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Bureaucracy: The Making of a Buzzword

Anna Joukovskaia

Bureaucracy is surely one of the most spectacular linguistic-conceptual success stories of the modern era, and it is curious that historians of political thought most attentive to language, members of the Cambridge and *Begriffsgeschichte* schools, have largely overlooked its early history. It has been shown that the origin of the word *bureaucracy* goes back to the 1750s, to an invention of the French merchant, liberal economic thinker, and high-level royal administrator Jacques Claude Marie Vincent, marquis de Gournay (1712–59). Gournay’s famous contemporary, Baron von Grimm, remembered him saying “We have in France an illness that takes a terrible toll; this illness is called bureaumania.” In 1764 Grimm recalled that Gournay would “invent a fourth or fifth form of government by the name of bureaucracy” and in 1765 he noted that Gournay “complained much” of it.¹ Since the early 1970s, scholars such as Martin Albrow, Martin Krygier, and Fred W. Riggs have drawn special attention to Grimm’s testimony:

He [Gournay] explicitly evokes the classical Greek classification of

governments. In so doing he invents another type of government to add to long

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¹ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, tome XI (1764)*. Mélinna Caron (Centre international d’étude du XVIII^e siècle: Ferney-Voltaire, 2018), 263: “Feu M. de Gournay excellent citoyen, respectable par sa droiture et ses lumières [. . .] disait quelquefois: ‘Nous avons en France une maladie qui fait bien du ravage; cette maladie s’appelle la bureaumanie’. Quelquefois il en faisait une quatrième ou cinquième forme de gouvernement, sous le titre de bureaucratie.” The following year Grimm wrote: “Le véritable esprit des lois de France est cette bureaucratie dont feu M. de Gournay, cet honnête et digne citoyen, se plaignait tant.” Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, tome XII (1765)*. Stéphanie Géhanne Gavoty (Centre international d’étude du XVIII^e siècle: Ferney-Voltaire, 2020), 329–31.

recognised forms, such as monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. He does not, therefore, conceive of eighteenth-century French government as some malformation of monarchy, such as tyranny. He is identifying a new group of rulers and a method of governing. The complaint against them is not that they are acting unlawfully, outside their proper authority, but that governing seems to have become an end in itself.²

Through the following decades, the idea that Gournay “invented a type of government” spread widely and was reified in textbooks and dictionaries of concepts—one of which, for example, stated without nuance that bureaucracy “took its place alongside monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.”³

More recent scholarly literature questions whether this interpretation of the neologism’s original meaning is correct. Keith Baker links the term to liberal economic reforming circles within the French royal administration, and Ben Kafka insightfully suggests it was a pun, a “little joke” that invoked the Aristotelian theory only to “violate a well-worn semiotic code.” Both scholars recognize however that the evolution of the term up to the revolutionary period remains to be traced.⁴ Grimm’s testimony has been taken at face value, but like any other historical fact, it should be analyzed in context. Grimm’s explanations of the neologism *bureaucratie* were

² Martin Albrow, *Bureaucracy* (London: Macmillan International Higher Education, 1970), 17; Eugene Kamenka and Martin Krygier, eds., *Bureaucracy: The Career of a Concept* (New York: Edward Arnold, 1979), 21–22; Fred W. Riggs, “Introduction: Évolution sémantique du terme bureaucratie,” *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 31–34 (1979): 605–27.

³ Nicolas Kada, Mathieu Martial, *Dictionnaire d’administration publique* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2014), 48–50. See also, among other examples: Jos C. N. Raadschelders, *Handbook of Administrative History* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 142.

⁴ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 160; Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 77–107.

produced five and six years after Gournay's death. Were they accurate? And if they were, have they been interpreted correctly? In any case, what Grimm actually meant in the *Correspondance littéraire* is a separate research problem, different from the question of what Gournay himself could have meant when he coined the neologism. Moreover, the meaning Gournay intended cannot simply be deduced from the basic signification of the lexeme *bureau* and the morpheme *-cratie*. Etymology can appear to be more transparent than it actually is. The origin of a word like *bureaucratie*, which has become so ubiquitous in the social and political sciences and even in everyday use, deserves some serious digging.

I. ON THE METHOD

There is no evidence in the extensive literature on the French language, on Gournay, and on his intellectual circle that he nor anyone else during his lifetime used the word *bureaucratie* in writing. Supposing Grimm's attribution of the neologism is correct (a plausible assumption given the Baron's close acquaintance with the Parisian "world of the salons"⁵), the task of determining the word's initial meaning presents an unusual methodological challenge, insofar as it involves searching for the sense of a term without having any contemporary examples of its usage. A combination of the Cambridge and *Begriffsgeschichte* schools' modes of interpretation (involving analysis of the exact historical conditions, the social milieu, the larger intellectual atmosphere, and the concrete argumentative situations) may prove to be instrumental. Given this

⁵ Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

unusual scenario, any conclusions reached should be regarded as tentative. But an explicit and thoroughly argued hypothesis is better than mere intuition.

The forms *bureaucratie* and *bureaumanie* were new at the time of their invention but their parts (*bureau*, *-manie*, *-cratie*) were old, each more or less polysemic, presenting a wide range of uses, and linked to networks of discursive associations (examples of usage in argumentative contexts) that could have been more or less readily present in Gournay's mind. Educated contemporary speakers of a language normally share the same idea of the semantic polysemy of a lexical item, which is reflected in the dictionaries of a given time. But the same item's discursive associations may vary between individuals, social milieux, intellectual circles, or debating communities. This is why etymological analysis should be complemented by contextual analysis. It is necessary to consider the discursive associations of the units *bureau*, *-manie*, *-cratie* that might have been available to Gournay. We should study several interconnected contexts: First, the basic linguistic context (the natural languages Gournay happened to know). Second, the context of his theoretical and practical experience of the world. And third, the context of "the institutionalized modes of speech" of his time—the political languages, idioms, or discourses in J. G. A. Pocock's sense.⁶

The speaker's intention is also fundamental to the interpretation of meaning.⁷ Who were Gournay's audience and how would he have wanted to influence them? Quentin Skinner's observations concerning the "argumentative context"⁸ and the rhetorical strategies of an

⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'Historien*: Some Consideration on Practice," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20.

⁷ Quentin Skinner, "Interpretation and the Understanding of Speech Acts," in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1:103–27.

⁸ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1:86.

“innovating ideologist” are useful in studying Gournay and his neologisms. The French merchant and economic thinker is a fine representative of the prototype analyzed by Skinner.⁹

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT BEING EARNEST

Let us start by questioning the commonplace view that the word *bureaucratie* was invented to enrich the existing classification of political regimes. Could Gournay earnestly think that Aristotle’s categorization was outdated, that Montesquieu failed to amend it properly, and that he himself was able, and willing, to do better? The catalogue of Gournay’s library¹⁰ shows that he had a keen interest not only in economics but also in political philosophy. However, he did not seek to make a personal contribution in the latter field. The Parisian decade of his life (1747–59) coincided with the first period of reception of *De l’esprit des lois* (of which Gournay possessed a first-edition copy). It is implausible that this cultured and extremely modest man¹¹ attempted to revise Montesquieu’s classification of political regimes with a mere turn of phrase. When Gournay had something important to say, he tended to put it in writing. In this case, he did not. And when he did briefly enter into the discussion of forms of government, he confined himself to the usual terminology (“monarchy” and “republic”).¹² Similarly, Gournay’s friends and followers, prolific authors who often worked in collaboration with him, remained within the bounds of Montesquieu’s terminology.

