notre défaite, nous conserverons notre vertu et nos principes; et si nous pouvons réaliser nos objectifs sous un ciel autre que celui de Genève, ne vaut-il pas mieux avoir été vaincus que de nous retrouver là où le luxe nous opprime, immergés dans la corruption et la dégradation des mœurs<sup>19</sup>.

Early in 1783 Clavière travelled to Waterford as one of eight commissioners nominated to negotiate with the British government. By April they were planning a commercial village of fifty two-storey houses, with an upper floor of each house devoted to industry, governed by a democratic general council which made law and elected magistrates. Commercial decisions were to be taken by assemblies of independent workers, called 'ouvriers aisés'. As Clavière considered education to be crucial to sustain 'bonnes mœurs', he requested that Brissot, then in London organising a *Lycée* or democratic academy for independent *philosophes*, send him details of his ideas on public instruction. A university was planned to rival the Academy of Sciences at Geneva, in addition to the establishment of a communal bakery, tannery and paper factory. Negotiations continued through the summer of 1783. Despite the *représentants'* energy and optimism, the project was troubled by numerous factors. British authorities refused to provide what the *émigrés* considered to be minimum levels of finance, while there were problems shipping gold of sufficiently high quality for the watches. Clavière also blamed the first immigrants from Geneva, whom he considered excessively concerned with making money and little interested in creating a republican community. The 'honnêtes gens', upon whom he believed the scheme depended, had failed to appear. This was partly be-

<sup>18</sup> Karmin: *D'Ivernois*, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> A.N.T\* 646<sup>1</sup>.

cause of the arrest and imprisonment of one of the commissioners charged with securing industrious families from Geneva, Amy Melly. The fact that, with Clavière, he had taken British citizenship did not protect him on his return to the city, despite the protests of the British government. While the Genevan representative in London, Saladin, sought to besmirch the reputation of the exiles, many British aristocrats began to express fears about national security and national character: would the Genevese be loyal if the French invaded Ireland? would their republicanism taint the political culture of monarchical Britain?<sup>20</sup> Although the foundation stone of New Geneva was laid in July 1784 most of the exiles had by this time abandoned the project.

Hopes for a New Geneva outside Ireland continued for a time, with D'Ivernois interesting Thomas Jefferson in an American colony, but it has generally been assumed that *représentant* political thought and political economy ended with the Waterford failure<sup>21</sup>. D'Ivernois maintained his status as a British subject and largely moved in London radical circles before 1789. Du Roveray, with several other exiles, settled in Brussels, forming the Senn Bidermann Company, whose interests ranged from Rhineland manufactures to commerce in the Levant<sup>22</sup>. Clavière's disdain for French manners had never extended to a refusal to profit from her economy, and since the establishment of the Caisse d'Escompte by Turgot in 1776 he had sunk his wealth in the debts of the French state, believing the expenses incurred by Britain in the war with America to be about to cause a national bankruptcy<sup>23</sup>. Keen to extend his financial operations, Clavière moved to Paris in June 1784. None of the exiles, however, abandoned their Genevan origins. All of them addressed anew the question of making the Geneva of old a democracy. While Du Roveray was content to wait for the international situation to alter, D'Ivernois and Clavière developed radically opposed solutions.

#### IV

In the *Philadelphien à Genève*, as orthodox republicans, the horizon of *représentant* vision remained limited to small republics whose size allowed the institution of a democratic General Council and whose man-

20 H. Butler: *Escape from the Anthill* (Mullingar, 1986), pp. 25–31.

21 Letter from Richard Price to Thomas Jefferson, 2 July 1785, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. J. P. Boyd (Princeton, New Jersey, 1954–), viii, 258.

22 D. Jarrett: *The begetters of Revolution. England's involvement with France 1759–1789* (London, 1973), pp. 210–212.

23 Letters to Delessert and Co. and Cazenove, July 1781–March 1782, printed in Bouchary, *op. cit.*, i, 16–20; Luthy: *La Banque Protestante en France*, ii, 420–469, 658, 667–772; M. Marion: *Histoire financière de la France depuis 1715* (Paris, 1914), 3 vols., i, 348–385.

ners were not beyond redemption They did not remotely consider applying their ideas to France.

