

**The “Great Altercation” between the *Trois Petites Loteries* and the Comédie:  
Luxury, Consumption, and Power**

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Historians such as Daniel Roche, Cissie Fairchilds and Michael Kwass, among others, have now firmly established that a Consumer Revolution did indeed take place in eighteenth-century France. Eighteenth-century France and Paris in particular were awash with economic wealth and consumer goods. The expansion of international trade, colonialism and slavery brought unprecedented wealth to France. Frenchmen and women now regularly consumed tobacco, coffee, sugar and other colonial goods on a massive scale. They also had more clocks, mirrors, silverware, beds and other “luxury” goods than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, those “luxury” goods were increasingly shifting into the category of “necessity.”<sup>2</sup> And historians have shown that the new consumerism penetrated deep within society. Fairchilds, for example, has shown that cheaper imitation luxury goods – her so-called populuxe goods – descended the socio-economic ladder to the middling sorts and even the popular classes.<sup>3</sup> Despite the explosion in research done lately on the Consumer Revolution many questions remain. For example, we now know a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kwass, “Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France,” *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 631-59; Michael Kwass, “Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Representations* 82 (2003): 87-117; Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun, *The Birth of Intimacy: Privacy and Domestic Life in Early Modern Paris*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Philadelphia, 1991); Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Colin Jones and Rebecca Spang, “*Sans-culottes, sans café, sans tabac*: Shifting Realms of Necessity and Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*, Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds (Manchester, 1999), 37-62.

<sup>3</sup> Cissie Fairchilds, “The production and marketing of populuxe goods in eighteenth-century Paris,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds (London, 1993), 228-48.

great deal about the proliferation of goods in the eighteenth-century, but how did these goods and the purchasing of them change the ideological and cultural framework for those consumers? That is, what were some of the larger cultural and political implications of the Consumer Revolution? What implications did the spreading consumer culture have for everyday, common power relationships in a society predicated upon hierarchy, orders and tradition? Much more generally, what were the implications for the traditional social order of the Old Regime?

The lotteries are particularly useful in considering these issues of consumption and power because the lotteries are so closely associated with both ideas. They are quintessentially consumerist in that they feed off of people's hopes of material gain and they are completely discretionary. The lotteries were also closely associated with the state because it often operated various lotteries throughout the eighteenth century. Even when the state did not directly operate a certain lottery, it was always responsible for its regulation and oversight – and indeed, for the very privilege of operating one at all. No lottery was allowed to operate legally without the explicit permission of the crown. There is also a particularly interesting dynamic of consumerism and power because contemporaries tended to moralize about lotteries – much the same as many people do today. The lotteries were thought to prey upon credulous, and even ignorant, common people. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a noted social and moral commentator in the eighteenth century, claimed that the lotteries had a devastating effect on families, and referred to these supposed debilitating losses as “odious conquests by the state on its citizens.”<sup>4</sup> Mercier implied a power dynamic in which the state forced itself upon the helpless people through the popular consumption of lottery tickets. But when we move beyond this moralizing discourse, what does the relationship between lotteries and lottery ticket consumers really look like? How did contemporaries not opposed to lotteries on moralistic grounds understand consumers of lottery tickets and how did that change over time?

I will examine these questions by focusing on a particular debate that occurred in 1747 between the administrators of the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés and the actors and actresses of the Comédie Française, which sought to increase lottery ticket prices for its own financial benefit. This “Great Altercation” – as those involved referred to it – went to the heart of many of these questions. The Comédie sought to benefit from the popularity of the lotteries for their own gain, while the lottery administrators fought to defend their lotteries as their exclusive privilege. This altercation in 1747 threatened to destabilize the entire lottery market as the Comédie threatened to encroach upon the lotteries. In defending themselves, the lottery administrators articulated a position that both defended a very traditional order regarding lotteries, yet at the same time offered a radically new way of imagining consumers as having very real power. In making this argument, they also suggested a potentially larger alteration to the entire social order of the Old Regime – one in which the lowly consumer had an important place. In short, the lotteries state emphatically that consumers would not tolerate a price increase. In the end, it was the consumers who should have the final say in the matter, not privileged actors and administrators or, for that matter, even officials within the monarchy itself. The dispute over lottery tickets demonstrates the ways in which the Consumer Revolution eroded the traditional social order.

