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One of the most prominent and geographically widespread phenomena in the eighteenth century was the rise of societies that aimed at improving the economic basis of European states. Traces of this development were left in a wide variety of contemporary sources. These societies called themselves improving societies, patriotic societies, agricultural societies and economic societies, among other labels that were used. Not only did these institutions differ semantically, their characters, self-declared missions and attributed functions were shaped by local and national political and socio-economic history. Given this variety, how and why would one attempt to treat these economic societies in a unified way?

A direct reason for doing so lies in restoring historical accuracy. So far, economic societies have been studied almost exclusively from nationally delineated perspectives, but this is not quite how their functions were perceived at the time. The writings and activities by the most celebrated figures in the international network that connected such societies like Arthur Young – who became an honorary member of a number of economic societies, from St Petersburg to Philadelphia and Stockholm to Florence – provide a fascinating insight. Young was himself a practising experimental farmer, whose published observations on husbandry methods, travel notes from journeys in Great Britain and Ireland, France and Italy, and political pamphlets, form a window on the perceived importance of agricultural development in the eighteenth-century social, economic and political landscape. More than that, Young developed an encompassing vision of the various entwined eighteenth-century crises he learned about throughout Europe. Through his outlook on the importance of agricultural development as a central element in his political vision, comprising reflections on the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence, the
Koen Stapelbroek and Jani Marjanen

state debts of France and Britain, patriotism, colonialism and the rise of statistics, one gets a sense of the complex of factors that played a part in the international proliferation of economic societies.\(^1\)

To what degree agricultural development and its promotion by voluntary associations formed an effective response to the socio-economic and political conditions of eighteenth-century Europe was subject to debate. ‘Agromania’ was the term for the phenomenon coined by Voltaire, who noticed that aristocratic improvement ideals often fell dead on peasant farmers’ ears.\(^2\) Ridicule befell the 2nd Viscount Charles Townshend, whose idealism earned him the nickname ‘Turnip’, conferred to him by Alexander Pope.\(^3\) If these sceptical remarks were directed at the mythical, pastoral and moralising romanticism that accompanied this movement, its principles were grounded on thoroughgoing analyses of the social and economic history of Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire and connected to the main political reform debates on international trade and the balance of power. Agricultural development across Europe was seen by a number of political writers as a requirement for pacifying international relations and the trade competition that turned eighteenth-century European rivalry into a global battlefield. As such, economic societies were local instruments that served a patriotic function in concrete state development inspired by an idea of the future of the interstate system.\(^4\) It would however be a mistake to see economic societies as politically motivated institutions. In most cases their agency and statutory structures revolved around notions of ‘improvement’ whose formulation bore no resemblance to the traditional power-related


and controlling objectives of the state. To better understand the manner in which economic societies tended to operate independently from hierarchical political reasoning – which has been likened to an early form of popular political representation – we need to go back to the membership facts, techniques of data collection and grass-roots activities initiated by the range of eighteenth-century economic societies.

This volume brings together a series of studies on the most influential eighteenth-century societies and contributes to the reconstruction of the emergence, visions and impact of economic societies as witnessed by contemporaries. Read in conjunction, the chapters reveal common patterns in political discourses, organisational and associational characteristics and actual activities – like prize essay contests and networking methods to gather and disseminate practical farming knowledge. At the same time, the contributions shed light on how societies responded to similar questions of political economy that manifested themselves under different local circumstances. Free associations of patriotic citizens who aimed to develop the basic agricultural foundations of the economy took on different forms, following alternative civic traditions. Thriving on newly emerged communication modes, economic societies and their networks became carriers of, and active contributors to, the development of combined theoretical and practical outlooks on how to reform the European (or rather global) interstate system of economic competition and cooperation.

The volume loosely charts the process whereby this movement took shape, starting from the genesis of the Scottish and Irish early societies of the 1720s and 1730s. The successes of modernised Scottish and Irish agriculture and industry (those parts allowed to develop by the English political core of the Empire) were quickly noticed by merchants and writer politicians in other parts of Europe as well as in newly independent America and sparked a desire for emulation, notably also in not fully sovereign or economically dependent states such as Austrian Lombardy, Austrian Tuscany, the Dutch province of Zeeland, the Swiss Canton of Berne, Finland within the Swedish realm, and Norway as part of the Danish composite state – not to mention colonial territories. Soon, what was a British peripheral phenomenon turned into an associational movement that spread across the world and continued to have an impact on national socio-economic and political dynamics until deep into the nineteenth century. Grounded on a common awareness – even if political interpretations differed – of the relations between both the eighteenth-century agricultural subsistence crises and economic warfare that swept through Europe and the peculiarly inverted (trade-led rather
than agriculture-based) historical development of European states, which had previously inspired colonial ventures, economic reformers often were self-declared patriots. Moreover, they shared an implicit agenda that without being over(t)ly politically laden connected to the core of Enlightenment political economy.