⁹ Quentin Skinner, “Moral Principles and Social Change,” in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1:145–57.

¹⁰ Simone Meyssonier, *La Genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIII^e siècle: De Boisguilbert à Montesquieu: Vincent de Gournay: Rôle et influence* (PhD diss., Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1987), Annex 9 “Inventaire de la bibliothèque de Vincent de Gournay,” 32–37.

¹¹ Montaudo de la Touche, quoted by Benoît Malbranque, *Vincent de Gournay: L’économie politique du laissez-faire* (Paris: Institut Coppet, 2016), 32.

¹² *Traité sur le commerce de Josiah Child, suivi des Remarques de Jacques Vincent de Gournay, Texte intégral d’après les manuscrits*, ed. Simone Meyssonier (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008), 278. Hereafter: Gournay, *Remarques*.

In proclaiming that France was governed by some bureaus, Gournay was speaking within the tradition of sarcasm and satire, not political philosophy. Words built with the lexeme *manie* were used frequently in the eighteenth century, and always in a satirical sense, to denounce irrational collective behavior marked by imitation and fashion: *théâtromanie*, for example, or *métromanie* (mania for making verses—a term that served as the title of a 1737 play by Alexis Piron). The morpheme *-cracie* had a similar function. Gournay’s contemporary Charles Pinot Duclos, perpetual secretary of the French Academy (1755–72), once said, “For new things, a new word is needed. We have a new kind of government; it is my duty, as historiographer of France, and secretary of the Academy, to find the word. I have found it; this is a *conocracy*.”¹³ (The French *con* stood for *cunt*, meaning female genitals, and for *idiot*). A number of similar satiric neologisms appeared during the Revolution: *acéphocratie*, *calotinocratie*, *clubocratie*, *culocratie*, *juntocratie*, *nobilocratie*, *plébécration*, *sacerdotocratie*, *sanguinocratie*, *stratocratie*, *aristo-démocratie* and *aristo-robino-théocratie*.¹⁴ These words were puns—not intended as serious additions to the classical typology of the forms of government—and Gournay’s *bureaucratie* is in keeping with this trend.

Clearly, Gournay intended his neologism to be informal, not for scholarly or literary purposes. However, there is every reason to believe that despite its informality, the word *bureaucratie* was more than just a pun or a little joke about the apparatus of government; it served as a sharp polemical weapon with a precise meaning and role in Gournay’s plan for economic reform.

¹³ “Aux choses nouvelles, il faut un mot nouveau. Nous avons une nouvelle espèce de gouvernement; c’est à moi, comme historiographe de France, et secrétaire de l’Académie, à trouver le mot. Je l’ai trouvé; ceci est une conocratie.” Quoted in [Nicolas Baudeau], “Chronique secrète de Paris, sous le règne de Louis XVI par l’abbé Baudeau,” *Revue rétrospective, ou Bibliothèque historique, contenant des mémoires et documens authentiques, inédits et originaux* 3 (1834): 78–79.

¹⁴ Max Frey, *Les transformations du vocabulaire français à l’époque de la Révolution (1789–1800)* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1925), 35.

III. WHY *BUREAU*? THE LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

In uttering the words *bureaumanie* and *bureaucratie*, Gournay was denouncing the influence acquired by a certain element of society that he considered illegitimate or harmful, the *bureaux*. But which ones, exactly? *Bureaux* were present in all branches and on all levels of the French system of justice, administration, police, and finance. A listener who encountered Gournay's term out of context—who did not know Gournay and his views—could not readily understand which kind of *bureaux* he was referring to. So why did Gournay choose such a broad term?

Gournay had left France in his early youth, and it was in Spain that he became an adult. When he returned to France after fifteen years in Spain and two long journeys, to Holland and England, he may have been unaccustomed to everyday life in France and to conversational French. And even if this were not the case, as a polyglot he must have perceived the contrasts among the languages he was familiar with (French, Spanish, Italian, and English). Let's imagine some of his first linguistic impressions on his return to France. In Spanish, the word *bureo*, of French origin, had an extremely limited use. It applied only to a council chaired by the butler of the royal palace.¹⁵ As he crossed the Spanish-French border, Gournay must have realized that the *casa de la aduana* (customs office) was called *bureau de douane* or *bureau des traites*. Accustomed to picking up his letters at the *caxa de las cartas*, he now had to collect them from the *bureau des postes*. Did he have to deal with a formality related to taxation? Instead of going to the *thesorería*, the *contaduría*, or the *cámara de cuentas*, he would go to the *bureau des finances*, *bureau des gabelles*, or *bureau des aides*. A French colleague-tradesman did not invite

¹⁵ *Diccionario de Autoridades* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1726), vol. 1, s.v. "bureo."

him to his *oficina* to talk about business, but to his *bureau*. When he needed to write to a judge in France, he did not take the letter to the *secretarías* or *escribanías*, but rather to a *bureau*. A secretary of state would not receive him in his *despacho*, but in a *bureau*, and the ministers' clerks did not work in *covachuelas*, as in Madrid, but in *bureaux*. Gournay became a member of the *bureau* of Commerce, whereas in Spain such an agency would have been called *junta del Comercio*. And if he had wanted to take part in charity, he would have become a member of the *bureau des Pauvres*, which sat on Mondays and Saturdays in the *bureau* of the Hôtel-Dieu.¹⁶ Wherever he turned, the whole of France seemed swaddled in a dense network of *bureaux*. Thus, it is perhaps not at all surprising that Gournay chose this word as the basis for satirical neologisms designed to name a specific “disease” of France.

However, it would be unreasonable to suppose that Gournay directed the sarcastic word *bureaucratie*, literally “the government of bureaus,” indiscriminately at any and all of these bureaus, from the top where the bureaus of the secretaries of state dispatched their correspondence in the name of the King, to the bottom where the unfortunate pushed open the doors of the *grand bureau des Pauvres*. Gournay had something specific in mind, and to discover what it was, we must consider the other contexts: the context of social experience, the discursive context, and the argumentative context.

IV. WHICH *BUREAUX*? THE CONTEXT OF THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

¹⁶ The examples come from the dictionnaires of Pierre Richelet (1680); Furetière (1690); the French Académie (1694, 1718, 1740); Trévoux (1721); *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726). About the *covachuelas* see Saint-Simon, *Mémoires complets et authentiques du duc de Saint-Simon sur le siècle de Louis XIV et la Régence* (Paris: Hachette, 1858), 19: 96–97.

