Privilege and the Machine Question:  
The *Hautes Justices* of Normandy in 1789

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The *cahiers de doléances* (lists of grievances) written in the spring of 1789 have been heavily mined as sources of public opinion on the eve of the French Revolution.¹ Here the *cahiers* provide a means to explore a little-studied aspect of the feudal system, namely the territorially distinct areas known as *hautes justices* (high justices). Held by both clerical and lay seigneurs, the *hautes justices* honeycombed the province of Normandy, France's industrial heartland. Because an enormous percentage of the province's and, indeed, the nation's mechanized textile production was found within the privileged confines of the *hautes justices*, the "machine question" that was so divisive in early nineteenth century Britain was, for the Normans in 1789, fundamentally an issue of privilege. Discontent with the privilege of mechanized production was expressed in the idiom of "moral economy," but this was a more complex moral economy than the traditional demands for bread depicted by E. P. Thompson.² Instead, the Norman version of moral economy articulated in 1789 was market-sensitive and market-focused rather than constituted as contrary to the market. It is this very market sensitivity that, in the depressed economic conditions of 1789, led the Normans to turn away from the machine and away from the privileges that had helped spread mechanization in

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¹ Although not the final word on the *cahiers*, this book will be the last word for some time. Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolution Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
favor of a more populist political economy that could be termed "popular mercantilism." The cahiers reveal the Normans' shift from a pro-development strategy based on privilege to an insistence on full employment and national economic self-sufficiency, which would be guaranteed by tariff walls and thorough-going state intervention in industrial matters. In the summer and fall of 1789, as a result of the triumph of the moral economy of popular mercantilism in Normandy, violence was directed against the privileges and machines found in the hautes justices as part of the emergence of revolutionary politics.

Privilege was fundamental to industrial development in Normandy, a province already described as "the Lancashire of France" because of the prevalence of clerical and lay seigneurs who had been granted the right of haute justice by the crown, some hundreds of years earlier and some at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This powerful judicial authority included the right of police (oversight) which encompassed the regulation of economic matters. With the vocal encouragement and material support of the central state, over the course of the eighteenth century, these seigneurs of hautes justices, such as the archbishop of Rouen, the abbess de Montivilliers, the marquis de Seignelay (the husband of a daughter of the Duke de Montmorency), and the prince de Soubise (Préaux) granted exemptions from the myriad of restrictions and regulations that typified the economy of the old regime. These territories ranged in size from tiny parishes in the suburbs of Rouen to the entire city of Dieppe and included the internationally known textile centers of Bolbec, Darnetal, Elbeuf, Louviers, and Yvetot. In the developmental strategy of the Bourbon state, the Norman territories under seigneurial haute justice became proto-"enterprise zones" where new technologies and labor techniques could be tested and where foreign workers could find protection as they sought to naturalize techniques and industrial methods that France lacked.

The faubourg of Saint-Sever on the other side of the Seine River from Rouen was the flagship privileged enclave in Normandy and one of the key centers of innovation in France.
Divided between three seigneurs including the prince of Rohan, the faubourg was part of a haute justice controlled by the prior and monks of Bonne-Nouvelle. Thanks in large measure to its large colony of English and Irish emigrants, technology transfer became a specialty of this enclave. Here James Hargreave's spinning jenny was naturalized and one of the first Arkwright water-frames installed. Textile machinery, dyeing techniques, metallurgical methods, and chemical processes spread widely from the factories and workshops of Saint-Sever. The success of this distinctive developmental model using what I have termed "the privilege of liberty" was mirrored, albeit on a lesser scale, throughout the province where the hautes justices housed an extraordinarily high proportion of France's most technologically advanced industrial producers. The "privilege of liberty" represents the paradox that is at the heart of Old Regime economic development. The institution of privilege did not always stifle industrial innovation. Indeed, administrators and entrepreneurs were able to use privilege to advance their projects. The most important privilege both sought and given was exemption from the taxes and regulations that typified the old regime. Thus, by supporting entrepreneurial initiative and rewarding innovation, the "privilege of liberty" was a major aspect of state economic policy in eighteenth century France.

