The early modern period saw two major transformations reshaping Europe: the gradual expansion of commercial society and the rise of the modern state. Historians often view these two developments as complementary and call them “mercantilism.” This book tells a different story. By exploring these processes in France from a local angle, it argues that absolute statecraft and commercial aggrandizement did not involve the mere imposition of policies unilaterally decided upon by the Crown. Rather, they were bolstered through the complicated participation of two significant political entities: French municipalities and the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, this book demonstrates that these two developments—which accelerated during the reign of Louis XIV—did not necessarily march in lockstep. In fact, individuals involved in commerce and debates about market society altered social relationships and triggered political developments in ways that often interrupted the Crown’s authority and its state-building initiatives. In other words, commerce did not automatically empower the monarchy; rather, it also stimulated and strengthened local organizations, practices, and languages that competed with royal power and ideology.

This is a book about state-building and civic politics in the context of a globalizing economy. It explores the relationship between French commercial expansion into the Mediterranean market and Bourbon statecraft under Louis XIV and his successor, the regent duc d’Orléans, through the lens of a particular port city, Marseille. Situated on the southern margins of the French kingdom, and culturally and politically peripheral from the Crown’s perspective, Marseille nonetheless became strategically essential for France’s commercial contacts with the
Ottoman Empire. Marseille had a two-millennia-long tradition of Mediterranean trade, and it was the only French port privileged to trade directly with the Levant. The Crown saw in it opportunities for royal aggrandizement, commercial growth, and personal gain, and thus the city became central to efforts to strengthen and enrich the French state.

Marseille’s municipal traditions, however, strengthened and interrupted royal commercial and statist expansion. A close study of this city, which became France’s most important Mediterranean port after Louis XIV conclusively asserted royal authority there in 1660, aptly illustrates the challenges municipalities faced in negotiating between the Crown’s centralizing impulse and their own local political practices. A city ruled by commercial elites who saw themselves as inheritors of a long heritage of autonomous self-rule, Marseille was a crucible where civic, French, and various Mediterranean identities converged, collided, put pressure on one another, and reformulated the political culture of the city and beyond.

The study of broad developments in French statist politics through a focus on Marseille offers a valuable new perspective into understanding the dynamics of how traditional local institutions, practices, languages, and rituals interacted with new circumstances and sociopolitical realities in early modern Europe. The expansion of commercial society and the innovations in political centralization championed by the monarchy may suggest that the transformations occurring in western Europe thrust the continent into the “modern age.” This book however, demonstrates that the state-building tactics of the Sun King were much more a piecemeal mixture of old and new methods of rule, and constant renegotiations between local and royal approaches to governance, rather than the replacement of “premodern” by “modern” systems.

As a former republic whose institutional networks, legal traditions and political practices traced to Greek and Roman antiquity, Marseille had deeply rooted structures that resisted change at the same time that they provided foundations for commercial expansion and state-building. The city’s established contacts with the Levant and its chamber of commerce, which predated French monarchical interventions served as a springboard for Louis XIV’s commercial initiatives, while simultaneously generating impediments to royal centralization. Most important, the city’s political tradition of classical republicanism—conventionally averse to royal kingship, absolute authority, and commerce—became integral to the development of a new understanding of virtuous French citizenship. The city’s commercial elite mobilized this republicanism to imagine themselves as exemplary citizens charged by the king with the unique responsibility of strength-
ening France’s Mediterranean presence, while simultaneously using it to resist French royal presence in their own city. Such persistence and malleability of classical republicanism held lasting implications for Marseille and France more generally. Practiced in civic contexts and adapted to absolutist aggrandizement, it ultimately became the political language of revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

This book argues that Marseillais elites—aldermen, members of the chamber of commerce, local go-betweens who served as the city’s representatives at court, merchants, religious leaders and new nobility—mobilized classical republicanism to support and criticize the expansion of Mediterranean commerce and royal authority as they materialized in their city between 1660 and 1720. In other words, classical republicanism heavily informed conflicting ideas regarding international commerce in absolutist France. In its original form, this political language that had emerged in ancient Greece and Rome did not provide a generous reading of commerce. According to this tradition, the stability of the body politic rested on virtue, practiced through the alignment of personal interests with the public good, and the active participation of citizens in public affairs. Ancient republican political theorists understood political virtue as the political community’s sole impediment to social, cultural, and moral decline. Commerce could only distract citizens from the res publica; luxury cultivated in commercial society would lead them to prefer personal interests over the general good. According to John Shovlin, ancient Roman moralists had described how “luxury enervated and feminized men, sapping their capacity for military virtue; it was a tool of despots who used it to weaken the commitment of their subjects to liberty; it made both rulers and their subjects self-serving, vitiating their capacity to place the public welfare before private interest.”