As a rule, historians of the eighteenth-century French administration are not particularly interested in the concept of bureaucracy, because it refers to developments that occurred after the end of the ancien régime. They attribute the origin of the word to the irritation and even hatred the opponents of administrative centralization felt toward the secretaries of state and especially the personnel of their bureaus headed by the principal clerks, *premiers commis*. According to François Burdeau, “It was around 1780 that the word *bureaucracy* appeared, to designate a system of monopolization of power by clerks who decide on everything, with the help of a growing body of precedents.”¹⁷ This meaning emerged during the 1770s, but as we already know the word had been coined some years before 1759 (the date of Gournay’s death). Could a man of Gournay’s background and convictions have regarded the ministerial bureaus as critically as would the next, prerevolutionary, generation?

Gournay was a wealthy and experienced merchant who had rendered important services to the French crown and whose expertise and liberal economic views, which contrasted with the official French mercantile and industrial policy inherited from “the Great Colbert,” gained him sympathetic attention among Louis XV’s ministers. He was thus invited to enter the royal administrative service as a member of a council on Commerce (*bureau de Commerce*).¹⁸ In that capacity, Gournay had to collaborate closely with the comptroller general, the secretaries of state, the intendants of the provinces, and a host of principal clerks who worked for, and sometimes in place of, the ministers. There exists no material indication that Gournay harbored any antipathy toward ministerial bureaus or the intendants of the provinces. Of course, the silence of the archives is ambivalent. It might be reasonable to suppose that Gournay’s

¹⁷ François Burdeau, *Histoire de l’administration française: Du 18^e au 20^e siècle* (Paris: Montchrestien, 1994), 28.

¹⁸ *Le cercle de Vincent de Gournay: Savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIII^e siècle*, dir. Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre, Christine Théré (Paris: INED, 2011).

neologisms could have been prompted by a social interaction that left no written trail. For example, Gournay could have been dissatisfied with the influence exerted on ministerial affairs by such people as the Sieurs Clautrier, father and son, the eternal and inescapable principal clerks to the comptroller general of Finances,¹⁹ and his displeasure could have led him to sarcastically describe them as *bureaucratie*.

However, it is necessary to consider the prominent place that higher administration, the state, occupied in Gournay's liberal economic doctrine, as well as his practical experience as intendant of Commerce, which led him to rely on the administrative hierarchy.²⁰ Gournay understood the usefulness to government of well-organized bureaus. A learned economist, he saw the value of statistical information collected on a large scale and properly analyzed—a task that the existing administrative staff, too few in number and insufficiently qualified, was not always able to carry out, as shown by Gournay's expressed disappointment with the work of the Balance of Trade bureau and his attempts to improve its operations.²¹

The main lines of Gournay's economic thought and his administrative experience indicate that he did not perceive the high administration as a despicable and hostile environment. Believing that the economy obeyed precise laws, Gournay had sought to discover these laws through practical knowledge and theoretical study of the success of England and Holland against France in international trade²². An apostle of freedom of work, he was among the first in France

¹⁹ Jean Imbert, Jean Nagle, Jean Meyer, Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de la fonction publique en France*, ed. Marcel Pinet (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie de France, 1993), 2:277–81. Hereafter: HFPPF.

²⁰ Felicia Gottmann, *Global trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism: Asian Textiles in France 1680–1760* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5, 107–9, 129–30, 168, 170–71.

²¹ Simone Meyssonier, *La balance et l'horloge: La genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris : Éditions de la Passion, 1989), 177; Loïc Charles, Guillaume Daudin, “La collecte du chiffre au XVIII^e siècle: Le bureau de la Balance du commerce et la production des données sur le commerce extérieur de la France,” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 58, no. 1 (2011): 128–55.

²² Arnaud Orain, *Les savoirs perdus de l'économie. Contribution à l'équilibre du vivant* (Paris : Gallimard, 2023).

to speak out against the restrictions expressed in the statutes and corporate regulations encouraged and guaranteed by the state; a propagandist of the virtues of competition, he fought for the government to abandon the policy of privileges and monopolies.²³ On the other hand, it should not be inferred that Gournay was, to put it simply, an unconditional friend of the merchants and an enemy of the state administration. The interest of the *négociants* was not for him an objective in itself but rather a tool to achieve the supreme goal, the well-being of the “nation.”²⁴

Laissez-faire—Gournay’s favourite expression—did not mean, for him, that manufacturers and merchants should be allowed to organize their activities as they wanted. They could only be allowed to do so after they had been taught the right way to be free, according to the rules of “good administration” and the laws of economic science. These ideas are apparent in the article “Commerce” in the *Encyclopédie*, which was written by Gournay’s young disciple François Véron de Forbonnais²⁵. According to Forbonnais, it is necessary to distinguish between the interests of the merchants and the interests of the state; to ensure the interests of the state, it is necessary to “govern” trade; “good administration” consists of “listening” to the merchants, who alone know the indispensable “details,” but without forgetting the general picture, of which the merchants generally have no idea.²⁶

²³ Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

²⁴ Letter to La Roche-Aymon, archbishop of Narbonne, 19 Jan. 1754 in Vincent de Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres, Publiés sur la base des manuscrits conservés à la bibliothèque de Saint-Brieuc*, ed. Benoît Malbranque (Paris: Institut Coppet, 2017), 202–3. Hereafter: *Mémoires et lettres*.

²⁵ Loïc Charles, Arnaud Orain, “François Véron de Forbonnais and the Invention of Antiphysocracy,” in *The Economic Turn: Recasting Political Economy in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Sophus Reinert and Steven Kaplan (London: Anthem Press, 2019), 139–68.

²⁶ *L’Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 35 vols. (Paris, 1751–72), 2: 690–700, <http://enccre.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedie/>.

Gournay disagreed with those, like Montesquieu, who thought that a republican regime was more propitious to commerce than a monarchy,²⁷ because the latter, with its concentrated decision-making power, had more facilities than a republic to adopt “the small number of laws which can bring it [commerce] to the highest degree.”²⁸ Although Gournay was in many ways a precursor of the physiocrats, he never advocated decentralization or the devolution of administrative responsibilities to local elected representatives, which was advocated by some of the physiocrats and other administrative thinkers.²⁹ Colbert had introduced privileges and monopolies as temporary crutches to support business while it grew; Gournay wanted to drive out privileges and monopolies so that competition would strengthen the health of businesses. But despite some differences, both statesmen were believers and practitioners of state action. Like Colbert, Gournay did not oppose *dirigisme* and liberty, but he strove to achieve their fusion in his daily work as intendant of Commerce.³⁰ In order to make the administrative monarchy an instrument of liberalism, Gournay believed it was sufficient that “the principles of commerce penetrate even the Council of Monarchs.”³¹ Thus, Gournay relied on the ability of the administrative machine to direct the economy according to the principles of liberty until the economic actors understood their true interest and learned to be free—a paradox of liberalism that proved to be long lasting.³²

While Gournay did possess a critical attitude toward the shortcomings of ministerial bureaus and the intendants of the provinces—the undue influence of the principal clerks, the

²⁷ Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), 2: 587–88.

²⁸ Gournay, *Remarques*, 278.

²⁹ Anthony Mergey, *L'État des physiocrates: Autorité et décentralisation* (Aix-en-Provence: PUAM, 2010).

³⁰ Philippe Minard, “Economie de marché et État en France: mythes et légendes du colbertisme,” *L'Économie politique* 37, no. 1 (2008): 77–94.