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<sup>4</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 12 vols (Amsterdam, 1782), 3: 243.

*The Trois Petites Loteries and the Changing Lottery Market*

The “Great Altercation” took place at a time in which lotteries were dramatically changing in France after a long period of relative stability. The first large scale lotteries in Europe appeared in Northern Italy during the Renaissance and quickly spread throughout Europe along trade routes. The first legal lottery appeared in France in 1539 during the reign of François I. Between 1539 and the early part of the eighteenth century, lotteries became firmly established in French life along with an entire set of expectations around them and their proper use and regulation. Jacques Savary des Brûlons outlined these collective expectations in his famous *Dictionnaire universel de commerce*, which was published in 1723. It was commonly understood, according to the *Dictionnaire universel*, that lotteries could be used as a “kind of commerce through which the Sovereigns have found resources to repair their finances exhausted by long wars or to pay off the state’s debts.” Lotteries had also been accepted as a means to raise money “to support establishments useful to the Public, or in order to complete Basilicas and Churches.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, lotteries could be used by the state during time of exigent fiscal need or for charity or charitable projects, broadly defined. There was yet another principle reflected in Savary’s statements: lotteries were meant to be limited and finite in nature. They were not permanent and could not operate indefinitely. Once a fiscal crisis ended, so too did the lottery. Once a church construction or reconstruction project ended, so too did the lottery. This was the way lotteries were understood and used for nearly two hundred years in France. It had been a remarkably stable period for lotteries in France, and a period in which lotteries had helped to undergird traditional pillars of order in times of crisis: the Absolutist state and Christian charity.

Lotteries had always been associated with times of stress and crisis and they were by definition extraordinary. It is therefore unsurprising that lotteries gained particular prominence in French life during the latter part of Louis XIV’s reign, which ended in 1715. With only four years of peace between 1688 and 1714, the end of the Sun King’s reign was characterized by warfare and seemingly endless fiscal and economic crisis. As such, the use of lotteries expanded dramatically, particularly for charitable lotteries as public revenue became less available. This was especially true during the War of the Spanish Succession, which began in 1701 and finally came to an end in 1714. As the war raged, much of Europe was brought to its knees economically and France was no exception. With budgets strained to the breaking point, Louis XIV approved an unprecedented spat of new charitable lotteries. In 1707 and 1708, for example, lotteries were approved by the monarchy to support various impoverished religious communities, including the Abbey of Poissy, the Benedictine monastery at Saint-Marcel, the Abbey of Port Royal and the Irish Benedictine monastery at Ypres. These lotteries fit into the traditional schema: they were charitable and temporary. In fact, all four of these lotteries were revoked in 1708 because the lotteries had simply gone on for too long.<sup>6</sup> Many other lotteries were approved during the remaining years of Louis XIV’s reign.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Savary des Brûlons, *Dictionnaire universel de commerce*, 3 vols (Paris, 1723), 3: 189.

<sup>6</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter BN), Fonds Français 21628, “Arrest du Conseil d’Etat du Roy du 27 Octobre 1708.”

<sup>7</sup> Élisabeth Belmas, *Jouer autrefois: Essai sur le jeu dans la France moderne (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 2006), 306-18.

Despite this quite unprecedented expansion in the lottery market the fundamental basis remained the same: lotteries should be charitable and temporary. Despite the ideological basis of lotteries remaining the same, there was now increasing recognition of something like a consumer market for lottery tickets and that market was showing signs of stress and instability. In 1713, a royal order noted that this new proliferation of lotteries had become unwieldy and the lotteries had begun to cannibalize each other's profits through fierce competition.<sup>8</sup> This was an implicit recognition of the new lottery market place dominated by ticket consumers. With lotteries becoming a regular part of urban life, particularly in Paris, consumers increasingly had options and were exercising those options with their own *livres*. There were those within the monarchy that felt the lotteries needed some control and guidance to ensure their long-term viability.