Les Français ne conçoivent rien à ce système [republicain]. Accoutumés à jouir de mille plaisirs, d'une chère délicieuse de spectacles, d'habits, d'ameublements fastueux, ils font reposer le bonheur dans ces jouissances factices, & en les donnant à des républicains, ils croient les rendre heureux. Eh! reprenez ces dons empoisonnés, leur disait un genevois; ... mais laissez-nous notre morale austère, notre ignorance, notre simplicité, notre bonheur.<sup>24</sup>

By 1785, however, Clavière had changed his mind. This was partly due to the fact that French governments were experimenting with policies, such as provincial assemblies and public credit, and introducing radical *philosophes*, such as Turgot and Condorcet, into positions of power. The possibility of having innovative ideas adopted by government, or by powerful princes such as the Duc d'Orléans, was greater in France than elsewhere in Europe. The change of perspective had far more to do with the parlous condition of the French national debt. It has hitherto been assumed that the writings generated by the debt question were either to do with individual financial gain or Rousseauist opposition to 'agio-tage'<sup>25</sup>. But there was nothing Rousseauist about defending certain kinds of commerce and particular kinds of speculation on government debt, as Clavière's pamphlets did. While there can be no doubt that the Paris Bourse was seen as an incomparable opportunity to inflate Clavière's personal wealth, it is a mistake to distinguish between his private financial activities and his political objectives. A means was discovered to unite them.

The pamphlets Clavière sponsored, written by the impoverished but well-known polemicists Brissot and Mirabeau, had a dual aim with regard to Geneva. Having abandoned any lingering faith in Necker's ability to change French policy, Clavière wanted to place the finance minister Calonne in a condition of dependence upon financiers such as himself. When the time was right, this could be translated into political influence over their old enemy Vergennes, who might not be so willing to initiate a call to arms at the expense of a national bankruptcy. The other strategy had a longer gestation. Clavière, having sunk his personal wealth in the French state, did want to place national finances on a firmer foundation. Since public confidence, and ultimately the economy itself, depended on the manners of the nation, Clavière argued that the

<sup>24</sup> *Le Philadelphien*, pp. 112, 152–155.

<sup>25</sup> R. Darnton: 'Trends in Radical Propaganda on the Eve of the French Revolution (1782–1788)', unpublished D.Phil. (Oxford, 1964), p. 54; Darnton: 'L'Idéologie à la Bourse', *Gens de Lettres, Gens du Livre* (Paris, 1991), pp. 86–98.

best solution to the French debt problem was to move French culture towards virtues rarely associated with subjects in large monarchies, particularly industriousness, honesty, sobriety and benevolence. Since the source of the crisis was a lack of revenue, the surest means to address it was by increasing the commerce which generated revenue, which in turn depended upon these manners. Clavière's letters were full of such ideas during this period<sup>26</sup>. Just as in *représentant* policy with regard to the Genevan economy, distinctions were made between commercial and financial practices which tended to foster luxury and corruption, and honest dealings which increased wealth and sociability. Pamphlets over the next two years, such as *De la Caisse d'Escompte* (1785), *De la Banque d'Espagne* (1785) and *Sur un nouveau projet de Compagnie d'Assurances contre les Incendies à Paris* (1786), distinguished between the 'real commerce' (commerce proprement dit) to be found in stable, free and virtuous states, and the 'commerce politique' of corrupt systems, among which were included contemporary France and Britain. Montesquieu's commercial typology was being applied to France in the hope of gradually transforming general culture and, as a consequence, national politics.