³¹ Gournay, *Remarques*, 278. Arnaud Orain, “Le *Journal oeconomique*, le cercle de Gournay et le pouvoir monarchique: Quelques preuves matérielles d'un lien organique,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 45, no. 1 (2013): 565–83.

³² Steven L. Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 228.

excessive number of staff coupled with the lack of qualified personnel, the jealous division of departments, the routine paperwork, the mediocrity of knowledge hidden behind a facade of unimpeachable formalism (as his friend Turgot put it)³³—it seems unlikely that a man of Gournay’s theoretical background and practical experience would go so far as to equate higher state administration with a “disease,” even in jest.

Perhaps the bureaus targeted by Gournay’s sarcasm might be lower in the administrative hierarchy? Let us consider Gournay’s use of the word *bureau*. His correspondence and other writings show that one of his constant concerns as intendant of Commerce was to check whether the activity of this or that “control bureau of merchandise quality,” “merchants’ bureau,” “butchers’ community bureau,” and, above all, “customs bureau” was not “strangling” industry and commerce (“resserrer le commerce”³⁴). During his visits to the provinces, Gournay systematically carried out investigations to find out “what formalities were observed at the control bureau? what costs were incurred? what time was wasted? did the trade receive any benefit? if there was no benefit, what were the inconveniences? what were the clerk’s costs?”³⁵ Gournay did not always conclude that the local bureaus were useless. His daily administrative correspondence partially contradicts his statements of principle, in which he invariably vituperated regulations and controls. While he was adamant about the need to abolish customs and internal tolls, he sometimes demanded compliance with existing manufacturing regulations and even asked for the drafting of new ones, and he welcomed the opening of new quality

³³ Quoted in Frédéric Garrigues, “Les intendants du commerce au XVIII^e siècle,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 45, no. 3 (1998): 626.

³⁴ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 76.

³⁵ “Mémoire sur les demandes de Monsieur de Gournay, intendant du commerce,” in *Le cercle de Vincent de Gournay*, 309; see also a questionnaire from Gournay about the Silesian cloth factory (26 Dec. 1752) in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 185–86; Gournay, “Mémoire sans titre, portant des questions diverses sur le commerce,” in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 108–10.

control bureaus for manufactured goods.³⁶ But, overall, concern about the “countless formalities to which we have subjected authorized and legitimate trade,”³⁷ imposed with or without reason by a growing multitude of bureaus, recurs in his writings with an almost obsessive regularity and intensity.

Before becoming a senior state administrator, Gournay had been a merchant for more than twenty years and had experienced all the joys of daily contact with quality control and customs bureaus armed with a plethora of state regulations. He knew how “harmful formalities” were enforced by tax and duty collectors, quality and transportation controllers, labor and trade inspectors—those countless “tasters,” “measurers,” “gaugers,” “loticians,” “visitors,” “taxers,” “auctioneers,” “weighers,” and so forth. All these “clerks and employees,” as Gournay politely called them, came into daily and often brutal contact with every trader, merchant, craftsman, manufacturer, and even with every customer and consumer. They went so far as to tear off women’s dresses in the middle of the street under the pretext that they were made of smuggled fabrics, the famous “painted cloths” that Gournay wanted to be allowed to be imported freely.³⁸ Many of the state agents were recruited from among poor demobilized soldiers, left by the king to live off the by-products of his tax activity. Still more numerous and hated were the agents of the Farm (*Fermes générales des impôts*), a private tax-collecting company, whose action produced immense resentment in the general population and was by far the most important cause of revolts since the seventeenth century and until the Revolution.³⁹ Thus, there is every reason to

³⁶ Letters from Gournay to Aubry, inspector of factories in Tour, 4 May 1751; to Brunet, manufacturer in Alençon, 8 June 1751; to Lemarchant, inspector of factories in Lyon, 22 Dec. 1752, in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 139–40, 143, 183–84.

³⁷ Gournay, “Réflexions sur la contrebande,” in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 52.

³⁸ HFPF, 2: 306–7, 264–66.

³⁹ Jean Nicolas, *La rébellion française: Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale 1661–1789* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

think that Gournay's *bureaucratie* may have been coined as a tongue-in-cheek term summarizing the multiple problems posed to the economic-liberalism agenda by the activities of this army of state and private administrative flunkeys.

An untitled memoir on the “two classes of men,” written by Gournay in 1753, reinforces this interpretation.⁴⁰ Gournay estimated that there were 2,750,000 people in France living at the expense of the “nation.” The group of “58 thousand clerks [*commis*] spread throughout the Kingdom,” although numerically negligible next to monks and beggars, nevertheless occupied a visible place in the hierarchy of “idlers” in France. The financial weight of the clerks was even more important than their demographic weight. Gournay estimated their total annual salary at 34,800,000 *livres*: the clerks cost the nation almost as much as the two hundred thousand soldiers. In addition, there were forty thousand “men for justice with bailiffs, sergeants, etc., who cost the nation in court fees, etc., at least 20 million *livres* a year.” While recognizing the usefulness of “persons who apply themselves to the study of the laws and the administration of justice,” as well as the fact that these persons “must necessarily be maintained at the expense of the nation,” Gournay wanted to “make it clear that the professions of ploughman, sailor, worker, and merchant must be encouraged and the others restricted so as to prevent them from expanding beyond what is necessary.” Above all, the proportion between the “laborious and active part” and the “idle part of the nation” was less favorable in France than in England and Germany (“our most powerful neighbors”), and the situation continued to deteriorate. Gournay was convinced that “in 1685 there were not half as many clerks and employees as there are today.” To reverse this dangerous trend, “it is necessary to ensure that people find it more attractive to cultivate [the land] than to become clerks, lackeys or beggars.” In France, however, this was not the case, as

⁴⁰ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 63–89. All quotes in this paragraph come from this text.

Gournay observed: “Our mores make us regard as ignoble anything that tends to preserve our property. The English want witnesses to have property in the form of land; to be a member of parliament, one must have land. Here, one disposes of one’s land in order to acquire an office.” The result is felt in all areas of industry: “If the English have three times as many ships as we do, we have at least four times as many clerks as they do for the service of our navy, and therefore less profit and more expense.”

Thus, it seems that Gournay’s life experience and his theoretical convictions led him to believe that the *mania* of the French monarchy for multiplying clerks and bureaus—shared by the merchant communities, and the artisans’ guilds, and, most of all, the tax Farm—eventually led to a paradox, an irony of fate, when real power (*cratos*), without losing its hold on social and economic processes, slipped out of the hands of the great, only to become scattered and misused by the humble. Commerce was paralyzed by the *κράτος* of innumerable local bureaus filled with petty clerks who should have been ploughmen and artisans. Gournay’s *bureaucratie* was not situated at the level of ministerial bureaus, nor even at the middle one occupied by the thirty-two provincial intendants with their ninety clerks and 120 subdelegates,⁴¹ but at the bottom level of the administration, where the tens of thousands of microscopic tentacles swarmed, by which the state “strangled commerce,” sometimes voluntarily but often in spite of itself.

