

**Élise Pavy-Guilbert, Françoise Poulet (dir.), *Contre le luxe (XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris (Classiques Garnier) 2021, 534 p., ISBN 978-2-406-10503-9, EUR 59,00.**

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This is a large collection, made up of twenty-six chapters by the same number of authors. It deals with criticism of luxury, rather than luxury itself, and it is this critical perspective that gives the collection its unity and interest. With only a few exceptions (chapters on Italian reformers by Gérard Vittori; on funeral pomp in the Habsburg monarchy by Philippine Dauga-Casarotto; and on Benjamin Franklin and physiocracy by Manuela Albertone), its focus is largely French, not only because most of the contributors work in French academic institutions and were involved in the conference in Bordeaux on which the collection is based, but also – and more saliently – because the subject of luxury came, in the eighteenth century, to be given a range of strongly French connotations that, somewhat surprisingly, it has never entirely lost. Inequality might well be global, but luxury still seems to be more French than Scottish, Swiss, German or American, despite comparable measures of inequality or comparable symbols of excess. One possibility, which gives this collection its coherence, is that the association between luxury and France owed more to its critics than to its apologists and, concurrently, more to the resulting uncertainty over whether the target of criticism was luxury or France, or both.

One possible explanation of the overlap is the association between France and Rome that was established in the second half of the seventeenth century by the parallel between the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the reign of Augustus Caesar in ancient times and the end of the period of the Fronde and the beginning of the reign of Louis XIV in modern times. A second explanation is the further parallel that could be drawn between the decline and fall of imperial Rome and its possible future equivalent in the modern French monarchy towards the end of Louis XIV's long reign. Both parallels helped to add a more causal and systemic quality to the earlier, more personal, moral and behavioural connotations of the word *luxe* or »luxury« that, as Patrick Dandrey, Yves Vargas, Myriam Tsimbidy and, notably, Camille Venner show in their respective contributions to the collection, was still usual in the late seventeenth century. Both parallels were also central to the eighteenth century's most famous indictment of luxury, published in full as »Les aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse« at the time of Louis XIV's death in 1715 by François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai.

Fénelon figures prominently in this collection where his critical comments on luxury have been well described by Olivier Leplatre, Colas Duflo and Magali Fournaud. It is regrettable, however,



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that none of the contributors to the collection appear to have known of Istvan Hont's discovery of a possible connection between Fénelon's late-seventeenth-century poem, »Les abeilles«, and the better-known »Fable of the Bees« by Bernard Mandeville, nor seem to have been familiar with Hont's concise but wide-ranging examination of the early-eighteenth-century debate on luxury that was published nearly two decades ago in the »Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought«. The bridge between Fénelon and Mandeville that Hont suggested, and the idea that the »Fable of the Bees« began as one of a number of English language replies to Fénelon, amounts to a framework that lends itself well to the growing range of topics and subtopics that came to be covered in the Europe-wide luxury debate. Both the chronology and the range of subjects with which the Fénelon-Mandeville pairing came to be associated – from the Jacobite alternative to the Anglo-Dutch monarchy in the first half of the eighteenth century to the physiocratic alternative to the modern French monarchy in the second half of the eighteenth century – make it possible to establish a fuller and clearer range of explanations of why so many of the various connotations of luxury, from its many putative causes to its many possible consequences, came initially from its critics rather than its apologists.

As Stéphane Pujol shows in his well-crafted chapter on Diderot and his »Satire against Luxury in the Manner of Perseus« (helpfully reprinted as an appendix to the chapter), criticism of luxury had a well-established ancient pedigree, symbolised not only by the figures of Cato or Brutus in the Roman Republic, but also by the ancient Greek Cynics, typified notably by the story of the Cynic philosopher Diogenes trampling Plato's purple carpets under his bare, muddy feet. In this respect, Christian hostility to luxury was often the channel that brought back ancient criticism of luxury into the modern world. Here too, as with the otherwise interesting chapters by Ourida Mostefai and Laurence Mall on, respectively, Rousseau and luxury, and on the dramatist and self-styled progenitor of the *sans-culottes* during the period of the French Revolution, Louis-Sebastien Mercier, more could have been said about the moral and political consequences of this type of criticism of luxury and, too, on its bearing on the question of why the subject of luxury came to lose much of its earlier moral and political charge despite the fact that the range of subjects with which luxury was associated – from inequality to injustice and from centralisation to empire – still continue to have powerful and divisive moral connotations. As this absorbing and wide-ranging collection helps to show, the subject of luxury might well have gone away, but in other guises it could still be very much alive.



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