Events in France during Calonne's tenure at the helm of state finances altered Clavière's political vision once again, causing him to develop a second and more immediately practical solution to Geneva's dilemma. By 1787 he had become convinced that constitutional surgery in France, a utopian dream for the *représentants* of 1782, might in fact be the shortest route to Genevan democracy. Reflection upon the republican constitutions of the North-American states played a role in this further movement of ideas. One important source of information was Hector Saint John de Crèvecoeur, the noble Norman turned New-World adventurer, whom Clavière met through the fashionable salon of Mme. d'Houdetot. Clavière agreed with Crèvecoeur's claim that America could serve as a model to illustrate the corrupt manners of the French people, and he founded the Société Gallo-Américaine. to this end<sup>27</sup>. He also became convinced that forms of republicanism could be developed in large states, and that such republics could develop forms of public credit which would make them not only prosperous but invincible if wars with monarchies became necessary. In the case of France, as in the earlier case of Geneva, the question was how to put such ideas into practice. Given that the state of the French finances was worsening, Clavière ex-

26 Bouchary: *Les Manières d'Argent*, i, 42–56.

27 *Lettres d'un cultivateur Américain* (Paris, 1787), 2nd ed., 3 vols., iii, 116; Brissot: *Correspondance et papiers 1776–1793*, ed. C. Perroud (Paris, 1912), pp. 105–136.



pected the debt problem to translate into political upheaval. The necessity, he believed, was to guide any political revolution which might occur, establishing forms of political architecture, political culture and political economy which would make France into a popular state. The long-awaited Genevan revolution could then follow without fear of foreign intervention. In three books written in 1787 and published between April 1787 and January 1788, Clavière outlined his script for the successful transformation of the French state into a popular republic. All of the works were written in conjunction with Brissot, to whom they are usually ascribed. Brissot, however, described Clavière as his mentor throughout this period, and acknowledged him to be the source of all of his ideas on political economy.

Clavière's diagnosis of the ills of France and the means of addressing them was distinctly Genevan. Indeed, all of the themes of *représentant* could be found in these writings. France had failed to fulfil her economic potential. Ministers for over a century had created industries for luxury goods protected by laws proscribing competition. These industries had attracted labour from the countryside to the towns and ultimately created centres of poverty and disease, because the markets, being supported by the demand of the noble classes, were unable to expand and employ the artificially-increased urban population. In short, France had developed a protected urban manufacturing sector before her markets and income levels were able to support it. The prices of goods were beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen; the protected industries were parasites feeding on the coffers of the state; labourers were trapped because their numbers reduced wages to the absolute minimum, and product markets in luxury goods were incapable of expansion to increase demand. Just as in Geneva, the 'people' had been sacrificed to the nobility and the court<sup>28</sup>. Escape from this predicament necessitated the stimulation of commerce in manufactures and other goods which were natural to France, which would thereby yield enough profit to provide higher wages. Higher wages would in turn invigorate domestic markets, spread wealth, and further commercialise popular culture. Ultimately, the commerce generated by such measures would solve the problem of state debt and address the issue of national poverty. Since France could not initially rely on the demand of domestic consumers to expand markets for indigenous products, it was essential to rely on foreign consumers.

28 *De la France et des Etats-Unis, ou de l'importance de la révolution de l'Amérique pour le bonheur de la France; Des rapports de ce Royaume et des Etats-Unis, des avantages réciproques qu'ils peuvent retirer de leurs liaisons de commerce, et enfin de la situation actuelle des Etats-Unis* (Paris, 1788), pp. 45, 106, 116, 130, 133.

Foreign commerce was therefore the most important branch of national industry. A commercial treaty with 'Amérique libre' was essential. The liberation of America, so 'si favorable au peuple', had 'a fait connoître l'influence du commerce sur la puissance, la nécessité du crédit public, et conséquemment des vertus publiques, sans lesquelles il ne peut subsister long-temps'<sup>29</sup>. The last point was imperative. Public credit was sustained by public confidence, which in turn depended on virtuous popular manners. Behind such manners lay wealth, because without wealth the populace would become impoverished and prey to corruption. But wealth had to be generated by honest means and never be excessive, because the commerce which created wealth could easily produce ranks and luxuries, both inimical to virtuous manners and credit. The case of North America proved that time was on the side of the *représentants*. Democratic republics were more commercially successful than mixed states. Popular sovereignty could be combined with moderate wealth, moral commerce and 'bonnes mœurs républicaines'.