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers drew on this tradition for various purposes: moralists to condemn luxury, royal critics to denounce the Crown’s despotic extensions of power, members of the second estate to protest against the growing tide of arriviste financiers, venal officeholders, and merchants who threatened to wrest power away from the sword nobility (noblisse d’épée). While these elites by no means formed a united group, their arguments overlapped. Though reluctant to condemn commerce altogether, they warned how luxury was fundamentally irreconcilable with virtue. Bent out of political shape by luxury, weakened states, they argued, could be destroyed by imminent catastrophic events, be they wars or natural or medical crises.

This republican vocabulary that was fundamentally critical of commerce proved useful to many French elites who were uncomfortable with the privileged
role that Louis XIV and his controller-general, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, assigned to commercial expansion. It should be pointed out, however, that one did not necessarily need to borrow from the classical republican handbook to articulate misgivings about the market. The late seventeenth century saw both royal and local elites expressing concern regarding the corrosive forces of the market; the republican vocabulary was one of several that individuals could adopt in order to convey their ambivalence about commerce. This unease was particularly pronounced in Marseille, given the climate of suspicion that clouded the relationship between the monarchy, merchants, and local administrative bodies that ran commercial enterprises in the city. Led by Colbert, royal administrators remained mistrustful of Marseillais in general, whom they considered recalcitrant and incapable of recognizing what was in the interests of their own city and the kingdom at large.

Furthermore, while advocates of commercial expansion, the controller-general and his intendants duplicated the traditional view that saw merchants as fundamentally untrustworthy, morally vacuous creatures. Although a promoter of commercial expansion, Colbert was nonetheless aware of the dangers involved in a growing marketplace. While both Colbert and Colbertism were targets of the republican anti-luxury argument, the controller-general tempered his expansion of international trade and manufacturing with calls for rigorous reform and merchant supervision. As Amalia Kessler has recently shown, “the growing legitimacy of commerce . . . derived from the fact that it operated directly under—and on behalf of—royal power.” Even as Colbert announced in 1669 that “commerce is the most proper means to reconcile different nations and entertain the most opposed spirits in great and mutual correspondence,” he and subsequent royal administrators maintained that commercial expansion required royally determined regulations that would deter merchants from corrupt practices. Royal elites in support of Colbertism believed that commerce was beneficial for state and society, but they doubted the political commitment and moral fortitude of merchants. Commerce was potentially good, but merchants were bad. Royal and municipal elites came together to strengthen French commerce without shaking off entirely the Christian worldview that condemned the pursuit of worldly goods as sinful and the classical republican idiom that denounced merchants as morally and politically decrepit.

Over the last decades of the seventeenth century, however, a new positive assessment of commerce began to emerge among French administrative elites. While many voiced concern about merchant self-interest, they began to concede that mercantilist expansion and administrative centralization seemed to render
obsolete the darker age of aristocratic rebellions, religious and civil wars, and domestic political chaos. Indeed, supporters of commercial expansion would help solidify what would become the dominant Enlightenment reading of historical progress; leading eighteenth-century men of letters would optimistically suggest that political strife and natural disasters would ultimately be eradicated as new rational forms of communication and sociability led humanity toward progress and perfection.6 The marquis de Condorcet would offer one of the most emblematic visions in this vein in the latter half of the eighteenth century; “with progress in industry and welfare, which establishes a happier proportion between men’s talents and their needs, each successive generation will have larger possessions,” he wrote, “the improvement of medical practice, which will become more efficacious with the progress of reason and of the social order, will mean the end of infectious and hereditary diseases and illnesses brought on by climate, food, or working conditions.”7 According to the historical equation to which disciples of modernity and doux commerce subscribed, commercial exchange was the motor for progress; new networks of exchange and communication would weave together a strengthened social fabric that would enhance human knowledge, wealth, health, and “civilized” behavior.

Such formulations that defended commerce as the foundation of society began emerging in the late seventeenth century, and specifically, at the commencement of Louis XIV’s personal reign in 1661. This book considers in particular, how classical republican traditions were unpacked and combined with new ideas to formulate positive assessments of certain kinds of merchants and commercial activity. During the late seventeenth century, royal elites, merchants, moralists, and even nobles began advocating a new commercial civic spirit that challenged the traditional anti-merchant and anti-luxury argument. With Henry Clark’s definition of “commercial humanism” in mind, I interpret commercial civic spirit as the set of attitudes that reconciled an enthusiasm for commercial prosperity with the classical republican sensibility that defined virtue as the aligning of personal and public interests.8 Promoters of commercial civic spirit rescued commerce—previously devalued as detrimental to civic virtue—and recast it as the ultimate mark of good citizenship. They disputed the classical tradition by elevating commerce as a useful public activity and by reserving for certain merchants the ability to be politically and morally virtuous.9 They particularly extended their positive visions toward elite wholesale traders, or négociants, whom they considered to be honorable, noble, and exemplary leaders of commercial society. The market world substituted for the political res publica; elite merchants functioned as its best citizens. Meanwhile, these authors retained their prejudices
against retail traders, financiers, and speculators, whom they continued to categorize as small-minded, fraudulent delinquents.