The expansion of the lottery market at the end of Louis XIV's reign destabilized a system that had been remarkably stable since 1539, but it was irrevocably altered in 1727. In that year, the French monarchy overhauled the entire lottery market by creating three charitable lotteries that would be, for the first time in French history, permanent. The Loterie des Enfants Trouvés, the Loterie de Saint-Sulpice and the Loterie des Communautés Religieuses would come to dominate the French lottery market for decades to come. They would also be organized and regulated collectively by the monarchy with an exclusive and permanent privilege. They became known as the *trois petites loteries*, or simply as the *trois loteries*.

The *trois loteries* were organized collectively in 1727 but all three lotteries had long histories as small, intermittent charitable lotteries under the previous system. The Loterie des Enfants Trouvés (the Foundlings' Lottery) supported the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés (the Foundlings Hospital), which was the main orphanage in Paris and could house thousands of children at a time. The history of the lottery is not entirely clear, but it helped to build the orphanage in 1658 and there were at least several other lotteries to support the hospital before 1727, including a lottery granted permission in 1717 by the Regent, the Duc d'Orleans.<sup>9</sup> The Loterie de Saint-Sulpice meanwhile was meant to help support massive renovations to that church, and the Loterie des Communautés Religieuses was meant to support numerous religious communities and church renovation projects.

The royal order of 1727 suppressed all other lotteries in favor of the *trois loteries*. The three lotteries were still operated separately by the various foundations they supported, but they would now be regulated uniformly by the monarchy with exclusive privilege. The drawings, prices, profits and even the tickets themselves would all be the same. The drawings were spread out over the course of the month with the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés drawing its winning tickets on the tenth of each month while the other two lotteries drew on the twentieth and the thirtieth of each month.<sup>10</sup> Tickets were sold for twenty *sous* each, or one *livre*, with eighty-five percent of ticket sales mandated to go into the prize pool to be paid out to the players. The other fifteen percent could then be

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<sup>8</sup> BN, Fonds Français 21628, "Arrest du Conseil d'Etat du Roy du 29 Mars 1713."

<sup>9</sup> René Rouault de la Vigne, *La Loterie à travers les ages et plus particulièrement en France; ouvrage orné de reproductions photographiques de documents anciens* (Paris, 1934), 42-43. For the 1717 lottery during the Regency, see BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 166-70.

<sup>10</sup> BN, Fonds Français 21628, "Arrest du Conseil d'Etat du Roy, du 26 Fevrier 1727."

used to cover operating expenses of the lotteries themselves with any remaining profit going toward the respective charitable ends.<sup>11</sup>

The *trois loteries* were organized together to prevent cannibalization of each other, but they were also organized in such a way as to optimize their consumer appeal. In doing so, the monarchy helped to create and expand the consumer market for lottery tickets. The drawings themselves were regulated in a uniform way to inspire confidence in the consuming public in the legitimacy of the drawings as well as to create a sense of spectacle. The lotteries were drawn raffle style with each ticket having a unique number. On each of the specified drawing days, a blindfolded child would draw the winning tickets from the “wheel of fortune” that was set up in the Grande Salle of the Hôtel de Ville of Paris. The winning lots would vary depending on the number of tickets sold, but they would be worth anywhere from one hundred *livres* to over twenty-five thousand *livres*. The drawings were held publicly to reassure the consuming public that the drawings were entirely fair, even using a presumably innocent child to pick the winning tickets. As if to lend even more legitimacy and gravity to the drawings, they were attended by both the Lieutenant General of police and the Archbishop of Paris. Anyone was welcome to come off the street to witness the drawings in person.