As has been noted, Clavière was applying Montesquieu's distinction between *commerce d'économie* and *commerce de luxe* to the case of France. But for the former to flourish in a revitalised France two further steps were necessary. Rejecting Montesquieu's claim that monarchy necessitated aristocracy, it was essential to sacrifice the French nobility to commercial need:

Ce préjugé, qu'on croit mal-à propos indestructible, parce qu'on fait mal-à-propos de la noblesse, un des éléments nécessaires de la constitution monarchique, ce préjugé, dis-je, seroit seul capable d'empêcher le commerce françois d'avoir de l'activité, de l'énergie, de la dignité, si l'on ne devoit pas espérer que la saine philosophie le détruire, et infailliblement, ramènera les hommes à la grande idée de n'estimer les individus que par leurs talents, et non par leur naissance; idée, sans laquelle il n'y a que des aristocrates; c'est-à-dire, des hommes incapables d'accueillir aucune ville élevée, et des hommes avilis, hors d'état de les produire.<sup>30</sup>

Only the accession of 'the people' to political life would vanquish the aristocratic prejudices which hindered progress, and which were ultimately responsible for the current threat of bankruptcy. French people would recognise 'que chacun d'eux est quelque chose, et cette idée, ce sentiment de son importance, fait seul le citoyen, et par conséquent, la prospérité et la grandeur des états'<sup>31</sup>. Taking advantage of the campaign for an Estates General, Clavière and Brissot, writing in August 1787, ar-

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410-411.



gued once more that 'La solidité de la dette Nationale demande plus une constitution Nationale qui la mette hors de toute atteinte de Banqueroute'<sup>32</sup>. A revised edition of *Point de Banqueroute* of October 1787 applied the Genevan assessment of modern politics to the crises in foreign policy provoked by the Netherlands revolt and the Russo-Turkish war. Peace coupled with commercial development was advised, until Britain had exhausted her resources supporting the Stadholder, after which France would be able to unite with the Dutch patriots, mounting a defence of liberty against the destructive system of aristocratic and monarchical war<sup>33</sup>. The necessity of popular sovereignty in France was then reaffirmed at the end of the year with the publication of the *Observations d'un Républicain*, which had also been completed earlier in 1787<sup>34</sup>. From February 1788, the Société Française des Amis des Noirs replaced the Société Gallo-Américaine as the means of popularising the ideas of Brissot and Clavière.

These activities, coupled with news of the imminent opening of an Estates General, convinced the exiled *représentants* that France would no longer prevent the establishment of democracy in Geneva<sup>35</sup>. They began to petition to authorities in Geneva to allow them to return to their former offices and also to speed democratic reform<sup>36</sup>. Late in 1788, Clavière once more united with Du Roveray, and aided by Etienne Dumont and Samuel Reybaz, began to argue that if France became allied with Geneva and North America, in addition to the reformers in Britain, privilege and commercial tyranny would be challenged across the globe<sup>37</sup>. Once it collapsed, aristocracies would fall and with them mixed government. A glorious republican era of moral commerce and moderate wealth for all would be inaugurated. These ideas influenced Mirabeau's speeches in the National Assembly. The Genevan *représentants*

32 *Point de Banqueroute, ou Lettre à un Créancier de l'Etat, Sur l'impossibilité de la Banqueroute Nationale, & sur les moyens de ramener le Crédit & la Paix* (London/Paris, 1987), pp. 20, 36 and section three, p. 3.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70, 107.

34 *Observations d'un Républicain Sur les diverse systèmes d'Administrations provinciales, particulièrement sur ceux de MM. Turgot & Necker, & sur le bien qu'on peut en espérer dans les Gouvernemens monarchiques* (Lausanne, 1788).