The chapters in the volume consider variations among different economic societies in terms of geographic delimitations, political and economic ambitions and definitions of patriotic and economic activity, in order to grasp their historical stature. The aim is not to come to a comprehensive definition of ‘economic societies’, but to use the deployment of similar concepts and rhetoric by members in different national contexts as a starting point for a comparative revaluation of the range of economic societies. Placing the societies’ experimental agriculture and patriotic zeal for including all strata of society adds depth and detail to, for instance, the more straightforward new institutional analyses of the contribution by economic societies to modernity. Precisely by not anachronistically imposing onto economic societies either social or political functions or intellectual motives that belong to later ages, the reasons for their spread and perceived significance in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe are recaptured.

The remainder of this introductory chapter brings out the range of domestic and international, political, ideological and sociological aspects that played a role in the rise of economic societies throughout Europe and indeed outside the continent. Firstly, a number of political contexts and intellectual discourses of the eighteenth century are discussed to tentatively explain why economic societies came into being. Secondly, we will inquire into the range of institutional structures, sociological backgrounds, geographical spread of membership and conceptual and symbolic representations of eighteenth-century economic societies.

**Economic development and the history of European government**

The rise of economic and patriotic societies cannot be seen independently of contemporary accounts of a set of concurrent crises experienced in the mid eighteenth century. Subsistence crises across Europe during and following the Seven Years’ War were linked not only to

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problems of agricultural productivity and the wrecking of local economies, but to a wider set of legal, political and social conditions that caused commercial competition between states to spill over into global warfare and the stagnation of international trade in peacetime. Unrest over the future of colonial possessions of Britain and France and rising state debts threatened the territorial integrity of small European states, affected the stability of dominant states and the legal principles of the European state system and Balance of Power in general. Awareness of these crises is present in the major part of eighteenth-century political thought and policy reform discussions. Likewise the rise of economic societies was related to these crises, even if their engagement with the deeper roots of the need for economic improvement was at times implicit. Consequently, rather than seeing economic societies as designed to realise a supra-historical Baconian-Promethean dream of economic science, another category of myths – about population density in antiquity, the economic development of China, the figure of a ‘Rural Socrates’ and the political Utopia of Macaria – is considered relevant for understanding economic improvement as an acronym for crisis response.

Most societies discussed in this volume were mainly concerned with issues relating to agriculture. Agriculture was an important focus, since increasing the productivity of the land represented the most direct way to counteract some of the most acute threats that eighteenth-century crises put to the lives of human beings. Agricultural improvement could repair the manifest inability of states to provide subsistence to its members. Yet, the status of agriculture in relation to the genres of political thought of the later eighteenth century was more profound and had widespread historical, moral, philosophical and, in the end, political connotations.

Among the intellectual reference points in eighteenth-century texts pointing to the need for agricultural improvement are the Enlightened

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6 Hont, Jealousy of Trade.
8 In the Dutch case this concern related to the price of grain imports, see Stapelbroek’s chapter.
histories of humankind that accounted for the inverted structure of European economies that had formed since the fall of the Roman Empire. By the middle of the eighteenth century European states had conquered large parts of the globe but were unable to feed their own members. How had this situation arisen? And why was it so difficult to get out of this condition? Writers formed different answers to these questions, attempting to resolve the paradox of why Europe's wealth and power were accompanied by undernourishment. In doing so a common template was to start from the fall of the Roman Empire and reconstruct how the forms of government and socio-economic customs of barbaric tribes that had invaded Europe blended with the remnants of Roman civilisation and gave rise to a kind of society whose moral tissue relied on the values of commercial exchange. Writers like Montesquieu, David Hume and Adam Smith (to name few authors whose works have remained famous) all in their own manner recreated explanations of how this historically contingent and, on a global scale, unique event was related to concepts like inequality and luxury and the concomitant development of what was seen as modern government: territorial property- and inheritance-based stately rule, mitigated by proto-representative structures. In so doing they connected the principles of statehood to those of international relations and devised political theories that fed into the older juridical genre of natural jurisprudence.9

The historicisation of eighteenth-century political theory and modern government provided a template for rival explanations of the relative underdevelopment of European agriculture and the turn to imperial conquest that European states had made. This template enabled political writers to debate the prospective effects of various economic reform strategies for European states. When Arthur Young, famously, referred to the ‘Vandals and Goths of open fields’ (in Oxfordshire) he implicitly lumped together theories of the history of modern government and agricultural underdevelopment, which in turn connected to his message that misconceived agricultural reform programmes would cause Europe to fall back into a primitive state of military despotism.10

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One of the questions that drew great attention was whether modern government, notably the idea of the monarchy contained in Montesquieu’s *Esprit des Lois*, not only was the remarkable outcome of the historical inversion of the normal development of societies, but also generated possible antidotes for its own evils. Montesquieu’s critique of empire-building to compensate for the failure of European states to maintain its own population – ‘Europe cannot be repaired in this manner’, he wrote – was mirrored by his vision that the intra- and interstate balance between the development of trade and agriculture had to be monitored through the social welfare institutions of the state.\(^\text{11}\) Montesquieu’s argument relied on the idea that whereas ancient small states needed laws to repair overpopulation, modern European states needed, and were able to put into place, laws that promoted population growth by recreating the socio-economic conditions that had been reached in late feudal times when a natural balance between urban and rural productivity and exchange occurred. The debate about population spread across Europe from Sweden to Naples and would intersect with the economic society movement. Hume’s critique of Montesquieu’s views on ancient population as unhistorical and partial to ‘zealous partizans of civil liberty’,\(^\text{12}\) was echoed by Arthur Young’s refutation of French physiocratic ideas and Richard Price’s statements about British national wealth in his *Political Arithmetick*, which was ‘Addressed to the Oeconomic societies of Europe’\(^\text{13}\).