The late seventeenth century also witnessed the development of a new kind of “republican historicism” that provided a positive reading of commerce. The classical historical discourse on republics held a rather pessimistic view. It saw civic virtue as the republic’s only lifeline through time. It projected that self-interest and fluctuations of human passions would corrode civic virtue, corrupt the body politic, and destroy liberty. This traditional republican vision of history was formulated on the distrust of human will and on the nightmarish assumption that republics reeled toward a crisis, a moment, as Keith Baker describes, “in which the very existence of the body politic hangs in the balance, in which it will either recover its health and vigor or fall into an irreversible, fatal sickness.”

Archbishop François de la Mothe-Fénelon revived and adapted this historical vision most famously in Télémaque, the “most read literary work of eighteenth-century France.” In his epic, Fénelon insisted that ostentatious shows of prosperity projected by commercial states were harbingers of a dark future characterized by depopulation, “idleness and effeminacy” and the extinction of virtue. He used the classical tradition to discredit financiers, venal officeholders, and merchants who were gaining access to political power; he called upon the old nobility to help the king banish “pomp and luxury” and rebuild a politically and morally sounder state. Meanwhile, in a different setting, Jansenist ecclesiastics and parlementary magistrates also revitalized this dark historical worldview, drawing on the metaphor of a republic in crisis to condemn sybaritic depravity and despotic papal and royal authorities.

In contrast to this somber historical view, the modified republican historicism developed by apologists for international commerce maintained that monarchs and commercial activity could rescue republics from downward spiraling trajectories. Kings, it held, liberated republics and set them back on a positive historical track, while commercial activity provided a new public space where merchants could cultivate their virtues. Such a revisionist view of history proved particularly attractive to Marseillais elites. It could be applied to provide a positive spin to increased royal presence and interference in civic governance, while also legitimating the city’s flourishing trade with the Levant.

REPUBLICANISM AND ABSOLUTISM

How and why could republican ideologies and vocabularies find increasing use and relevance in an absolutist regime like Bourbon France? How did the process
of state-building—a process that on the surface strengthened and centralized power in the royal person at the expense of local political authority—allow for intensified use of republican idioms? This study presents two answers to this question. First, municipalities could serve as repositories of classical republican traditions in an absolutist polity. The French kingdom was comprised of cities and towns whose administrators often used classical republican vocabulary to maintain the municipal body politic. Classical republicanism was particularly well practiced in Marseille; the city’s governing body of aristocratic consuls and councilmen drew on classical language that underscored the former republic’s historical connections to Athens, Rome, and Carthage. The royal conquest of Marseille in 1660 did not erase this tradition. The new merchant-administrators who replaced the former government continued to employ classical republican vocabulary: administratively, to discern the public good for the community, and historically, to imagine the commercial and moral regeneration of Massilia, classical Marseille.

Second, the relationship of accommodation fostered between municipal elites and the Crown from the reign of Louis XIV created a space where civic vocabulary and traditions could be co-opted and spread by the state. A common attitude toward the market enabled local elites who privileged political and commercial autonomy to share common patterns of speech with a developing centralized state that sought to restrict that autonomy. Marseille was not the only municipality where increasing encounters with the Crown energized historical republican traditions and rhetoric. The relationship between royal and civic political culture could be characterized as an ever-changing series of Venn diagrams; royal and civic languages were deployed by individuals who existed in spheres that were both distinct and overlapping with one another. In particular, Marseillais elites’ and the Crown’s common enthusiasm for commercial expansion allowed the classical republican concept of virtue and civic excellence to become compatible and interchangeable with the Crown’s language of utility to the state.

This study, therefore, suggests a contradiction in the policies of the Bourbon monarchy: the Crown that sought to expand its power and limit local autonomy adapted political concepts stemming from the city to sustain absolutist claims. The monarchy helped intensify civic and republican sensibilities throughout France while gutting France of actual republics. Classical republican traditions potentially damaging to the Crown were co-opted in service of the monarchy. They became one of the most prominent political traditions that fractured the Old Regime and energized the French Revolution.
My central argument, therefore, is that the classical republican tradition served the interests of elites who both embraced and rejected royal commercial expansion. More important, local and royal elites working commonly, but not together, on commercial expansion, simultaneously helped develop a positive understanding of commerce while reinvigorating an anti-absolutist political tradition. Such an argument takes the current historiographies of classical republicanism and French absolutism in new directions. First, it adds a civic dimension to historiography on French republicanism. Building on the historical analysis of civic humanism in Italian Renaissance and early modern Anglo-Atlantic studies, historians of France have recently demonstrated how the monarchy’s critics increasingly gave republican idioms a prominent role in eighteenth-century French political discourse. This research has shown how the classical republican tradition was a key element of political contestation in eighteenth-century France; it has debunked the assumption that classical republicanism drew on antique political models that vanished under French absolutism. While my work extends this new historiography, it introduces a unique argument: classical republicanism was not only configured in opposition to the monarchy. It was adopted by the Crown. Republican virtues of civic participation, “disinterestedness,” simplicity, Spartan discipline, and frugality were upheld as models for good behavior both in local and state contexts.