35 An entry in the *Journal d'Ami Dunant* of 17 February 1789 reports: 'On dit que M. Prévost, procureur-général, a reçu une lettre de M. Clavière dans laquelle il se plaint de ce qu'on n'a pas profité des avis qu'il avait donnés pour changer la constitution; que celle qu'on aura est trop aristocratique.' (Karmin, *D'Ivernois*, p. 175).

36 *Réclamation des Genevois Patriotes Établis à Londres, Contre la nouvelle Aristocratie de Genève contenue dans deux lettres aux Procureur Général & aux Adjoints* (Paris, 1789).

37 An anonymous letter of August 1790 to Geneva's *premier syndic*, which had been attributed to Mallet du Pan, captures the sense of foreboding: 'Deux chefs exilés ... veulent remettre en liberté non la France seulement, mais le reste de l'Europe, la Hollande, la Brabant, Genève, la Suisse en particulier.' (O. Fazy: *Genève, 1788–92*, Geneva, 1917, pp. 90–91).

were also responsible for Mirabeau's letters to his constituents, entitled *Le Courrier de Provence*. After Mirabeau's death in April 1791, similar ideas were canvassed by means of Nicolas Bonneville's *Cercle Social* and journals such as the *Chronique du Mois*. With France in revolution, the Genevan problem appeared to have been resolved. The irony was clear to D'Ivernois:

L'aristocratie genevoise avoit exilé ses ennemis en France pour les aider à porter à l'aristocratie française le premier et le dernier coup, et pour faire gagner aux grands principes qu'ils avaient inutilement défendus à Genève, un triomphe complet dans un empire dont l'influence devait inévitablement s'étendre sur Genève.<sup>38</sup>

He returned home on 5 February 1790. On 23 February the General Council ratified the proposition that *représentants* exiled in 1782 should be allowed to return to their political positions. Democratic reform proceeded apace. Du Roveray became the leading member of the constitutional committee of August 1790 which resulted in the constitution of March 1791.

## V

Just as external constraints on Genevan politics appeared to have been abandoned they reasserted themselves in a different guise. Within Geneva, the democratic constitution enjoyed far from unanimous support, but it soon became clear that the major threat to its existence was the proximity of a rapidly democratising France. Mixed government in France, embodied by the constitution of 1791, had failed, with the King refusing to become a chief magistrate and Europe's monarchs in mortal fear of a powerful popular government leading to the collapse of the established order. As war commenced, French politics entered the realms of the unknown, most clearly with the creation in September 1792 of the first republic in a large commercial state in modern history. Rather than following his friends to Geneva, Clavière had decided that his financial skills would be essential in maintaining a French republic and he became a French citizen to this end. The author of the assignats scheme by which public debts were to be paid at the same time as citizens were persuaded to embrace moral forms of commerce, Clavière became the last finance minister of the Old Regime and the first of the new republic. At some point he and his Girondin colleagues came to their final verdict on the question of Geneva. As early as 26 November 1791 he wrote to Dumont expressing concern that 'la paix des Genevois n'est rien moins solide'

<sup>38</sup> Karmin: *D'Ivernois*, p. 186.

while outlining his view that 'il valoit mieux ne rien faire et attendre que la révolution française fut parfaitement consolidée'<sup>39</sup>. It became clear by the Autumn of 1792 that this consolidation entailed the annexation of Geneva by France. To the horror of his compatriots, Clavière now rejected the ultimate goal of a Europe of independent popular states and advocated a universal republican empire. Although he disputed the claim of the French commander in Savoy, general Montesquiou, that he was ordered by Clavière to 'détruire ce nid d'Aristocrates et y pêcher tous les tresors que nous y avons enfouis', there can be no doubt that he was actively seeking the union of the two republics<sup>40</sup>. Clavière's motive in December 1792 was probably that the assignats would cease to depreciate in value if public confidence was restored in the potential wealth of an expansive republic. It was also significant that large numbers of *faux assignats* were said to be entering France via Geneva. Rather than having become the self-serving 'Mirabeau de Genève', as one writer put it, or the 'vengeful demagogue and democratical fanatic' that F. P. Pictet described, Clavière had carried D'Argenson's maxim to its logical conclusion<sup>41</sup>. Given the contentious status of democratic government, small popular republics could never sustain themselves in contemporary Europe. Only large states had a chance of survival.