Just how fundamental the historical inversion of the natural pattern of economic development was in theoretical terms, was a main source of contention. The relevant debate was held in terms of the development of the human mind and the passions. Could agriculture really be understood as a primitive socially innocent activity or did it require the same mental forms as the ones that dominated commercial society? And was agriculture, because of the nature of its output and the characteristics of the market for subsistence goods destined to become the Achilles heel of modernity? This moral philosophical as well as

\(^{11}\) Book 23 of Montesquieu’s *Esprit des Lois*, entitled ‘Of laws in the relation they bear to the number of inhabitants’.


\(^{13}\) Arthur Young, *Political Arithmetick. Containing observations on the present state of Great Britain; and the principles of her policy in the encouragement of agriculture* (London: 1774), 208–302, 322–31.
political economic debate, which developed through Rousseau’s legacy into a major directly political debate about inequality and revolution, also intersected with the themes addressed by economic societies. On the one hand, there was the idea – played out at various levels and associated with different reform visions – that in order to stabilise states and guarantee peace, agriculture had to be promoted and morally or institutionally sheltered in order to correct the fundamental imbalance that had crept into the development of European societies. The Swiss myth of the Rural Socrates played an important popular role as an illustration of moral and political reform theories that were at odds with, but thematically overlapped with radical cultural critique. Arthur Young, who himself published an English translation of Hirzel’s *Socrate Rustique*, in his *Political Arithmetick*, judged of the latter ideas, which circulated among European economic societies, as ‘founded upon principles extremely false’.

On the other hand, a distinction was made between agriculture ‘old’ and ‘new’. Whereas primitive agriculture had been need-based and focused on the self-subsistence of families and tribes, eighteenth-century markets and production systems for agricultural goods rapidly innovated and were virtually indistinguishable from manufacturing markets. The latter form of agriculture relied on trade for its progress and required different principles of government from primitive farming – while its exercise remained equally salutary for body and mind.

Within these debates about agriculture it was generally recognised that land was the source of all nourishment. Yet, this idea could be related to rival outlooks on luxury, inequality and the future of

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15 Henry Home Lord Kames, *The Gentleman Farmer: Being An Attempt To Improve Agriculture By Subjecting It To The Test Of Rational Principles* (London: 1776) was built on this distinction, which was clearly expressed throughout the nineteenth century, e.g. by Carlo Cattaneo, *Civilization and Democracy*, eds. Carlo G. Lacaita and Filippo Sabetti (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2006), 99.
international trade politics that further developed late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century notions about how to understand and accommodate human self-interest.\(^{16}\) Similarly, patriotism was a common feature of the identity of economic societies, yet also reflected the same variety of eighteenth-century perspectives on sociability, politics and trade, and was understood differently from context to context.\(^{17}\)

In one sense the books published about agricultural reform all adapted to local circumstances – Lord Kames’s *Gentleman farmer* for instance was concerned with Scotland and Young’s *Political Arithmetick* was supposed to convince a British audience. At the same time, internationally, the same topos recurred. The cover of this volume, portraying the French Dauphin ploughing the land, became a commonplace. It in itself referred to the frequently mentioned story in which the Chinese Emperor performed this annual ritual.\(^{18}\) Likewise, passages from classical texts about ancient agriculture were universally cited.\(^{19}\) More importantly, the explanatory categories of the history of agriculture in Europe became nearly universal: by 1790 a Sicilian Paolo Balsamo published in Arthur Young’s *Annals of Agriculture* a piece on Flemish agriculture. He also referred to the agrarian laws of Rome and the history of property laws in a manuscript entitled *Dell’agricoltura ovvero economia rurale con l’aggiunta di alcuni principii di legislazione e di economia relativi all’agricoltura ed alla ricchezza delle nazioni*, in which he applied the

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\(^{18}\)Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue*, 90–2; Kames, *Gentleman Farmer*, xiv. Famously, the Chinese Emperor was depicted ploughing on the frontispiece of Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*.

framework of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to the challenges of Sicilian economic reform.\(^{20}\)

Although inevitably influenced by these debates about the history of modern government and trade, economic societies in their missions remained close to the facts and appearances of concrete agricultural and other crises and addressed these directly. Their mission was not to develop political visions or choose sides, but through practical improvements contribute to the dissolution of the social and economic problems of European states. While in a sense no instrument within the arsenal of any society's activities was entirely politically neutral (from field rotation, enclosure and share cropping to introducing seed drills, grain storage machines and new plough designs or running vaccination programmes) mostly the institutions themselves did not have a strong reformist identity vis-à-vis the state.