The interaction between republican traditions and state-building is a topic of increasing interest to historians of Europe, who have recently discovered that regional and state political traditions are not consistently at odds. Meanwhile, this study offers an alternative to approaches historians have taken in regards to absolutism. Research exploring the relationship between the monarchy of Louis XIV and provincial elites has fallen into two principal categories. Scholars following the Tocquevillian tradition have held that the Crown broke the power of provincial elites by widening the orbit of a depersonalized, bureaucratic state that overrode corporate privileges. Meanwhile, competing scholarship has offered that absolute monarchy was not quite absolute, maintaining that Louis XIV’s government was founded on compromise and “social collaboration” between the Crown and provincial elites. These have studied the contradictory ways in which the Crown empowered local institutions and individuals: the state augmented its domestic and international standing by encouraging a commercial society that ate at the foundations of Old Regime structures.

This study modifies both of these claims. First, I move beyond the question of whether the state smothered or strengthened local political bodies and traditions. Mine is a dynamic story of mutual transformation: the Crown transformed
cities, but civic traditions transformed the Crown and state. Second, emphasizing the distrust between royal and local elites, this book characterizes the relationship fostered between Crown and locality as one of accommodation rather than of collaboration. It focuses on the correspondences between royal administrators, intendants, the Marseille échevinage (municipal magistracy) and commercial institutions to argue that these bodies and individuals made accommodations, which I take to mean varying degrees of adaptation in their views, behaviors, and speech patterns. Through such modifications, they tailored the new situation of commercial expansion to benefit themselves without entirely becoming willing collaborators.20

Over the past decades, the subject of the rise of commercial society has increasingly interested French historians as a result of major transformations in the historiography of the Old Regime and the Revolution. The 1970s revisionist turn that drew historians away from Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution and initiated research in political culture has, curiously, opened up opportunities to examine social questions from new directions. Initially, the break from Marxist social history led revisionist historians to concentrate on the ways political discourses and contestations led to the crisis of the monarchy and made the French Revolution thinkable and possible. Postrevisionist historians have begun to bridge these two earlier historiographical trends by demonstrating that political discourses were used to address and evaluate certain social, material, and cultural changes occurring in the Old Regime. The rise of commercial society was one such change. Royal and civic elites in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mobilized idioms of classical republicanism and commercial civic spirit to make sense of the multilayered transformations wrought by economic expansionism: the generation of wealth and luxury; the disappearance of boundaries between estates; the proliferation of tax farmers, speculators, and financiers; the refining or debasing of taste and manners; commerce’s effect on arts and sciences.

But what historians have labeled as a rise of commercial society was not always understood as a rise to contemporaries, who recognized that theirs was a new age of commercial change and economic growth. Certainly, many Enlightenment philosophers who advocated this change understood it as the necessary kind of progress that drew humanity toward perfection. But as Michael Sonenscher has recently shown, from the vantage point of the darker “other side of the Enlightenment,” the changes in commercial society and economic practices were leading France toward decay, catastrophe, and crisis; “the eighteenth century focused largely on [the] menace” produced by wealth and a credit-driven state.21
This book builds on this emphasis on the more sinister obsessions in the Century of Light. Anxieties over merchant virtue, mistrust between royal and civic elites, the worries that luxury would produce despotism, and debates over how economic crises would prompt political and moral decay all suggest that the late early modern period was as much conceivable as a period of decline as one of advancement. The distrustful and pessimistic musings of the eighteenth century most often associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau or with Jean-Paul Marat and the Jacobins more generally were more commonplace among French elites of the Old Regime than previously assumed. And this pessimism emerged, in large part, due to the vertiginous sociopolitical transformations energized by Louis XIV and his impulse to expand his monarchical regime.