The reorganization of the lotteries was successful; they had indeed become very popular, especially with the popular classes. At only twenty *sous* per ticket, prices were set to maximize their accessibility deep within the French economy and society and were easily affordable for most workers. Jacques-Louis Ménétra, a common glazier, indicates in his famous journal that purchasing lottery tickets was a regular part of his and his companions’ daily lives.<sup>12</sup> Even lower skilled workers would often buy lottery tickets in common with others, making tickets even more accessible. William Cole complained in his journal of his trip to Paris in 1765 that his French valet, who was a lowly day laborer, failed to show up for work one day because he was too preoccupied arguing with another worker about some lottery tickets that the two had bought in common.<sup>13</sup> The lotteries were by all accounts a huge success.

One indication of just how popular the lotteries were was their continued success in the 1740s. The middle of the eighteenth century was generally a time of economic prosperity and expansion, but the 1740s were a decade of hardship for most of France, especially 1747-1749. The French spent an enormous amount of money fighting the War of Austrian Succession from 1740-1748. On top of increased taxes and borrowing, there were also numerous bad harvests. By 1747, the year of the Great Altercation, France was under enormous strain.<sup>14</sup> Despite this economic hardship, the lotteries were prospering with steady increases in ticket sales during the 1740s. And 1747, the year of this debate, was a record year for the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés, selling 1,648,000 lottery tickets or 1,648,000 *livres* worth of tickets – up an astounding thirty-three percent from just the previous year.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Max Terrier and Vanier Henriette, *La loterie racontée par l’image, histoire abrégée des blanches, tontines et loteries faites en France de 1539 à 1933* (Paris, 1936), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal of My Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1986), 190-92.

<sup>13</sup> William Cole, *A Journal of My Journey to Paris in the Year 1765*, ed. Francis Griffin Stokes (London, 1931), 166.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon, 1715-99* (New York, 2002), 131-33.

<sup>15</sup> Paris, Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), F12 795, “Releve des Benefices de la Loterie des Enfants Trouvés F12 795”; and AN G9 114, “4 Autres Comparaisons.”

*The Great Altercation and the Challenge to the Traditional Order*

The astounding success of the lotteries in a time of economic turmoil did not go unnoticed, particularly by the actors and actresses of the Comédie Française, which had seen a precipitous decline in its ticket sales in the 1740s and was in a dire fiscal situation. The privileged theaters of Paris were required to pay an annual charitable duty to the Hôtel Dieu and the Hôpital Général. Under these trying economic circumstances, the Comédie Française petitioned the government to suspend the theater's charitable duty to the sick and poor. To make up for this charitable shortfall, the theater proposed increasing the price of lottery tickets by four *sous* to twenty-four *sous* with the new lottery revenue generated going toward the theater's obligation.<sup>16</sup>

The theater's proposal highlighted several key points in support of their petition. First, the theater argued that it was in a desperate financial situation and simply could not afford to continue paying the duty without the possibility of bankruptcy. Second, and more interestingly for my purposes, the theater argued that the price increase on lottery tickets would be easy and painless for the lottery administrators since they "would collect this sum without it costing them any expense." Seeming to sense that the proposed price increase would be met with resistance, the theater adamantly denied any negative public reception of the measure, arguing that "an increase so small will never be onerous to the public, nor consequently do any harm to the established lotteries." Indeed, the actors claimed, "Far from the Public being cool to this increase, it will find it a lure, since" the prize pools "will be increased proportionally."<sup>17</sup> In this last statement, the theater implied a consumer motivation: material gain. Though the end purposes of the lotteries may have been charitable, the motives of the consumers were anything but charitable. The theater thus felt no moral compunction about further exploiting lottery consumers. In sum, the theater argued that shifting the burden of poor relief to the lotteries would more than replace the Comédie's duty: it would cost the king nothing; it would be very little hassle for the lotteries themselves; and the public would actually happily accept it since that would mean bigger prize pools. This seemed to be the proverbial win-win situation – at least that is how the actors portrayed it.