Although the state intended these privileged enclaves to spearhead French economic competition with Britain, the implementation of the Commercial Treaty of 1786, coupled with the spiraling economic crisis that began in 1785, created high levels of unemployment. In 1789, the public opinion demonstrated in the cahiers expressed a mercantilistic insistence on full employment at any cost: such opinions explicitly rejected state developmentalism based on the privilege of liberty. Such

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3 On the rights to this territory, see Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), F12 784: "Arrêt du Conseil d'État," 10 July 1721.
views articulated in the cahiers were in contradiction with another point made repeatedly in the Normans' grievances: that equality of opportunity was the best means of bolstering French economic and technological competitiveness. As we will see, in the cahiers, popular discontent with the economic privileges of seigneurs centered on machinery and on the various feudal fiscal exemptions and dues resented by so much of the French population. John Markoff, among others, has discussed the feudal question. I intend to explore how machinery became associated with privilege in the Norman discourse produced in the spring of 1789.

Historians have noted the complaints about machinery in the cahiers of Normandy before. Whether the subject was the rise of "market culture" or the emergence of working class solidarity, these investigations portrayed the machine and machinery as an aspect of some form of modernity. I would argue, however, that in the historical moment of the spring of 1789, the advanced textile machinery which drew the ire of the Normans should instead be regarded as fundamentally an element of privilege. The reason for this seeming contradiction is that the vast majority of these machines had been purchased either by the central state or by the provincial administration and then distributed to favored producers, nearly all of them found in the hautes justices. Given the skill requirements of building such machines, not even all those who possessed or understood the new technology could make them, much less keep them running. For the Normans, such machinery was a privilege that required the participation of the state and threatened the livelihoods of tens if not hundreds of thousands of workers. Small wonder

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7 On these questions, see Jeff Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French
then that the mercantilist chimera of full employment materialized around machinery.

Among the 1,284 extant cahiers of the parishes, urban corporations and communautés (communities), cities and bailliages of the province of Normandy, 137 (10.7 percent) made demands about machines. Seventy (5.5 percent) called for the abolition of the hautes justices. These numbers mask the depth of the concerns about the privileges of the hautes justices in industrial districts. In the bailliage of Rouen, 47.7 percent of the cahiers discussed machines; in Andely, a secondary bailliage of Rouen to the southeast, it was 58.1 percent; in the city of Rouen, 22.2 percent; and in Gisors, another secondary bailliage to the southeast, 14.8 percent. The coastal regions of Normandy were far less worried about the privilege of industrial machinery. Only seven cahiers of 950 (.7 percent) mention machines. Demands for the elimination of the hautes justices were found more widely: Andely (16.1 percent), the city of Rouen (14.3 percent), the bailliage of Cany to the east of Le Havre (11.6 percent), and the bailliage of Rouen (9.7 percent) had the greatest concentrations, but every bailliage in the province had at least one cahier make this demand.8

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8 It is worth mentioning that these subjects are not found in Jacques-Guillaume Thouret's model cahier. This widely distributed and widely copied model cahier has made it more difficult to use these lists of grievances to discuss public opinion. Marc Bouloiseau, ed., Cahiers de doléances du Tiers État du bailliage de Rouen pour les États généraux de 1789 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957, 1960), I:xvii-ci; E. Le Parquier, ed., Cahiers de doléances du bailliage du Havre (seconnaire de Caudebec) pour les États généraux de 1789 (Épinal: Imprimerie Lorraine, 1929); Marc Bouloiseau and Philippe Boudin, eds., Cahiers de doléances du Tiers État du bailliage d'Andely (seconnaire de Rouen) (Rouen: Comité départemental de la Seine-Maritime pour l'histoire économique et sociale de la Révolution française, 1974); Les cahiers de doléances de 1789 dans le Calvados (Caen: Centre régionale de documentation pédagogique, 1986); E. Le Parquier, ed., Cahiers de doléances du bailliage d'Argues (seconnaire de Caudebec) pour les États généraux de 1789 (Lille: Camille Robbe, 1922); and Émile Bridrey, ed.,
These figures demonstrate that a significant number of Normans were concerned with the machinery often found in the privileged enclaves of the hautes justices. But these concerns did not reflect a detailed understanding of machines, how the technology functioned, or the economic effects of mechanization. Nearly all of the grievances were expressed by parishes within the hautes justices or by parishes, corporations, or communautés located within a few miles of one. Such proximity to the nascent industrialization under way in this region led the Normans to express a generalized anxiety about economic competition, but the cahiers demonstrated a stunning, yet revealing misunderstanding of the labor-savings involved in the use of a water-powered spinning jenny, a water-frame, or a mule-jenny.