V. FROM ARCHOMANIA TO BUREAUMANIE: THE DISCURSIVE CONTEXT

J. G. A. Pocock has demonstrated that, in political argument, “One of the primary contexts in which an act of utterance is performed is that furnished by the institutionalized mode of speech

⁴¹ HFPPF, 2: 266–70.

which makes it possible. For anything to be said or written or printed, there must be a language to say it in.”⁴² And for a neologism to be understood according to its inventor’s intention, it should bear marks of recognition that would allow its absorption into an existing political language. I have suggested that Gournay’s neologisms *bureaucratie* and *bureaumanie* were sarcasm directed against excessive regulation and against petty clerks of the king and the tax Farm, that “strangled” French industry and commerce. If that is the case, we should be able to find a political language in which such a meaning could have been conceived and received.

Unlike the word *bureau*, the words *manie* and *κράτος* had meaning in a wide range of argumentative contexts. At least since Henry III, madness and mania were among the typical tropes of anti-office discourse.⁴³ When, in the treatise *Du droit des offices* (1610), Charles Loyseau criticized “the immoderate desire for offices,” specific of the French nation, he knew that he was uttering a commonplace and felt the need to revive the discourse with a neologism of his making:

It therefore remains to draw the conclusion that it is ambition alone which has gained a stronger foothold in our nation than in any other, and even more so in our age than before. It is a *cachoètes*, and a bad disposition of moods, or rather of mores, which holds us: it is like a kind of mania which agitates us, for the word ambition is now too mild, although it was invented on purpose by the Romans to signify the immoderate desire for offices; we must forge another for us and call it Archomania: fury of offices.⁴⁴

⁴² Pocock, “The Concept of a Language,” 20.

⁴³ Jean Nagle, *Un orgueil français: La vénalité des offices sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), 27.

⁴⁴ Charles Loyseau, *Cinq livres du droit des offices* (Chateaudun: pour Abel L’Angelier, 1610), 290: “Reste donc de conclure que c’est la seule ambition, qui a pris plus de pied en nostre nation qu’en nulle autre, et plus encore en

Loyseau's neologism was soon forgotten. Though the treatise had remained a legal classic throughout the seventeenth century, it seems to have fallen out of fashion in the following century. Gournay had no edition of Loyseau in his personal library, so it is impossible to affirm that Loyseau's *archomania* became a model for Gournay's *bureaumanie* and *bureaucratie*. But the coincidence is striking and suggests a thread to be followed.

It is curious that the word *bureaucracy* owes its birth to a liberal economist and not to a jurist like Loyseau, a political philosopher like Montesquieu, or an administrative theorist, such as Jeremy Bentham or J. H. G. von Justi.⁴⁵ Did it happen by chance, or did there exist a relationship between the doctrine of economic liberalism and the traditional French anti-office discourse? The doctrine of political economy promoted by Gournay and his intellectual circle was an outgrowth of a trend in economic thought in the first half of the eighteenth century, of which Boisguilbert and Jean-François Melon were fundamental French references.⁴⁶ However, it should be remembered that another reference—the great Colbert—remained important for Gournay, as well as for the closest of his collaborators, Véron de Forbonnais.⁴⁷ They were well aware of Colbert's motto "liberty is the soul of commerce," and they did not fall victim to the easy analytical shortcut that later led to a caricature of Colbert's "dirigisme."⁴⁸ And it is in the Colbert legacy that we find a missing link allowing us to connect the strictly economic part of

notre âge qu'auparavant. C'est un cachoëtes, et une mauvaise disposition d'humeurs, ou plutôt de mœurs qui nous tient: c'est comme une espèce de manie qui nous agite, car le mot d'ambition est désormais trop doux, bien qu'inventé exprès par les Romains pour signifier le désir immodéré des offices; il en faut forger un autre pour nous et l'appeler archomanie: fureur d'offices."

⁴⁵ L. J. Hume, *Bentham and Bureaucracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); H. C. Johnson, "The Concept of Bureaucracy in Cameralism," *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1964), 378–402.

⁴⁶ Meyssonier, *La balance et l'horloge*, 19–160; Steven Kaplan, Sophus Reinert, "The Economic Turn in Enlightenment Europe," in *The Economic Turn*, 1–34.

⁴⁷ According to the catalogue of his personal library, Gournay possessed a large manuscript collection of Colbert's writings, as well as his *Testament politique*, see Meyssonier, *La Genèse*, Annex 9, 35–36.

⁴⁸ Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: État et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

Gournay's doctrine and his concern with the proliferation of tax collecting and customs bureaus in France.

As shown above, Gournay argued that the enormous staff of petty clerks who “strangled” French commerce would have been more useful as “ploughmen and artisans”—professions whose work was the only source of wealth in a country like France where “we do not find gold and silver as the Spaniards by digging the earth.”⁴⁹ The discourse linking and opposing productive labor to administrative jobs was an old one. Richelieu thought that “if one could enter office without money, commerce would be abandoned by many people who, dazzled by the splendor of dignities, would rather be inclined to the offices and to their ruin than to the traffic that makes families abundant.”⁵⁰ The same idea is found in Colbert's didactic preamble to an edict of 1667 aimed at abolishing a local court at Marennes. Colbert castigated a pernicious tendency widespread among artisans, merchants, and sailors who, driven by vanity, preferred to buy a small and often useless office to the exercise of their socially less prestigious trades: “the more officers there are in our Kingdom, the more obstacles we find to the intentions we have for the re-establishment of trade.” There used to be many good pilots in the region (the text continues), and good sailors, but there are almost none left, “because the most well-off have assumed higher offices, and the others have become clerks, procurators, notaries or sergeants.”⁵¹

French society became hostile to the multiplication of venal offices as early as in the sixteenth century, and anti-office discourse continued to be highly popular well into the eighteenth century. Several argumentative contexts coexisted, each having its particular

⁴⁹ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 56–58.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Nagle, *Un orgueil français*, 27: “si l'on pouvait entrer aux charges sans argent, le commerce se trouveroit abandonné de beaucoup de gens qui, éblouis de la splendeur des dignités, courroient plustost aux offices et à leur ruine tout ensemble qu'ils ne se porteraient au trafic qui rend les familles abondantes.”

⁵¹ Quoted in Nagle, *Un orgueil français*, 27–28: “plus il y a d'officiers en nostre Royaume, plus nous trouvons d'obstacles aux intentions que nous avons pour le rétablissement du commerce. [. . .] parce que les plus accomodez se sont fait revestir des premières charges, et que les autres se sont fait greffiers, procureurs, notaires ou sergents.”

rhetoric.⁵² Awareness of the risks to “freedom” and corporate privileges in the face of advancing royal authority was expressed in terms of protest against the intrusive omnipresence of the *officiers*. The feeling that officers’ wages were a burden on public finances took the form of calls for a return to the good old days. Criticism of the monarchy’s financial opportunism in putting new offices for sale used the language of the pamphlet on the creation of superfluous venal offices. Charles Loyseau drew up a comprehensive indictment of the ambition that made the office preferable to “other exercises”: “And soon in the cities every good man will have his office” and indulge in “honest idleness,” the jurist lamented.⁵³ Colbert seized upon this traditional discourse, which was highly popular in various social and intellectual circles, and converted it into a tool of his new economic policy by pretending that the harmful consequences of the nation’s well-known passion for offices went so far as to harm the industry and commerce of the entire state. Gournay did not invent the connection between the language of politics and that of economics but exploited an already established authoritative institutionalized mode of speech familiar to governing circles.