Finding the proposal less than enticing, the directors of the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés and the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés vehemently and bitterly opposed any ticket price increase designed to relieve the Comédie of its obligation to the poor. In making their case, the lottery administrators leaned heavily upon two ideas: first, the unworthiness of the actors and actresses in contrast to the worthiness of the poor; and second, the expectations and power of lottery ticket consumers. In depicting the actors as unworthy and the poor as worthy, the lottery administrators used a common reference in the eighteenth century. Contemporaries commonly understood that there were two types of poor: the "deserving" and the "undeserving," and there was a drastic difference between them. Drunkards, able-bodied beggars and the irreligious were all undeserving of aid, while elderly widows, the infirm, disabled veterans and orphans were all deserving

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<sup>16</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 113-16.

<sup>17</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 113-16.

of charity. And to be sure, foundlings were the one incontestable group of the deserving poor.<sup>18</sup>

The Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés was formed in 1658 as a branch of the larger Hôpital Général which was founded in Paris in 1656. The Foundling Hospital was the only one of its kind in France. The hospital was deemed necessary in Paris because of the demands placed upon it by the provinces. Each year hundreds and at times thousands of children were sent to Paris for care. Most did not survive the long journey to Paris, but those who did put a huge burden on the hospital system. The problem of foundlings increased dramatically over the course of the eighteenth century. In 1680, the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés cared for 890 children, but by 1740 that number had increased to 5,302; by 1772 it was caring for an astounding 10,634 children.<sup>19</sup> Contemporaries, especially government officials, were all too aware of the plight of these children and the lottery administrators used this awareness to its fullest extent. In their rebuttal, the lottery administrators used the foundlings as an unmovable wall against which to back the actors and actresses. They used every bit of rhetorical verve to contrast the deserving, poor and helpless foundlings to the undeserving, luxurious and able-bodied actors.

The lotteries responded with a series of memoranda. They deeply resented the intrusion of outsiders upon their charitable lottery and they worried that a ticket price increase would have a detrimental effect on the lottery's profits. In crafting their response to the theater's proposal, the lottery administrators discursively constructed their own lottery ticket consuming public and explicitly contrasted those consumers with the actors and actresses. As the lottery portrayed it, consumers bought their lottery tickets with the charitable intention of helping the foundlings. These good, simple consumers were very much contrasted to the actors and actresses, who had "chamber maids, lackeys, etc; furniture, fine clothes, lace, no less similar to the furniture and clothing of the most distinguished people by birth or dignity." They had acquired "immense fortunes" and had all "the luxury which the theater had procured for them." To try to skirt their responsibility to the poor and sick showed quite bluntly that "there is no decency in these gentlemen in not wanting to suffer at all in these times of misery."<sup>20</sup> Despite the hard times there was no outward appearance of deprivation. In a word, the actors lived a life of luxury.

Luxury was a highly contentious subject in the eighteenth century, and it had a severely negative connotation, especially by mid-century. As Sarah Maza claims, luxury was often "a convenient code for all of society's perceived problems."<sup>21</sup> Luxury was not just an economic reference; it was a moral reference as well, standing for degradation, selfishness and general immorality. It was exactly these societal and cultural concerns about luxury that the lottery administrators tapped into, thus moving beyond attacking the Comédie's proposal to attacking the very morality of the actors and actresses themselves. The administrators referred to the "immense fortunes" that many of the Comédie's members had made and "the luxury which the theater has procured for them [the actors]."

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<sup>18</sup> David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley, 2002), 54-56; Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974), 139-43.

<sup>19</sup> Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 334-45.

<sup>20</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 122-30, "Observations."

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Maza, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France," *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 217.

Instead of taking from the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés and the poor foundlings whom the lottery supported, the Comédie should use a part of this outrageous fortune to pay off its debts: “It is a part of this luxury of all the members of the Comédie that should be tapped in order to pay their communal debts, and not impose upon the poor, all of Paris, and all of France in order to repay them.”<sup>22</sup> This was not merely a bureaucratic struggle. As the lotteries discursively framed it, this was a “great altercation,” because it was a political and moral struggle between the degenerate and luxury-loving actors and actresses and the good and charitable lottery ticket-buying people of France. The lotteries were coded as good, moral, and charitable as were those who bought lottery tickets – that is, when the proceeds for lottery tickets went to relieve the poor rather than to relieve the luxurious actors.