CRISES AND HISTORICAL CHANGE

Two cataclysmic events, the conquest of 1660 and the plague of 1720, serve as the bookends to this study of the revisions in rooted civic structures, rituals, and discourses in the context of absolutist state-building: the first where Marseille was subdued by Louis XIV, the second where the city, remodeled as a French commercial hub, nearly collapsed as a result of a southern invasion by “Oriental plague.” The first of these involved a military invasion from the north. The monarch who would eventually earn the title of Sun King ordered six thousand troops to march on Marseille, a “republican” stronghold, and to construct the citadel of Saint Nicolas with cannon facing the city. Accompanied by Anne d’Autriche, the duc d’Anjou, the prince de Conti, and his chief minister, Cardinal Mazarin, Louis XIV entered Marseille through a breach in the wall of Porte Réale, the symbol of the city’s republican past. Letters patent of 5 March 1660 ordered an overhaul of the municipal government. This was a strategy on the part of the French monarchy both to disable the Marseillais nobility’s attempts at maintaining their city as an autonomous aristocratic republic, and to establish a commercial center designed to expand international trade under royal guidance. Marseille’s chief viguier would henceforth be chosen by the king and operate under the eye of a royal intendant in Aix. The king abolished the consulate and Council of Three Hundred. He forbade Marseillais nobility from participating in municipal politics. Subject to royal approval, four échevins (municipal magistrates or assessors) elected from among the city’s négociants would administer it, aided by a Council of Sixty also consisting of merchants. The king left behind 3,500 Swiss and French troops to prevent further rebellion.
The conquest was an ostentatious show of Bourbon state-building, and it jump-started its drive to extend French commerce into the Mediterranean. Marseille’s days as an aristocratic republic were over. It was repackaged as a politically compliant commercial trading center. The Crown projected that merchant elites newly promoted to power would effectively collaborate with the monarchy to extend French commerce in the Mediterranean market. Over the next decades, Marseille became the only French city with the privilege of conducting duty-free trade with the Levant. The city more than doubled in size and population. Revenues soared, and the French out-traded the British and Dutch in the Mediterranean.

The same commercial activity that generated local prosperity and provided the French Crown with an opportunity to harness a provincial city to its statist ambitions could also introduce potentials for disaster. While the Mediterranean market offered possibilities for royal expansionism and commercial growth, increased contacts with the Ottoman Empire introduced Marseille to demographic instabilities and the specter of medical catastrophe. Calamity came to pass sixty years after the conquest, in May 1720, when the merchant vessel *Grand Saint-Antoine* returned to Marseille from the Levant, carrying among its 400,000 livres worth of cargo the most dreaded disease of the early modern period: plague. Health intendants of Marseille’s Bureau de la santé had received news of renewed pestilential outbreaks in Palestine and Syria that year and had toughened restrictions on ships from eastern Mediterranean ports. The *Grand Saint-Antoine*, however, sped into Marseille. The ship’s merchandise was clandestinely unloaded, allegedly upon orders by the *premier échevin*, Jean-Baptiste Estelle, who was incidentally part-owner of the vessel.

In a matter of weeks, the plague spread through Marseille. In the outbreak’s worst months, mortality rose to a thousand daily fatalities. The epidemic was equally lethal to commercial activity. Austria, England, the Netherlands, and Spain, as well as administrators of Calais, Bern, Luxembourg, and Italian city-states suspended trade with France’s southern port. A state already crippled by the collapse of John Law’s economic system found itself paralyzed by simultaneous medical and financial crises. The epidemic continued its ravages for over two years, claiming the lives of approximately 50,000 inhabitants in the city. Over half of Marseille’s population, in addition to countless more in the Provençal countryside, passed away before the Crown announced the end of the plague with a Te Deum of Deliverance on 15 January 1723.

Organized as a narrative set between conquest and plague, this study makes three major contributions beyond enhancing our understanding of absolutism
and republicanism. First, it reconsiders the meanings of “center” and “periphery” in this context. Generally speaking, historians have inherited the traditional divide in France between Langues d’Oïl and Langues d’Oc that located political and cultural supremacy in Paris and the north over the southern half of France. The center is still understood as Paris; the farther from Paris, the more peripheral. *Between Crown and Commerce* argues that in the early modern world, Paris, Fontainebleau, and Versailles could be seen as the hinterland that lay beyond the commercially and politically dynamic Mediterranean universe. This study considers two still-ignored major events on France’s Mediterranean coast: the first where Marseille was conquered by Louis XIV, the second where it was stricken with “Oriental plague.” Both events brought Mediterranean France into focus as the heart of French commercial activity, but more important, as the center where French subjects and their non-French trading partners came together in an international marketplace to construct new political concepts and alternative political traditions to absolutism, circulating them statewide.