Looking at economic societies and recognising their ambiguous relationship towards the moral and political issues of the age provides a historical corrective to exclusively economically focused analyses of demographic shifts, subsistence crisis and theories of the interrelations between mortality, price developments and the availability of foodstuffs.\(^{21}\) That historical corrective starts with the development of the discourse of improvement around 1650.

The discourses of patriotism and the development of (experimental) agriculture fused in Britain around 1650 and produced the notion of

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‘improvement’ that in the 1720s was embraced by the first Irish and Scottish societies. Numerous studies have contributed to the current understanding of how political ideas of ‘improvement’ stimulated the development of the experimental agriculture of what is known as the British Agricultural Revolution and have identified the significance of Walter Blith’s *The English Improver* of 1649 and its sequel the *English Improver Improved*, dedicated to Oliver Cromwell and published with the motto ‘Vive la Re Publick’. Cromwell would, until deep into the eighteenth century, retain his image as a patron of Scottish and Irish agriculture as part of the more general transformation of Britain into a commercial empire grounded on principles that were very different from its trade rival the United Provinces. In the process the endeavours of the Hartlib circle – including the emulation and study of Flemish agriculture, the establishment of the experimental scientific society of the ‘Invisible College’ and the publication of the utopian manifesto for the socio-economic reform of Britain entitled *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria* – were absorbed (though not Hartlib’s peculiar visionary scheme of the *Reformed Commonwealth of Bees* to promote large-scale beekeeping in order to replace French wine imports with the consumption of domestic mead).22

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Proliferation of economic societies

How did the transformation of ‘improvement’, from a Cromwellian vision into a voluntary organisation aiming to promote agricultural development, culminate in a European movement of civil communication and practical reform? During the heyday of the later eighteenth century, members of a virtually uncountable number of local clubs, fraternities and societies corresponded with their counterparts across the continent and beyond. Their main models were the Dublin Society of Improvement of Husbandry, Agriculture and other Useful Arts (founded 1731, Royal from 1749 onwards) and the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in London (founded 1754, Royal prefix added in 1908),\(^\text{23}\) while the first blending of patriotic rhetoric with the organisational form of a voluntary association to improve local economic conditions stemmed from the Honourable Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland (founded 1723). The organisational model of an economic society proved so compelling that it gained endless variations under different local circumstances and also spread to unlikely areas. While British associational life in the eighteenth century hosted by estimation around 25,000 different clubs and societies, the Free Economic Society (Vol’noe èkonomicheskoe obščestvo, founded 1765) in St Petersburg was, as Colum Leckey points out in his chapter, the second society to be founded in the whole of Russia.\(^\text{24}\) Prize essay competitions, printing economic journals, and handing out premiums would become central tenets of the society movement. Responding to local needs, societies also developed new programmes of education, health care (e.g. small pox vaccination), the production and publication of statistical accounts and poor relief. Beyond functionally ascribing to economic and patriotic societies the roles of being forerunners in experimental agriculture, and platforms for political participation for new strata of society,\(^\text{25}\) it would be hard to deny that these activities


\(^{25}\) Apart from the chapters in this volume see also Richard van Dülmen, *The Society of the Enlightenment: The Rise of the Middle Class and Enlightenment Culture in Germany* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1992), 65–81; Ulrich Im Hof, *Das gesellige
paved the way for their later professionalisation in the disciplines of education, health care, economic science and social affairs.

Determining the number of ‘economic societies’ that sprang up from 1720 is a virtually impossible task. A look at the vast historiography on eighteenth-century economic associations targeting particular societies or several societies within a particular national setting illustrates the nature of this problem, which has everything to do with variety.26 One aspect is nomenclature. In order to capture the characteristics of groups of societies the previous studies have deployed a range of nationally confined short hands, such as improvement societies in Britain and Ireland, agricultural societies in France and the United States of...
America, patriotic societies in Germany and Spain, and economic societies in Sweden, Switzerland and much of remaining Europe. Only in some cases, such as in France, does the used term represent fairly accurately the actual naming of societies. However, at the time various labels – such as patriotic or economic societies – were regarded as near synonyms, even if contemporaries were fully aware of the complexity in rhetoric, activities, composition and aims of the different societies.

Bearing in mind that contemporaries understood societies with different names as part of the same movement one quickly sees that earlier, tentative attempts to determine the number of eighteenth-century societies remain gross underestimates. Ulrich Im Hof surveyed society life from Scotland to Florence and New York to St Petersburg, ending up with the estimate of 116 societies for the ‘promotion of economic improvement and the common good in Europe and overseas’ in the period 1731–1789. Combining the figures given by van Dülmen, Im Hof, Müller, and her own data for the Danish conglomerate state, Juliane Engelhardt arrived at the sum total of 233 ‘patriotic societies’. A more detailed survey of available national and regional synthetic studies leads to much higher estimates.

In Great Britain and Ireland at least 82 ‘agricultural societies’ were active prior to 1810. Some twenty regional Royal Agricultural Societies (Sociétés royales d’agriculture) were established in pre-revolutionary France (mostly in the 1760s). If local branches to the societies are included 29 societies ought to be added. In Spain, some seventy

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29 Hudson, Patriotism with Profit, 130–3. The list omits societies that remained short-lived or were not included in 1810 as agricultural societies.