Gournay’s disciple Véron de Forbonnais followed the argumentative strategy of his mentor. In his first treatise, *Considérations sur les finances d’Espagne*, written in 1753, Forbonnais did not yet mention the office as one of the causes of “the Republic’s lack of industrious men for all the most necessary jobs in society.” Idleness, synonymous with vagrancy, appeared as the sole result of the impoverishment caused by an excessive tax burden.⁵⁴ But by turning to the study of French history in 1754, Forbonnais became sensitive to anti-office

⁵² Nagle, *Un orgueil français*, 24–26.

⁵³ Loyseau, *Du droit des offices*, 290: “Et tantost dans les villes chaque honneste homme a son office.”

⁵⁴ François Véron de Forbonnais, *Considérations sur les finances d’Espagne*. Seconde édition, augmentée de *Réflexions sur la nécessité de comprendre l’étude du commerce et des finances dans celle de la politique* (Dresde, 1755), 131.

discourse. In a fundamental work, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France depuis l'année 1595 jusqu'à l'année 1721* (published in 1758), Forbonnais referred to the authority of Colbert to criticize men “provided with useless offices, like heads of families maintained by the State in idleness at the expense of other subjects.”⁵⁵ He radicalized Colbert’s discourse to elaborate an economic theory of the office as “a way authorized by the Prince to live in idleness, or to exercise vexations on Commerce and on the People.”⁵⁶ Alongside the involuntary idleness induced by impoverishment, the office was presented by him as one of the main causes of the “decrease in the number of workers, and the kind of shame spread over labor.”⁵⁷ Though Forbonnais recognized that it was impossible to completely dispense with agents for administration and justice, he insisted that “the Police of the State is interested in all respects that the charges and offices be in the closest proportion to what is necessary.”⁵⁸

In substance, Forbonnais was following closely the ideas that Gournay had expressed shortly before him. But, regarding the form, it is striking that the terms *office* and *officier*, abundantly used by Forbonnais, are absent from Gournay’s language. And, vice versa, the words clerk and employee (*commis et employés*), and bureau, normal for Gournay, are absent from Forbonnais’s vocabulary. The similarity in content coupled with the difference in language is particularly noticeable in the memoir on the “two classes of men” analyzed above. In his other writings, too, Gournay dispensed with the word office, except to offer his “good offices,” and used the word *officier* only for military and police officers. Although Gournay was well aware of

⁵⁵ François Véron de Forbonnais, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France depuis l'année 1595 jusqu'à l'année 1721*, 2 vols. (Basle, 1758), 1: 328: “les hommes pourvus de charges inutiles, comme autant de chefs de famille entretenus par l’État dans l’oisiveté aux dépens des autres sujets.”

⁵⁶ Forbonnais, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France*, 1: 131: “une manière autorisée par le Prince de vivre dans l’oisiveté ou d’exercer des vexations sur le Commerce et sur le Peuple.”

⁵⁷ Forbonnais, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France*, 1: 21: “diminution du nombre des travailleurs, et l’espèce de honte répandue sur le travail.”

⁵⁸ Forbonnais, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France*, 1: 22: “la Police de l’État est intéressée à tous égards à ce que les charges et offices soient dans la proportion la plus approchante du nécessaire.”

the legal and financial particularity of the venal office,⁵⁹ his language did not reflect the difference of status between an *officier* and an agent who was not an *officier*, as if this difference no longer counted for much. He referred to the agents of justice, of the state administration, and of the tax Farm without distinction as men for justice, clerks, and employees. Gournay preferred the word *charge* even in contexts where the word *office* would have been more appropriate (“to buy a charge,” “my charge of intendant of Commerce,” “the price of my charge,” “to reimburse a part of the charges” sold by the Crown).⁶⁰

This feature of Gournay’s language corresponds to a fundamental trend in the evolution of administrative personnel from the 1630s onwards, which is well known to historians. The government was less motivated to create and sell offices because the king’s income did not depend on them as much as it had in the past: “the office was replaced by the tax as a source of money.”⁶¹ Under the influence of the needs of war, the old corporations of *officiers* were duplicated by new administrative structures whose members had a different legal status from that of the office. The civil administrations for the control of the army and the navy; the civil administrations for military support and supply; and last but not least, the already mentioned privately managed tax administration, the Farm—all these services were created outside the traditional juridical framework of the office. The existing *officiers* remained, but they had been largely excluded from the new collection and expenditure circuits. Born in 1712, Gournay lived during the decisive phase of the social regression of the office.

In the process, the word *bureau* gained visibility and substance at the expense of the word *office*. During the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries, the *officier*, owner of his office, held a

⁵⁹ See his *État de ce qu’il en a coûté pour être intendant du commerce*, a note attached to his letter of resignation (1758) in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 136–37.

⁶⁰ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 32, 134–35, 136, 137, 161; Gournay, *Remarques*, 229.

⁶¹ HFPP, 2: 258–73.

lifetime title, often hereditary. Individually or collectively, the officers represented the king, and this dignity allowed them to fulfill their functions. They embodied what we are used to thinking of as abstract legislative, judicial, and administrative institutions: councils, parliaments, courts, chambers, and also numerous bureaus.⁶² In the seventeenth century, a *bureau* had nothing abstract or impersonal about it; it existed because a certain *officier* exercised his charge there, for as long as he exercised it, and in the place where he happened to be exercising it. In the case of the new types of administration listed above, however, the logic became different. For the new varieties of state or tax Farm agents—directors, inspectors, engineers, subdelegates, principal clerks, senior clerks, clerks, sub-clerks, scribes, etc., who did not possess their office—it was the function performed that gave them dignity and not the other way round. It was no longer the king’s agent who “made” a bureau; it was increasingly the bureau that “made” an agent. In the old anti-office discourse, the word *office* had dominated because the word *bureau* had no political substance. But by the end of the seventeenth century, *officier* in everyday language no longer meant anything but a military officer. And the anti-office discourse was evolving toward anti-bureau discourse. The evolution of language was noticeable in the theatre of the time, when the traditional aristocratically inspired satire against new nobles adapted its vocabulary, abandoning *office* and *officier* for *bureau*:

The Marquis

Is it this financier of minor nobility,

Who has recently become a gentleman in an hour;

Who built a palace on which they wrote,

⁶² Jacques Krynen, *L'idéologie de la magistrature ancienne* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2009), 62–78.