Second, an analysis of these catastrophic events contributes to recent research on crisis studies. Traditionally, social and economic historians led the study of early modern catastrophe, “crisis mortality,” and subsistence crises. The research of historians of Britain and France focused primarily on how economic factors contributed to demographic change; taking into account variables ranging from nutrition, prices, ecological differences, sociological fluctuations, class and gender inequalities, and administrative practices, these attempted to trace what caused catastrophe and death in early modern society.29 Such studies provided an impressive collection of quantitative data and demonstrated how interactions among fields in the social sciences—economics, geography, sociology and history—further our historical understanding of catastrophic crises; however, they have disregarded the connections between events, language, and culture.30 As Daniel Gordon observed in regards to plague studies, the dominant social approaches maintained that catastrophes do not “modify society but merely highlight its stable structures, such as class antagonisms and professional boundaries.”31 Rather than approaching catastrophes as dynamic events in and of themselves, these studies privileged an ahistorical structuralist reading over one of contingency and change.

A new approach to crisis studies developed in the past decades, particularly in regards to medical catastrophe, following the pioneering works of Susan Sontag and Colin Jones, who called attention to the metaphorical and mythical dimensions of disease.32 This present work meshes with their cultural approach to the study of crisis. By “crisis,” I mean a moment where relatively stable meanings
and representations are overthrown or reformulated. Understanding conquest and plague as ruptures from the everyday, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century municipal leaders deployed different sets of languages and practices to make sense of and manage catastrophic events, while sidestepping other idioms. The traditional classical republican language was one of the many vocabularies that became a useful tool for elite administrators, ecclesiastics, and commentators to understand these events, to maintain a sense of social and political order, and to assess the advantages and damages related to commercial activity.

Finally, combining the history of commercial expansion and state-building with a study of catastrophe (particularly of the medical sort) is valuable because it allows for a consideration of French political traditions in a transnational Mediterranean context. Bubonic plague, once endemic to the European continent, had retreated to Asian, sub-Saharan, and eastern-European territories by the seventeenth century. According to many French writers, the plague belonged to non-Western states that they described as founded on perverted forms of politics, sociability, and culture. The frequency with which French and Marseillais négociants entered into the Mediterranean commercial universe sharpened discussions regarding the contagious effect of “oriental” physical and moral diseases and the dangers they posed to French politics and society. The négociants who formed Marseille’s municipal administration were as much cosmopolitan inhabitants of French trade colonies in the Mediterranean as they were citizens of Marseille. Could virtue, patriotism, and fidelity to the French Crown be sustained beyond the shores of France? Could négociants who spent considerable time away from Marseille and France demonstrate exemplary civic behavior upon their return? Or would these négociants who associated with Turkish traders become political, cultural, and religious traitors and pollute France by spreading “Asiatic” customs and behaviors? Debates over whether commerce and merchants were the stable foundations for state and society were rendered more complex given this transnational commercial environment.

The Great Plague of Marseille that appeared in the context of these discussions over politics, commerce, and sociability presented French elites with a unique set of questions: Was the outbreak of a medical crisis within French commercial society an anomaly or the unsurprising consequence of commercial expansion and royal aggrandizement? Was plague indicative of fundamental problems in French politics, commerce, and morality? Did commerce benefit or poison society? Could commerce be regulated to avoid catastrophe and corruption? If not, what alternative foundation for society was there? Competing versions of classical republican thought—one antagonistic to commerce, the other
supportive of it—came to a head during and after the Great Plague of 1720. Positive assessments of commerce that redeemed certain merchants as beneficial to state, society, and history became difficult to sustain during medical catastrophe. Nonetheless, the Crown and municipal elites’ commitment to international trade and exchange was too great for such claims to totally wither away. The years immediately following the catastrophe saw intensified use of the idioms of classical republicanism and commercial civic spirit, as elites now keenly aware of the physical threats posed by commercial activity sought new ways of cultivating the virtues and patriotism they agreed were requisite for a well-functioning state.

Ultimately, the eighteenth century did not see French elites definitively choosing between traditional classical republicanism and its modified pro-commercial variant; rather, both persisted through the Enlightenment, one focusing on the promises of commercial expansion, the other directing attention to its dangers. The ways in which they coexisted through the end of the Old Regime allowed French elites to become well-versed and well-practiced in concepts of republican “civic excellence”34 and patriotism before the French Revolution. This concept of civisme, so integral to the Revolution of 1789, developed not only in Paris, traditionally seen as the “center” of the kingdom, but often in cities far from the capital, where local elites juggled their identities as royal subjects, municipal citizens, and cosmopolitan merchants.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In its first three chapters, this book examines how particular groups of royal, municipal, and intellectual elites appropriated classical republican traditions while participating in commerce from 1660 to 1720. They discuss the different forms of accommodation they negotiated as they tried to skirt the real and imagined threats that could undermine commercial activity and political stability. Chapter 1 focuses on discussions among controllers-general, royal intendants, Marseillais échevins, and the Chamber of Commerce. Once the Crown instituted a new municipal administration, it began introducing regulations to control Franco-Levantine commerce. These royal initiatives were premised on the idea that unsupervised commercial activity threatened the public good. The Marseillais merchant elite resisted these developments. The Crown and the merchant-administrators commonly believed that commercial expansion could benefit the general good. They disagreed, however, over how to derive this public good. Would commercial expansion be successfully realized through the sovereign gaze and
regulatory policing of an absolute king, or would it materialize through the political participation of citizens interested in the public well-being? Controllers-general, royal intendants, échevins and the Chamber of Commerce haggled over whether absolutist ideology or the city’s civic traditions legitimately determined the public good.