30 Justin, Les sociétés royales d’agriculture, 275. The work limits itself to agricultural societies and thus omits for instance the Free Society of Emulation (Société libre d’émulation) founded in 1776 (See Shovlin, The Political Economy of Virtue, 131).
‘Economic Societies of Friends of the Country’ (*Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País*) were established, while at least 14 societies were ‘created or suggested’ in the Spanish colonies. Information about societies in European colonies is very sparse. In 1781 Barbados got a society modelled on the Dublin Society, as did the Dutch-Indonesian capital Batavia, but these are isolated examples of what may well have been a more intensive network. Figures on German-speaking Europe vary. Müller accounts for 46 ‘patriotic societies’ in Germany, while Richard van Dülmen builds upon Müller’s list and gives 71 ‘public-spirited societies’, including societies from Switzerland and Imperial Austria. Henry E. Lowood suggests the figure of 146 patriotic or economic societies in German-speaking Europe. In the United Provinces 57 local departments were founded in 1777 under the Economic Branch (*Oeconomische Tak*) of the Holland Society of Sciences (*Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen*) while a handful of local economic societies continued to exist. Apart from the eight most significant agricultural societies in the federation, in the state of New York only, more than fifty agricultural societies were founded in the 1790s as a result of public financial support and the establishment of a Board of


Agriculture in New York. In the Danish state, ‘patriotic societies’ were founded between 1769 and 1813. In Norway, the establishment of the The Royal Society for the Welfare of Norway (Det Kongelige Selskab for Norges Vel) in 1809 triggered the foundation of 26 district societies, most of which had an independent existence before the newly founded umbrella-organisation, and are included in the 57 Danish patriotic societies. In the Swedish realm the number of economic societies grew from seven to 25 between 1809 and 1820 owing to the creation of the Royal Swedish Agricultural Academy (Kongl. Svenska Lantbruks-Academien, founded 1811). In neighbouring Russia, only one economic society was active in the eighteenth century, which adds up to a tentative sum total of 562 societies.

For the non-German parts of the Habsburg Empire, where economic societies did not thrive, solid figures on economic societies are yet to be collected. Furthermore, the (no doubt immense) number of economic societies or comparable academies in the Italian peninsula remains hard to grasp precisely because many of them existed only on a local level or were short-lived experiments. Moreover, owing to the differentiated political cultures and economic characteristics within the old Italian states any reliable figure on its own would be meaningless in other respects.

35 Margaret W. Rossiter, ‘The Organization of Agricultural Improvement in the United States, 1785–1865’, in The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic: American Scientific and Learned Societies from Colonial Times to the Civil War, eds. Alexandra Oleson and Sanborn C. Brown (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1976), 284–90. The New York Board may have been special, but it is unlikely that states like Pennsylvania and Massachusetts would not have experienced at least a portion of similar activity. For the United States of America figures remain to be systematically collected.

36 See Engelhardt’s chapter.

37 Olof Kårström, Regionala Främjare av de areella näringarna under 200 år. Hushållningssällskapens historiker, periodiska skrifter och arkiv (Stockholm: Kungl. Skogs- och lantbruksakademien 2002), 145–260; and Marjanen’s chapter. Figures of Swedish short-lived societies, like the Agricultural Society in Vårdinge (active 1811–1815) are incomplete.


The economic society movement remained (presumably for the wider reasons outlined above) by its very nature a predominantly European phenomenon. The merits of European societies were discussed in the Portuguese Empire, but did not trigger emulation, except perhaps for the Economic Society of the Good Patriots and Friends of the Common Good (Sociedade Económica dos Bons Compatriotas, Amigos do Bem Público), founded in 1780 in Ponte de Lima.40 Within the Ottoman Empire the development of economic societies would have been blocked by strict regulation limiting the creation of associations.41

Relation to scientific organisations and the state

Economic societies operated as an interface between civil society, academic institutions and state organisations and along with other eighteenth-century societies, clubs and associations provided platforms for new elites. The rise of the middle class through these associations contributed to the breakdown of traditional estate-based society. Whereas scientific and language societies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a rather exclusive membership, economic societies in the eighteenth century often were principally open-to-all, even if in reality large parts of the population were excluded due to inconvenient meeting times, high membership fees or educational requirements. Farmer membership remained underrepresented, while female membership was uncommon.42


41 On the limits of association in the region, see Lydia Papadakis, Teaching the Nation: Greek Nationalism and Education in Nineteenth Century Macedonia (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies 2006).