At Amfreville-sous-les-monts in the bailliage of Rouen, the cahier observed that four hundred men, women and children worked on cotton-spinning machines in Louviers and thereby "took the bread from more than 1,200 others." The cahier of Saint-Martin-au-Bosc in the bailliage of Gisors stated that "one of these machines occupies 7 or 8 people and takes the work of 200 others." Saint-Martin de Boscherville in the bailliage of Rouen believed that "each of these machines takes away the jobs of at least 60 people who are now in misery." Guitry, in the bailliage of Gisors, lamented that with these machines, it was possible "to spin in a day what used to take 100 people, leaving them to die of hunger." The écrivains-jurés (licensed writers) of the city of Rouen engaged in just a bit of writers' hyperbole when they wrote that "these machines have taken the jobs of a million workers leaving them without bread."9 Local officials estimated that, in 1789, in what became the department of the

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Seine-Inférieure alone, there were more than 126,000 cotton spinners (overwhelmingly female) among more than 246,000 textile workers (four-fifths of whom were female).\textsuperscript{10} According to these authorities, one-third of the cotton spinners were unemployed.\textsuperscript{11} Despite their misunderstandings of the actual labor-savings involved, it is possible, however, that the Normans’ anger was directed at the correct target. In 1790, there were only 1,600 spinning jennies in all of France, about half of them in Normandy; each could do the work of approximately eight people. Of the three Arkwright water-frames in France, the one in Normandy replaced more than one hundred people.\textsuperscript{12}

For the Normans in the spring of 1789, beyond the loss of jobs, machines were a problem for two fundamental reasons: quantity and quality. According to the cahier of Saint-Jean du Carconnay in the bailliage of Rouen, "spinning machines produce such a quantity of thread that the price of this merchandise has collapsed." Rebaïs in the same bailliage asserted that "machine-spun thread cannot be treated [with soap] and makes bad fabric with little durability." The cahier complained that "while it is true that fabrics using machine-spun thread look just as good and are less expensive, which manufacturers like, the consumer is frequently deceived because the fabric doesn't last as long and thereby discredits French industry." In addition to frequent criticisms of the quantity and quality of machine-spun thread, some cahiers identified more subtle consequences of the spread of machines. Notre-Dame de Douville in the bailliage of Andely remarked that, because they produced so much thread so fast, "the price of raw cotton has risen to an exorbitant price" that hand-spinners could not afford to pay, which meant that they could not even begin the process

\textsuperscript{10} André Dubuc, ed., \textit{Textile en Normandie: Études diverses} (Rouen: Société libre d'émulation de la Seine-Maritime, 1975), 145.

\textsuperscript{11} Jean-Pierre Allinne, "À propos des bris de machines textiles à Rouen pendant l'été 1789 : Émeutes anciennes ou émeutes nouvelles?," \textit{Annales de Normandie} 31, no. 1 (1981): 40.

\textsuperscript{12} Horn, \textit{The Path Not Taken}, 87, and \textit{The Industrial Revolution} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 37.
of earning a living.