Municipal merchant deputies and royal councilors of state, however, gradually found ways to synchronize civic and absolutist concepts of deriving the public good. The Crown’s desire to maximize the productivity of its subjects created an opportunity where utility to the state could be articulated in terms of civic excellence, and vice versa. This was particularly the case in discussions held by the Conseil du Commerce (1700), an advisory board comprised of royal councilors of state and merchant deputies from France’s major cities that deliberated commercial regulations. Merchant deputies strengthened the new commercial civic spirit by suggesting that elite merchants were exemplary citizens who dedicated themselves to the common good.

Chapter 2 explores aristocratic responses to commercial expansion in Marseille. As the Crown began considering négoce an honorable activity, and négo-ciants as an “aristocracy of commerce,”35 some ennobled aristocracy supported the market. Though the Crown had banned the traditional Marseillais nobility from municipal power in 1660, a number of nobles of the robe—mostly local antiquarians and historians—praised commercial expansion, arguing that kings liberated republics. This republican reading of history, similar to narratives developed in Renaissance Florence or Venice, was a cyclical story leading from ancient perfection via ruin to future regeneration. Local chroniclers began their narratives with the myth of classical Marseille, lamented how the republic had been corrupted, and celebrated its long-awaited resurrection. These historians obscured the memory of the conquest and cultivated a culture of historical amnesia, by imagining the French monarch rescuing the ancient republic out of its moral and economic doldrums. Such evaluations diverged from the discomfort that nobility of the sword around the kingdom expressed about commercial expansion. Commerce, these argued, destabilized ancient social hierarchies and weakened the state. Combining classical republican suspicions of luxury with the religious ideal of “disinterestedness,” the sword nobility advocated an agricultural society governed by a virtuous aristocracy. The Crown’s support for commercial expansion drove a wedge between the sword and robe nobility, and this division became apparent in historical discussions.

Chapter 3 studies how the presence of non-French merchants in Marseille affected conversations between royal and municipal administrators. Following
the conquest, the Crown threw open the city gates to greater numbers of foreign traders and immigrants, while great numbers of Marseillais and French traders departed for non-French ports. Such demographic shifts put pressure on the partnership between city elites and royal administrators, as well as their common commercial engagement. One major issue—Colbert’s recruitment of foreign professionals to Marseille—exacerbated tensions between royal and civic elites. The controller-general invited Levantine Armenians and Jews in particular to become French and trade for their adopted king. Royal and Marseillais elites employed different languages of public good, usefulness to the state, and civic virtue to debate over the flow of Jews, Armenians, and Protestants into Marseille and France. Royal intendants and Marseille’s chamber of commerce discussed whether naturalized subjects could interest themselves in the public good of a country originally foreign to them. The chamber and controllers-general did not come to an agreement until the latter half of Louis XIV’s reign, when renewed warfare and religious intolerance amplified xenophobic rhetoric against non-Christian trading partners across France.

The chapter places these Marseillais discussions about foreign and naturalized traders in the larger context of French Orientalisms in seventeenth and eighteenth-century France. Early modern French utterances regarding the Mediterranean East and the Ottoman Empire in particular were fraught with tensions. Historically an ally of the sultan, the French king oscillated back and forth between fostering positive views of his non-Christian trading partner and his people, and reactivating derogatory stereotypes of non-Christian barbarians. Under royal supervision and patronage, authors—doctors, merchants, ambassadors, nobles, and travel writers—who penned publications on the Ottoman Empire encouraged négociants to conduct missions abroad, while warning of the dangers present in Ottoman territories. The challenge for the Crown was to alert merchants to dangers connected to international trade without extinguishing enthusiasm for commerce. Meanwhile, outside the royal court, Protestant expatriates, sword nobility, amateur observers, and specialists in “Oriental languages” added to the number of Frenchmen collecting information on the Levant. All of these different writings provided a collection of Orientalist vocabularies that royal and local administrators, merchants, and intellectuals could employ to craft both inclusive and exclusionary arguments regarding non-French and naturalized French populations involved in international commerce.