D'Ivernois too came to the conclusion in 1791 that *représentant* thinking was no longer sustainable. In comments on the condition of Geneva at the beginning of that year he revealed that he no longer had any faith in political equality and expected the 'torrent' of French democracy to have dire consequences for Genevan independence<sup>42</sup>. After the experience of Terror at Geneva, the arrest and execution of the Girondins in France and the spread of war across the continent, D'Ivernois lamented his early ideas and experienced a political volte-face. Blaming Clavière for the evils suffered by Geneva he embraced the traditional defence of mixed government and, astonishingly, argued 'il n'y aurait à Genève ni réformes à désirer ... ni l'abus à détruire, ni même de classes privilégiées à jalouser'<sup>43</sup>. Democracy was 'impur' and the only solution

39 J. Bénétruy: *L'Atelier de Mirabeau. Quatre proscrits Genevois dans la tourmente révolutionnaire* (Geneva, 1962), pp. 391–392.

40 *Mémoire justificatif pour le citoyen François A.-P. de Montesquiou, ci-devant Général de l'armée des Alpes* (Paris, 1792); *Correspondance du Ministre Clavière et du Général Montesquiou servant de Réponse au Libelle du Général contre le Ministre* (Paris, 1792).

41 Maruerite Faure to Pierre Moulton, 5 January 1790, *Correspondance complète de Rousseau*, xlv, 163; F. P. Pictet: *A Letter to a Foreign Nobleman on the present situation of France, with respect to the other states of Europe* (London, 1793), pp. 6, 26–29.

42 O. Karmin: 'Un Mémoire inédit de Francis D'Ivernois sur la situation politique à Genève au début de 1791 et sur les moyens d'y établir un gouvernement stable', *Bulletin de l'Institut National Genevois*, XLII (1915), 73–95.

43 *La Révolution française à Genève* (London, 1794), pp. v, 93–96.

was to pray for counter-revolution against France. It might appear that with the death of Clavière, D'Ivernois's conversion, and the ultimate annexation of Geneva by France in 1798, Genevan political economy had come full circle. Exponents of small state democracy continued to defend their cause as they had before 1782. Conceptions of mixed government had, however, changed. Whatever D'Ivernois said about pre-reform Geneva, his notion of mixed government was far from that held by the old oligarchy. Citizenship was defined not by membership of an aristocratic caste but by ownership of property. The checks and balances of the British constitution, rather than its representation of ranks and classes, were now lauded as the solution to the dislocation of Europe caused by the French Revolution. They would also be the guarantee of an independent Geneva. As D'Ivernois put it in 1795, 'this balance of power is the salvation of Europe. It presents its tranquillity precisely in the same way that the balances of the British Constitution preserve the liberties of the people.' Representative government and a restricted franchise, in a Europe balanced between independently powerful states but guaranteed by British arms and money, became the new hope, as the writings of the Coppet circle, and that of the *Bibliothèque britannique*, which included Dumont, reveal. Although the *représentants* had always been critical of Britain's commerce, constitution and empire, by destroying the ancient mixed government of the state they ultimately led Genevans to model their own hoped-for stability on that of Britain. D'Ivernois lamented that it had not happened earlier. Talking of Rousseau he asked, 'if this political writer ... had but lived long enough in England to observe the practical effects of her Constitution, how much might it have contributed to introduce true liberty on the Continent?'<sup>44</sup>

44 *Reflections on the War in answer to the Reflections on Peace addressed to Mr. Pitt and the French Nation* (London, 1795), pp. 17, 95n.