A price increase to help relieve the ‘indecent’ theaters would only alienate the good lottery consumers who would simply refuse to buy tickets. The lottery’s public was on the one hand quite traditional in its charitable expectation, yet on the other hand was cognizant, strong and, above all else, powerful through its consumption. As the lottery portrayed it, the theater’s plan would merely “disgust the public” and lead to lower ticket sales. In the following extended passage, the lottery administrators argued that those who bought tickets did so with a particular motive:

The greatest number of those who play these lotteries, besides the desire and hope of gain, have also the consolation of thinking that if they lose, a part of their loss is going to the well-being of the poor and the church, and they will all be quite offended and disgusted at knowing that this increase on the tickets is in order to relieve the Comédie of what was imposed upon it [the duty] for the necessary aid to the Hôpital Général. This is a thing which can neither be hidden nor reasonably justified.<sup>23</sup>

Consumers thus had a particular motive behind their consumption, and in this case, that motive was primarily charitable. But besides that, the lottery administrators also withdrew themselves to a degree from the debate. It was not so much that they were arguing against the theater as much as they were acting as a proxy for the consumer public and that public’s implicit power. The administrators thus framed the dispute as not simply between the directors of the lotteries and the Comédie but between the Comédie and the consumer public. They warned that the price increase “will only create disturbances in the public and be very prejudicial to those who are interested in profiting from them [the foundations funded by lotteries].”<sup>24</sup> The lottery directors, who knew the fickle consuming public and its potential power, warned that the consuming public and its reaction was something to be feared.

To further explain the relationship between the consumer and the lottery, the lottery administrators addressed the more general question of just what exactly a lottery is and should be. They began by asking two rhetorical questions: “What in general is a lottery?” and “What are the current lotteries?” To the first question, they responded that “a lottery is a commitment [*engagement*] between those who receive the money of the

<sup>22</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 122-30.

<sup>23</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 122-30, “Observations.”

<sup>24</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 122-30, “Observations.”



lottery and those who bear their money to it [the lottery].” In this way a lottery was a contractual agreement among the players, but it also shared an implicit trust. The players join their money together with the understanding that some will lose a small amount and others will win a great amount. And “following from this commitment [*engagement*], one should return the total [of all the money wagered] because in this original institution [*institution primitive*] ... the expenses of the lottery should not be taken into account.”<sup>25</sup> So speaking of lotteries in a more general and even pure form, the lotteries would be a zero sum game – the total winnings and losses of all the players would always equal zero. As a pure game, the lottery was a commitment and promise among the players in which each player had an equal amount of equity in the game and variations of winnings were simply the luck of the draw, but ultimately no one had an inherent edge or profit.

This definition of a pure lottery does not, of course, describe the *trois petites loteries*. In the following passage, the author went on to define these lotteries as follows:

In regard to the three lotteries in question, we have announced to the public with public notices that we will follow exactly the commitment of lotteries with the only exception of the fifteen percent that is collected (expenses included) for the poor; one understands by the name poor to be the foundlings, the poor religious communities, and the building of Saint Sulpice.<sup>26</sup>

The three lotteries were not pure in form because they stood as an intermediary between the players and as such they took out fifteen percent from the total pool of wagers with the players consequently suffering a fifteen percent loss of equity. In order to explain why anyone would be willing to accept this lost equity, the memorandum ultimately explained that there were two types of consumers of lottery tickets. The first type of consumers “bears their money willingly” because “the eagerness for gain causes them to support the fifteen percent loss without repugnance,” and because they saw the lottery as a simple “amusement.” However, there was another type of consumer who did not think the lotteries were in themselves legitimate, but were able to tolerate them simply because the money was “designated for the assistance of the poor.”<sup>27</sup> For this consumer, the author argued, an increase in ticket price for the benefit of the Comédie would have to be accompanied by notification by the government so that the public would be fully aware of where their money was going. Implicit in this statement is that the charitable lotteries had a form of understanding with its consumers and with it an obligation to uphold. There was something like an implicit contract. Should that implicit contract be broken, the administrators warned that consumers would withhold their purchasing power.