42 See the chapters in this book; van Dülmen, The Society of Enlightenment, 67–9; Clark, British Clubs and Societies, 234–44.
Membership of Masonic lodges and economic societies often overlapped, yet in contrast to Masonic institutions most economic societies publicly announced their objectives and published their findings to guarantee the spread of ideas of improvement.\textsuperscript{43} Compared with academies and scientific societies, economic societies used similar ways of acquiring and producing knowledge, and as several of the case studies in this book show, economic societies engaged in a constant cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices with scientific organisations. In Berne, the Economic Society modelled its international network of honorary members on such institutions and, like many of its sister societies, used prize essay competitions as a means for knowledge production.\textsuperscript{44} The main difference was that economic societies, from the Dublin Society onwards, stressed their practical functions in relation to reform.\textsuperscript{45} This did not prevent the Dutch from copying the model of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in London in establishing the Economic Branch of the Holland Society of Sciences\textsuperscript{46} – a model also explored by Catherine II of Russia before creating the Free Economic Society in St Petersburg as an independent body.\textsuperscript{47} In Sweden too, the borders between academic institutions and economic societies were murky. The Patriotic Society in Stockholm of 1766 (\textit{Patriotiska sällskapet}, Royal from 1772) was deemed a potential rival to the Royal Swedish Academy of Science (\textit{Kungliga Svenska Vetenskapsakademien}, which itself, founded in 1739, was almost created with the title economic society), but saw itself as one among Europe’s ‘learned societies’. On the other side of the Baltic Sea, The Royal Finnish Economic Society (\textit{Kongl. Finska Hushållningssällskapet}, founded 1797) drew on the legacy of the Academy in Turku (\textit{Akademin i Åbo}, founded 1640) which was in fact a university.\textsuperscript{48}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44}See the chapter by Wyss and Stuber.
\item \textsuperscript{46}See Stapelbroek’s chapter.
\item \textsuperscript{48}See Marjanen’s chapter. Cf. McClellan III, ‘Learned Societies’.
\end{itemize}
The Accademia dei Georgofili in Florence was another famous hybrid organisation (and later renamed itself as an economic society).

Academic chairs in political economy sprang up across Europe around the same time. First these were established in Prussia (Halle and Frankfurt and der Oder both in 1727, and Rinteln in 1730), Sweden (Uppsala, 1741; Turku/Åbo, 1747; Lund, 1750) and Naples (1754). A key motive was to repair the underdevelopment of the local economy, which tied in well with the objectives of the economic society movement. Thus one understands why the Economic Society of Berne invited Anders Berch, professor of ‘jurisprudentiae, oeconomicae et commercium’ in Uppsala, as honorary member.49 In 1776 the Patriotic Society in Stockholm launched an economic journal (Hushållnings Journalen) in which it presented Science Academies, economic chairs and publications by economic societies as contributing to a common cause.50

Relations between state organisations, civil servants and economic societies remained close. In Brittany the Society of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Arts (Société d’agriculture, du commerce et des arts, founded 1757) was directly supported by the local estates, while in Berne the Economic Society functioned both as a stepping stone for young patricians into office and as an alternative channel for policy development. Likewise, the Free Economic Society in St Petersburg was established to be ‘free’ from government control, even if some of its prominent members were close to Catherine II.51 In contrast, The Royal Danish Society of Agriculture (Det Kongelige Danske Landhusholdningsselskab, founded 1768) and the Royal Patriotic Society in Stockholm emerged from private initiative to become Royal in 1770 and 1772 respectively.52 In Berne, the limits of engaging in state affairs were crossed when the Economic Society published a prize essay dealing with emigration and decrease in population and received a government order in 1766 to abstain from discussing politically sensitive matters.53

49 See Lars Magnusson, ‘Economics and the Public Interest: The Emergence of Economics as an Academic Subject during the 18th Century’, Scandinavian Journal of Economics 94 (1992: Supplement), 249–57; See also chapters in Augello and Guidi (eds.), The Spread of Political Economy, many of which shortly treat eighteenth-century societies as well.

50 See Marjanen’s chapter.

51 See the chapters by Shovlin, Wyss and Stuber, and Leckey. See also Pratt, ‘The Free Economic Society’, 1, 7–12.

52 See the chapters by Engelhardt and Marjanen.

53 See Kapossy, ‘Republican Political Economy’, 387–8. Emigration issues were debated at the time in Stockholm as well. See Marjanen’s chapter and Högberg, Kungl. patriotiska sällskapets historia, 41–7.
Concerns that economic societies might become channels for faction politics recurred during the period, as the cases of the United Provinces and the Society for Agricultural Economy in Celle (Landwirtschaftsgesellschaft in Celle, founded 1764) demonstrate. Yet, to retrospectively impose party politics and political interests onto the life of the Economic Branch of the Holland Society of Sciences and the Society of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Arts in Brittany is historically misleading.54

Formal relations to governing bodies were less significant in trade cities, like in the Patriotic Society in Hamburg (Patriotische gesellschaft für Beförderung der Künste un nützlichen Gewerbe, founded 1765) or in regions that did not enjoy political independence. In the Scottish and the Irish cases the Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland and the Dublin Society of Improvement of Husbandry, Agriculture and other Useful Arts answered some of the demands for political representation that resulted from the inclusion of Scotland and Ireland into the British Empire. In Finland the establishment of the Economic Society was in a similar way a reaction to experienced neglect from the seat of power in Stockholm.55