The specter of catastrophe, most notably plague, however, always threatened to annihilate the commercial activities that rested on the precarious cooperation among royal and local administrators, and French, naturalized French, and non-
French merchants. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 turn to this dark cloud that hovered over the international market. Chapter 4 examines how the Crown and Marseillais administrators developed regulatory systems to protect commerce and avert medical catastrophe. Members of Marseille’s Bureau de la Santé ran quarantines and collaborated with other European health bureaus to keep informed of the latest epidemics. The Crown increasingly intervened in the bureau’s affairs as it did in commerce, calling for new regulations and demanding clearer communication with royal authorities.

Strategies developed to avert medical catastrophe brought centuries-old medical ideas together with newer scientific and political ideas of health and disease. Ancient Hippocratic traditions and emergent Orientalist stereotypes of the Ottoman Empire converged to contrast a healthy Western civilization—ruled by public-minded rulers, officials, and citizens—with a decadent Ottoman Empire, founded on despotism, self-interest, and caprice. Meanwhile, scientific, geographic and moral arguments overlapped as plague writers stressed the need for citizens to prioritize public health over particular wants. Plague discussions drew on civic republican traditions, religious sensibilities against self-interest, and absolutist visions of a utopian sanitary order. Justified in the name of the public good, systems of surveillance became increasingly severe all over Europe as municipal leaders worked to eliminate disease.

Nonetheless, the Great Plague of Marseille, the subject of Chapter 5, appeared in 1720. Plague suspended commercial activity between France and its neighbors. It strained relationships between the French monarchy and Marseillais administrators. The Crown had extended its powers by exploiting the ambiguities of Marseillais republicanism. Downplaying the political freedoms that once characterized the republic, it had focused on the commerce that had also formed the city’s republican identity. The plague’s arrival on board a merchant ship and the subsequent mortality seemed to demonstrate that Marseille’s administrators had chosen wrongly by opting for the Crown’s strategy of commercial expansion and state-building. Levantine commerce and a corrupt merchant-run quarantine system had brought plague to Marseille. Plague thus stimulated a critique of commercial society and strengthened classical republican traditions antagonistic to commerce.

Civic leaders did not, however, relinquish their ties with the monarchy. Instead, the Crown played a critical role in establishing a municipal order that reactivated severe classical republican traditions. City administrators and royal commandants emphasized communal mobilization and polarized political virtue against individual interest and commercial and moral corruption. The royal
military and civic leaders implicated the market as a breeding ground of immorality. They gathered suspects—defined as those who put the population in medical and moral danger—and quarantined and summarily executed them. The plague years constituted a moment imagined as an ultimate crisis for a city whose citizens redefined civic engagement without commerce.

Marseillais elites therefore depended on old civic traditions, republican vocabularies, and new forms of royal aid to formulate responses to commercial and medical catastrophe. Chapter 6 demonstrates how this mélange of civic republicanism and monarchical bureaucracy converged with the religious reaction to plague, by examining Jansenist and Orthodox reactions to commercial crisis. Throughout France, Jansenist discussions predating the epidemic had applied the rhetoric of republican civic participation to ecclesiastical rule; these debates kindled criticisms of commercial luxury and royal and papal absolutism that became immediately pertinent in the context of the political and social chaos generated by plague. The Catholic establishment, meanwhile, located the causes of plague in immorality, particularly of the kind they believed was spawned by commercial excess and religious heterodoxy. Supported by pope and Crown, they cultivated a civic devotion—the Cult and Festival of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—to rid the community of such decadence. Meanwhile, ecclesiastics stressed the importance of civic aid and charity during medical crisis, and likened Catholics’ struggle to choose between redemption and damnation to citizens’ conflicts between political virtue and corruption.

Chapter 7 discusses how Marseille and France recovered from the medical and economic crises of 1720. Ultimately, the critique of commerce during the epidemic did not decimate France’s international market; commercial expansion reached new heights as France and Marseille turned again toward the Mediterranean to rebuild the French economy and centralized state. The mid eighteenth century was, in many ways, the crowning point of the optimistic philosophy of doux commerce. But as the claims of commercial apologists reached a crescendo, powerful arguments against commerce continued to resound, from calls for more vigilance in patriotic civic education to claims in favor of agricultural pursuits. Plague reactivated a language of opposition that would check and counterbalance blind enthusiasm for commerce. Remembering the epidemic, French authors would express their ambivalence about market luxury, royal aggrandizement, and their tendencies to corrupt moral and political virtues. Eighteenth-century elites faced the challenge of reconciling their hopes in an upward-moving historical trajectory toward civilization, progress, and perfectibility with their darker republican musings about a cyclical history of decline and human fallibil-
ity. Such was the problem both for commentators in the Enlightenment and for revolutionaries during the Terror. This study of eighteenth-century nightmares—both real and imagined—of a commercial society and expanding state at the crossroads of progress and crisis might serve to renew a sense of the Enlightenment’s relevance for the postmodern society of today, for which, regrettably, the political and economic impact of a catastrophic event resonates all too well.