There are unfortunately very few clues in the archives as to what happened next. There is, however, one small tantalizing slip of paper that gives the most concrete and forceful argument yet. The short note is unsigned and undated and includes just two short paragraphs. It begins by stating that, “The public has poorly received” the very idea of “the increase of four *sous* per lottery ticket in favor of the comedians. It appears that it would have been happy if the profit from the *trois loteries* such as it had been proposed

<sup>25</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 136-41, “Trois choses à examiner.”

<sup>26</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 136-41, “Trois choses à examiner.”

<sup>27</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 136-41, “Trois chose à examiner.”

had been granted to the foundlings.” The author then went on to state that “one can presume that this increase in the tickets will not produce the effect” that one had hoped for. And then the note’s author reminded the reader that there had been a similar proposal to increase ticket prices in 1742 – also for the benefit of the Comédie. The note sternly reminded the reader that “the simple rumor of the increase” in 1742 had decreased the sales of the Loterie de St-Sulpice by forty-six thousand tickets in just one month – implicitly the Loterie des Enfants Trouvés and the other two lotteries would suffer the same fate in 1747.<sup>28</sup> This note reaffirms and feeds into the fear that consumers would react negatively to any increase that would fundamentally alter the lotteries’ traditional charitable mission in favor of the luxury-loving actors. And it also fits into the lottery administrators’ discursively constructed image of the consuming public – that is, a public that spent in a very conscious and willful way, and a public that was very much aware of its own power and willingness to use it.

The government did not increase the price of the lottery tickets. It is ultimately unclear how the government made its final decision, and it is even less clear how much effect the lottery administrators’ argument had. It is clear, however, that the administrators defended themselves by fully aligning the lotteries within the traditional order of Old Regime France. Despite permanent lotteries being an entirely new innovation in France since only 1727, the lotteries were, nonetheless, coded as traditional and charitable. It was the theater that threatened to undermine this traditional order, not the lotteries. Yet in making that argument, the lotteries also had to argue that their consumers were more than mere lemmings. Their consumers, the lotteries argued, were strong, willful and powerful.

This image of lottery ticket consumers tells us something about the larger consumerism of the eighteenth century. Despite Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s many condemnations of luxury and consumption, the Consumer Revolution also offered radically new ways of understanding and shaping social and even political relations, especially for the popular classes. Daniel Roche has argued that the proliferation of goods and “commodities did not necessarily foster alienation; in fact, they generally meant liberation.”<sup>29</sup> I would go even further and argue that the proliferation of consumer goods was not only liberating but also empowering. The Great Altercation is deeply suggestive of a larger and overlooked aspect of the Consumer Revolution. With the Great Altercation, the Comédie presented consumers as malleable and even lacking agency. They were very much seen as subjects of conquest, as Mercier suggested when he referred to lotteries as “odious conquests by the state.”<sup>30</sup> The lottery itself, however, portrayed consumers as empowered by their consumption. In the arguments they made against the Comédie, the lottery administrators portray a much more complicated social and political landscape in which consumption was threatening to alter the traditional and hierarchical base of the Old Regime. The lotteries may have defended themselves as traditional in their charity, but they presented the popular classes, the consumers, as having a powerful voice in the social and political order. It was the consumers themselves who should have the final say in the matter. The lotteries may have had a very traditional

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<sup>28</sup> BN, Joly de Fleury 266, f. 162.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, 1998), 550.

<sup>30</sup> Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 3: 243.

end, but the means to that end, consumption, had potentially radical implications for turning the Old Regime social order on its head.