Eighteenth-century economic societies shaped their organisational forms to fit the administrative nature of the state or region.56 The first societies in Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and the first Spanish society in the Basque country (Real Sociedad Bascongada de Amigos del País, founded 1765) formed central forums for discussion in order to repair the underdevelopment of certain regions. In France and in Spain networks of associated ‘agricultural societies’ and ‘societies of the friends of the country’ soon emerged on a national level. In the Dutch case, the establishment of a national network of societies was inspired by the Spanish model and the writings of Pedro Rodríguez Campomanes.57 In Switzerland, the Helvetic Society (Die Helvetische Gesellschaft, founded 1761) acted as an umbrella organisation for previously existing local societies in the cantons.58 In Norway the Royal Society for the Welfare of Norway promoted Norwegian interests within the Danish and from 1814 the Swedish state.59

54 See the chapters by Bödeker, Stapelbroek and Shovlin.
55 See the chapters by Bonnyman, Livesey and Marjanen.
56 See also Im Hof, Das gesellige Jahrhundert; van Dülmen, The Society of the Enlightenment, 52–81.
57 See the chapters by Stapelbroek and Neele.
In Sweden, the Royal Agricultural Academy incorporated existing local societies, established new ones, and formed a similar centrally orchestrated organisation. In both cases the demise of the Danish and Swedish empires in the Napoleonic Wars created space for these organisations to function as nation-building agents. Conversely, border-transgressing attempts in Germany to form organisations that represented the national interest were initiated from the 1780s by Joachim Heinrich Campe and later by Rudolf Zacharias Becker, but remained unsuccessful.

Insofar as there was an economic society movement there was no transnational membership or brotherhood. While doors of Masonic lodges opened globally, economic societies created a transnational projection of their activities through processes of comparison, collaboration and emulation.

The rise of a movement

Following the mid-seventeenth-century English improvement programme, briefly discussed above, the seeds of what became a movement first germinated in Scotland and Ireland during the 1720s. Circles of aristocrats in politically weaker parts of the gestating British Empire in the early eighteenth century adopted the gist of the agricultural ‘improvement’ discourse that associates of the English Hartlib circle had devised in the 1650s as a strategy to reform the English economy. The aim of the first Scottish and Irish institutions was to carve out a niche for their own local economies so that they simultaneously contributed meaningfully and substantially to the growth of the British economy and remained faithful to their own true interests and locally present natural and human resources.

In Ireland this happened in the same context in which Protestant Whigs like Robert Molesworth compared the constitutional histories and freedoms of France and Britain and the possibilities for Irish economic development within a British Union. Molesworth’s ideas as well as the founding of the Dublin Society are best seen against the background of a series of British debates about rival designs for British global economic empire and Anglo-Irish debates about the Irish freedoms.

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60 See H. Juhlin Dannfelt, *Kungl. Lantbruksakademien 1813–1912 samt svenska landthushållningen under nittonde århundradet* (Stockholm: C. E. Fritzes Bökförlags Aktiebolag 1913) and Marjanen’s chapter.

of trade and the realisation of the Irish economic potential. In his chapter on the Honourable Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture, Brian Bonnymay discusses its emergence as an answer to comparable issues emanating from Scotland’s new position in the British Empire from 1707. The Dublin Society, as James Livesey writes, itself drew from the Scottish example, but also from the rich native tradition of civic improvement, which turned into a model followed by later societies from Brittany to Philadelphia and St Petersburg.

In Brittany, as John Shovlin shows in his chapter, the Irish model was a very direct source of inspiration. Inspired by the perceived successes of these societies the model was adapted through the creation of the Société d’agriculture, du commerce et des arts in 1757. Brittany, not Paris, developed France’s first agricultural societies, laying the groundwork for a network of societies supported by Vincent de Gournay and his circle of political writers. That Franco-British processes of emulation played a key role in the initial stages of the spread of the economic society movement is no surprise. From the 1720s, French political writers like Montesquieu, Jean-François Melon and Voltaire were obsessed with British political economy and its institutions. The translation of agricultural treatises, such as Duhamel du Monceau’s edition of Jethro Tull’s New Horse-Houghing Husbandry from 1731, was part of this process.

If rivalry was the ideal catalyst for the development of the science of agronomy, the Seven Years’ War marked a turning point in the spread of economic societies. Next to Brittany, Berne (founded 1759), Leipzig (1764), Zürich (1764), Hamburg (1765), St Petersburg (1765), Vergara (Bergara, in Basque country, 1765), Stockholm (1766) and Copenhagen (1768), among many others, followed suit. The societies of London, Brittany and Berne became models in their own right alongside the Dublin society. From this stage, agriculture turned into an object of

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62 Viscount Robert Molesworth, Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture, and Employing the Poor (Dublin: 1723) was written from this perspective. See Livesey’s chapter.


64 See the chapters by Shovlin, Wyss and Stuber, Leckey and Marjanen.

65 H. L. Duhamel du Monceau, Traité de la culture des terres (Paris: 1750), see also his École d’agriculture of 1759, which from their introductions onwards displayed the patronage of Gournay.

mainstream popular culture in Britain, and lay at the roots of a European exchange of ideas that found political applications in different contexts, such as in the south of Italy where the publication of agricultural treatises, along with the establishment of a chair of political economy in 1754 fed into a governmental programme for a large-scale scientifically grounded economic reform.