In a great black marble, in gold, the Damis hotel;
 He who once saw printed on his door,
 Bureau of the forked foot, salty flesh and dead flesh.⁶³

Bureau of the forked foot (*bureau du pied-fourché*) referred to a tax of the same name, an aid tax on meat, levied like all aids by the agents of the Farm.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, in the words of Jean Nagle, “it is the *Fermes Générales* that often represent the State most widely in everyday life. It is on their representatives, from the farmer general to the *rat-de-cave* and the *gabelou*, that hostility is focused. Hatred was transferred from the finance *officiers* to the employees of the *Fermes Générales*.”⁶⁴ Historians pinpoint the moment of definitive change in public perception in the 1740s.⁶⁵ On either side of this temporal threshold, Gournay and Forbonnais had divided the task: Forbonnais described the historical state of France up to 1721, when the *office* had still been a dominant reality, while Gournay in his ministerial memoirs analyzed the situation in its current state, where the weight of the problem had shifted from the legal framework of the *office* to the function, *charge*. Forbonnais succeeded in recovering almost the entire anti-office rhetoric accumulated over two hundred years and recasting it as part of the discourse of economic

⁶³ Jean-François Regnard, *Le Joueur* (1696), *Théâtre français*, dir. Sabine Chaouche, 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2015), 1:47, translation mine:

Le marquis
 Est-ce ce financier de noblesse mineure,
 Qui s'est fait depuis peu gentilhomme en une heure;
 Qui bâtit un palais sur lequel on a mis
 Dans un grand marbre noir, en or, l'hôtel Damis;
 Lui qui voyait jadis imprimé sur sa porte,
 Bureau du pied-fourché, chair salée et chair morte?

⁶⁴ HFPPF, 2: 266.

⁶⁵ Nagle, *Un orgueil français*, 27.

liberalism.⁶⁶ Gournay, on the contrary, abandoned the key words of the old anti-office discourse, which started to seem antiquated, for the description of the contemporary reality. He replaced them, in the formal register, by the words *charge*, *bureau*, *clerk*, *employee*, and in the informal register—by *bureaumanie* and *bureaucratie*.

VI. AN INNOVATING IDEOLOGIST: THE ARGUMENTATIVE CONTEXT

For a man of Gournay's generation, the elements *-manie* (disease) and *-cratie* could perhaps potentially refer to Charles Loyseau and Aristotle, but the immediate association, in the context of the 1750s, in Paris, was obviously with Montesquieu. Disease was a key Montesquieuan word, very significant for economic liberalism. The disease metaphor occurs in *De l'esprit des lois* only once (book 13, chapter 17). Like a bookmark, it flags the book on taxation and, within that book, the chapter where the author pointed to the unconditional link between war, finance, and trade. The "disease" of "increasing troops" causes "the permanent increase in taxes," "and soon, as a result of these soldiers, we shall have nothing but soldiers," Montesquieu worried. From Gournay's point of view, it was not only the increase in soldiers that was problematic; the proliferation of bureaus also followed the growth curve of "extraordinary means" of taxation. Thus, for Gournay reading Montesquieu, *bureaumanie* was a disease caused and maintained by the disease of the increase of troops, and both diseases cancelled out the benefits of commerce ("we are poor with the wealth and commerce of the whole universe," concluded Montesquieu).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Forbonnais, *Recherches et considérations sur les finances de France*, 2:81–82.

⁶⁷ Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 224–25; Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:470.

The philosopher also pointed out that the passion that “made our princes keep an inordinate number of troops” was “necessarily contagious” and that it affected all the countries of Europe. In other words, no form of government was immune to it. Therefore, the Montesquian reference did not suggest to a proponent of the ideology of economic liberalism that *bureaucratie* and *bureaumanie* could mean a form of government. In the context of *political* philosophy of his time, Gournay’s neologisms would have been understood in a rather narrow technical sense, as a pathological side effect of the general European phenomenon of increasing military expenditure.

In the context of *economic* philosophy, though, Gournay’s neologisms evoked other associations—regulation and control, taxes and fines, customs clerks and tax collectors. It is important to note that Gournay, unlike later writers, never mentioned the theme of employee corruption in his writings, although he must have been aware of this problem. His criticism focused on abusive regulation rather than on the abuses of the employees who had to apply it. His aim was to make the king’s ministers realize that regulations consisting of hundreds of articles and set up as “fixed, invincible laws” were “opposed to the spirit of commerce,” and to persuade the government to abandon them. Gournay believed that the supervision of the economy through regulations, controls, and fines expanded after Colbert’s death beyond what the minister himself had foreseen and desired.⁶⁸ He considered that the state was putting too much effort into protecting the consumer, as the “public must know best what suits them.”⁶⁹ The excessive number of clerks was an unintended consequence of the increase in “regulations made over the last 50 years concerning the manufacture of goods” in order “to prevent the public from being deceived.”⁷⁰ In Gournay’s view, this regulatory mindset was the systemic problem, while

⁶⁸ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 38, 70, 83.

⁶⁹ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 78.

⁷⁰ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 77.

the abuse of employee power was a secondary consequence that would disappear if the problem were addressed. Removing “harmful” regulations and formalities that “tend to strangle trade” would kill two birds with one stone, as their removal would reduce the number of clerks and convert them from “idle people” to “people who work to produce” and thus “make the State rich.”⁷¹

Gournay knew, though, that there existed a cultural obstacle to this social transformation: lacking respect in French society, merchants and artisans tended to buy venal offices and retire from their trade in order to enhance their social prestige, so that it was not clerks who converted to merchants but rather the other way round. The necessity of reversing this pernicious tendency was clearly expressed in one of Gournay’s most important theoretical texts, his commentaries on Josiah Child’s *A New Discourse of Trade* (1668). Child’s work was a bible of early economic liberalism, which Gournay translated from English in 1752–54 and published in 1754, although without his commentaries that he was not authorized to include in the publication. One commentary bears on *bureaumanie* and *bureaucratie*, though the words are paraphrased:

Nothing has contributed more to the numbing of industry than these countless charges which are the focus and object of ambition of almost the entire nation, and which cause a portion of the King’s subjects to devote themselves to idleness by purchasing these charges; for in order to possess them, one is content to put oneself in touch with a small circle of limited functions, which are repeated on certain days and during a certain number of hours; one does not extend one’s views beyond that, and one does not imagine that there is anything

⁷¹ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 76–79.

better to do; nothing has contributed more than these kinds of charges, to confine the genius and the ideas of the majority of the citizens of Paris within the limits of the gates of Paris. If we could succeed in reimbursing some of these charges, or at least in putting their titles into action and banishing the prejudice of those who hold them that they are incompatible with commerce, we would put back into the State much of the life and movement that has been taken away from it; we would give back to the nation the industry and talents of those who hold them; and those of them who would apply themselves to commerce would see that a merchant by the extent of the variety of his occupations must think and act every day and at all hours, and that the profession is so analogous to the good of the State that he never acts without doing good for someone, even when, for lack of reflection or experience, he acts to his own disadvantage.⁷²

Gournay's time was far from being one in which the medieval principle of *homo mercator vix aut numquam potest Deo placere* ("The merchant can behave without sin, but he cannot please God") reigned unchallenged in France. However, Colbertian doctrine had exalted commerce above all, but not so much the merchant. Belonging to a merchant dynasty, Gournay was firmly convinced that "those in power" retained many prejudices against merchants, and he

⁷² Gournay, *Remarques*, 229 : "Rien n'a plus contribué à engourdir l'industrie, que ces charges sans nombre qui font le point de vue et l'objet de l'ambition de presque toute la nation, et qui font qu'une partie des sujets du Roi se voue à l'oisiveté en achetant ces charges; car pour les posséder, on se contente de se mettre au fait d'un petit cercle de fonctions bornées, qui se répètent à certains jours et pendant un certain nombre d'heures; on ne porte point les vues au-delà, et on n'imagine pas qu'il y ait rien de mieux à faire; rien n'a plus contribué que ces sortes de charges, à renfermer le génie et les idées de la plupart des Parisiens dans l'étendue des barrières de Paris. Si on pouvait parvenir à rembourser une partie de ces charges, ou du moins à en mettre les titres en action et à bannir les préjugés où sont ceux qui les possèdent qu'elles sont incompatibles avec le commerce, on remettrait dans l'État bien de la vie et du mouvement qui en sont ôtés; on rendrait à la nation l'industrie et les talents de ceux qui en sont revêtus ; et ceux d'entre eux qui s'appliqueraient au commerce verraient qu'un négociant par l'étendue de la variété de ses occupations doit penser et agir tous les jours et à toutes les heures, et que la profession est si analogue au bien de l'État qu'il n'agit jamais sans faire le bien de quelqu'un, lors même que faute de réflexion ou d'expérience, il agit désavantageusement pour lui."

saw his role in the ministry as that of a broker between the business world and the government.⁷³ “In France, those who made our laws were not commercial men,”⁷⁴ Gournay observed (forgetting about Colbert’s social origins). In his eyes the reason for the proliferation of “harmful” state regulations and clerks was, in the final analysis, the contempt and distrust of merchants on the part of the rulers. Gournay’s general aim therefore went far beyond concrete measures such as the abolition of monopolies and customs. He wanted to bring about a revision of social values in France and hoped to see the day when French merchants “would no longer believe they were taking a higher estate, when they left theirs, to embrace others infinitely less related to the strength and power of the Kingdom.”⁷⁵ Gournay, then, embarked on his administrative career with a dual purpose. On a practical level, he wanted, as we know, to promote concrete measures to encourage trade. On a more general—one could say, philosophical—level, he wanted to teach the governing elites to respect the French merchant.

Gournay knew, however, that he, a merchant without a degree in law, was a black sheep in the French ministerial milieu of his time, which consisted almost entirely of jurists,⁷⁶ and that his views on merchants and commerce were heterodox. At the beginning of his career in the administration, it took him some courage to reveal them.⁷⁷ And once revealed, many of his contemporaries regarded him as a heretic.⁷⁸ Thus, bringing these views to Versailles, Gournay should have felt he was a kind of figure that Quentin Skinner calls an “innovating ideologist.”⁷⁹

⁷³ Letter of resignation from the Bureau of Commerce, addressed to Trudaine (1758) in Gournay, *Mémoires et Lettres*, 134.

⁷⁴ Gournay, *Remarques*, 192.

⁷⁵ Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 135 : “[les négociants] ne croiraient plus prendre un état, quand on quitte celui-là, pour en embrasser d’autres infiniment moins liés à la force et à la puissance du Royaume.”

⁷⁶ Garrigues, “Les intendants du commerce,” 645–47.

⁷⁷ Letter from Gournay, 25 Sept. 1752, to the director of Commerce Daniel-Charles Trudaine in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 179.

⁷⁸ Mably, “Du commerce des grains” (1775), *Collection complète des œuvres de l’abbé de Mably* (Paris, 1794–1795), 290.

⁷⁹ Skinner, “Moral Principles and Social Change,” 145–57.

An avid reader of the economic works of seventeenth-century English writers, Gournay knew that merchants in that country, as in France, had also suffered from a negative prejudice in the past. He would have recognized himself in the image of a man like Sir Lewes Roberts who, having preferred a career in commerce to studying law, had struggled to prove that “much more honor and respect are due to merchants than they ever receive.”⁸⁰ But England, Gournay saw, had overcome this prejudice, and if its trade gained an ascendancy over that of France, it was partly because of this.⁸¹ For Gournay, invoking the authority of English innovators, his predecessors in the ideological work of enhancing the merchant state, who had the advantage of having long since succeeded in overturning opinion in their own country, was a means of self-legitimization. Denying the novelty of his own views,⁸² though they were actually new in France, reveals the presence of an argumentative strategy that aimed at legitimizing a certain form of social behavior generally considered objectionable.

VII. CONCLUSION: *BUREAUCRATIE* AND ECONOMIC LIBERALISM

Rereading Gournay’s writings in light of Skinner’s analysis of moral principles and social change leads to a better understanding of the place that the critique of *bureaumanie-bureaucratie* occupied in Gournay’s overall ideological project. The “clerks and employees,” subordinate technical executors targeted by Gournay’s *bureaucratie*, did not rule, or govern, of course. But their considerable demographic and financial weight pressed on the national economy, as their sometimes greedy and brutal behavior destabilized it, and it was in this passive influence that

⁸⁰ Lewes Roberts, quoted by Skinner, “Moral Principles and Social Change,” 147.

⁸¹ Letter from Gournay to Trudaine, 15 March 1754 in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 216.

⁸² Letter from Gournay to Trudaine, 1758, in Gournay, *Mémoires et lettres*, 134.

their power consisted. Like soldiers, clerks did not command force, but they were force. Thus, *bureaucratie* in Gournay's language was a banal old complaint against the *officier*, the tax collector, and the customs clerk, rejuvenated by placing it inside an innovative context of liberal political economy. By pitting two apparently incompatible elements against each other (bureaus populated by vile little clerks armed with regulations, and the notion of *κράτος* with its train of sublime mythological and political associations) the word *bureaucratie* acquired a formidable sarcastic force that neither *archomania* nor *bureaumanie* possessed, and it became immortal.

So, what did Gournay intend when he invented the word *bureaucracy*? In Gournay's rhetorical strategy of legitimizing the merchant state, the neologism *bureaucracy*, which he used orally when speaking to insiders, functioned as an evaluative-descriptive term (in Skinner's terminology⁸³), or a buzzword in our current jargon. The image of small "clerks and employees" performing narrow and repetitive functions, languishing all their lives in "some bureau," holding back industry and commerce both by their restrictive and punitive functions and by their demographic and financial weight, highlighted, by way of contrast, the virtuous merchant profession, which lacked consideration in French society. The invention of *bureaucracy* by a French merchant-economist in the 1750s was anything but accidental, and the origin of the word should be seen as an integral part of the early history of liberal economic doctrine.

Grimm, who used to meet Gournay in Parisian salons in the late 1750s, and actually heard him use these neologisms, knew that they were rooted in economic thought. That is why he remembered them precisely on July 1, 1764, in the moment when one of Gournay's most cherished ideas, the liberalization of the French grain commerce, started to be realized by the government after years of debate and hesitation. After that, the word *bureaucracy* vanished for

⁸³ Skinner, "Moral Principles and Social Change," 148.

several years, only to reappear in the 1770s, in a rather different social milieu and in a different argumentative context. But this is another story, one that belongs to the history of the French Revolution, and which remains to be reconstructed.

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