Accompanied by the feverish activity of printshops across Europe, the political orientations and functions of the establishment of economic societies in the second half of the eighteenth century became subject to major discussion. The first sentences of Arthur Young’s *Political Arithmetick* (which served to correct European misconceptions about the principles of British wealth to prevent the influence in Britain of agricultural reformist schemes that would undermine the foundations of the state) declared that ‘the great encouragement which agriculture at present meets with in Europe has been either the cause or effect (probably both) of many publications upon that part of political œconomy which concerns the culture of the earth’. Yet, remarkably, simultaneous to agriculture becoming integral to an intensely sensitive debate about economic development, trade politics and the reform of the interstate system, most economic societies shielded themselves from these hotly debated issues through their inward, domestic and practical orientations, which produced new diversifications of functions and activities geared to local circumstances and opportunity, almost as a way to act without choosing sides.

In German-speaking Europe the Economic Society of Berne (*Die Oekonomische Gesellschaft Bern*, founded 1759) was one of the first to be established. Regula Wyss and Martin Stuber demonstrate in their chapter that the Bernese society was also modelled on science academies and strived to gain an international reputation through its publications.

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68 Bartolomeo Intieri funded the chair whose first incumbent also published agricultural works and reflected on the political requirements for transforming the Kingdom of Naples into a modern commercial society; see Antonio Genovesi, *Scritti economici*, ed. Maria Luisa Perna (2 vols., Naples: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici 1984).

69 Young, *Political Arithmetic*, v, which (again) resembles Schmid’s scepticism about such schemes, see Hont, ‘Correcting Europe’s Political Economy’.
and practice to invite famous foreigners as honorary members. The Economic Society of Berne complemented the improvement endeavours of the ruling Great Council.

As Hans Erich Bödeker points out in his chapter on economic societies in the German lands, the Hamburg Patriotic Society became a regional model. Modelled on English examples, the Patriotic Society absorbed the activities of loose groups of friends and active citizens by setting up rules and practices both for improving agricultural production, mechanical innovation and social work, and to offer new middle-class elites a channel for engendering societal reform. A similar function was performed by the patriotic societies in the Danish state, as stressed in Juliane Engelhardt’s chapter.

Civic life in Russia was based on specific principles. While the Free Economic Society in St Petersburg appropriated the idea of an economic society and achieved an international reputation, it was the politically charged questions of serfdom and the decay of Russia’s agriculture, as Colum Leckey shows in his chapter, that made for the Society’s internationally reputed prize essay question.

The aims of other organisations from the same period, like the Accademia dei Georgofili of Florence (founded 1753) and the Accademia dei Pugni in Austrian Lombardy (founded 1762), dealt with by Vieri Becagli and Sophus Reinert resembled those of the economic societies so far discussed and also drew on the same political economic discourses, while continuing the strong Italian academy tradition.

From the 1760s, economic societies popped up across Europe. In the United Provinces, the establishment of the Economic Branch of the Holland Society of Sciences in 1777 was a spin-off from a major debate about the Dutch trade republic. Starting from a national economic reform vision and inspired by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in London, tensions between autonomous local departments ultimately led to its demise, as Koen Stapelbroek and Arno Neele explain.

The agricultural societies of the United States of America, discussed by Manuela Albertone, that flourished in the post-Revolutionary era

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72 Im Hof, Das gesellige Jahrhundert, 260–3 considers the Georgofili a society for the ‘promotion of economic improvement and common good’.
facilitated the diffusion of physiocratic, and more broadly, French political economy. They served as platforms of opposition to federalist financial, manufacturing and trade politics. Later picked up by Progressive historians, French ‘agricultural societies’ played a role in the agrarian democracy programme of Jefferson’s Republican party.

The economic societies that were created around the turn of the century (in colonies, smaller cities and regional centres) continued to deploy the discourses of underdevelopment and patriotism and referred to the usual famous societies as their models. Yet, their functions shifted somewhat. In the Swedish realm, for instance, regional economic societies were reorganised in the 1810s as branches to the newly founded Royal Agricultural Academy, giving the societies a much more administrative role and also narrowed down their focus to agriculture and forestry. Through the secession of Finland to Russia in 1809, the Finnish Economic Society gained, as shown by Jani Marjanen, new momentum and experienced its golden age during the 1810s.

By this time the core business of economic societies, the approach of agricultural improvement, around Europe had either developed into a form of scientific inquiry or been included into state politics, thus making the previously arisen mechanisms of civic engagement largely redundant. Likewise states took over the proto-health care and poor-relief functions that economic societies fulfilled, as well as the proto-representative functions that societies served in creating a voice for the new middle classes. The emancipation of economic thought as a specific field of inquiry and its detachment from terminologies of the common good and patriotism also made societies recede into the background. In this position a number of economic societies continue to exist until this day as witnesses of the appearance of a somehow familiar set of crises that expose the imperfections of existing global markets in their relation to the production and distribution of subsistence goods.

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