Almost all the cahiers that explained their opposition to the new technologies made it clear that machine-spun thread had lowered prices so much that families could no longer survive on piece rates, especially given the high price of bread. Le Mesnil-Verclives in the bailliage of Andely claimed that the rate for hand-spun thread had fallen by half while Saint-Martin-au-Bosc bemoaned the fact that "thread has fallen in price to the point that a female spinner of this canton who used to earn 12-15 sols a day, at present earns only 2." Perhaps this is why Bill Reddy claimed that the cahiers of Normandy associated the spread of machinery solely with misery rather than with unemployment. However, most of the cahiers were more direct in apportioning blame: mechanization led to job losses. From Belbeuf in the bailliage of Rouen came the view "that this machine [the spinning jenny] leaves a considerable throng of workers unemployed." The cahier of Salmonville la Rivière in the same bailliage was one of the most articulate on this issue. Machines should only be used if the labor of female spinners did not suffice: "[I]t is the women who should have jobs and their daily labor ought to give them an honest subsistence."

It was not opposition to mechanization or machinery per se that agitated the Normans in 1789. Nor did all machines cause unemployment. Dozens of cahiers attacked only "English machines," "newly-invented machines" or "newly-established machines" put in place "since the peace treaty [of Paris of 1783]" rather than new technologies more generally. For example, the use of coal as fuel received strong support from the Normans even though it too saved labor, in large measure because of the shortage of wood in the province. More surprising was the powerful endorsement of state support for technological advance. The city of Le Havre stipulated "that public distinctions and recompenses be established for inventors, farmers, and artisans who excel in their art and who perfect

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14 For example, Cahiers . . . de Rouen, II:18, 82, 99.
machines or tools." Article 52 of the cahier of the cider and beer merchants of Rouen aggressively demanded the "complete destruction" of "all English [spinning] machines." The very next article, however, suggested that "prizes be established to encourage workers of every type who make a discovery or who perfect a process in our manufactures." The juxtaposition of these demands suggests, first, that not all inventions and machinery were perceived as problems in and of themselves, and, second, that these purveyors of alcoholic beverages might have been sampling their wares as they wrote their cahier.

The explanations of why their rivals across the channel could make such good use of new technologies heighten the impression that Norman mercantilism was strengthening. According to Caen's corporation of hosiers, "[t]he usage of these machines by the English who invented them is because they do not have enough people to supply the thread needed by their manufactures." Rouen's hatters and furriers asserted that "[t]hese machines suit our neighbors, the English, because of their dominant motivation: they have an immense trade with their large colonial empire and with South America, but few goods to support it." These two groups both faced direct competition with British goods not only in France, but also in export markets throughout the Americas. The British need for technological advance versus French self-sufficiency is an important aspect of the mercantilist world-view found in the cahiers.

Within the province, the lists of grievances pointed the finger of blame for the spread of machines using new technology at those who reaped almost all the benefit: their owners. Saint-Martin de Quevillon in the bailliage of Rouen claimed that "this industrious mechanism [the spinning jenny] only benefits the manufacturer who can lower the price of his fabrics." Saint-Martin de la Rouquette in the bailliage of Andely lamented that "[a]ll the new machines and inventions come from the desire by manufacturers to make a quick fortune" by using cheap thread in cotton fabric, for which there was a seemingly inexhaustible

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15 Cahiers . . . du Havre, 121.
market in late eighteenth century France despite the recession of the previous few years. The claims about machines causing unemployment coupled with these indictments of France's industrial entrepreneurs epitomize the pro-employment mercantilist stance found in the cahiers of Normandy in 1789.16

Given the mounting hysteria about mechanization and its effects, it is not surprising that there were a number of different ideas about what to do with these machines. Most cahiers demanded simply that the machines be eliminated. Dozens of cahiers specified the "destruction" of the machines in question. The textile center of Déville in the suburbs of Rouen wanted to "forbid manufacturers from using cotton thread not spun by hand and to prohibit both the export of raw cotton and the importation of cotton fabric from Switzerland." Saint-Jean du Carconnay hoped that "the goodness of the King would lead him to issue prompt orders for the destruction of these machines." Maromme's cahier recommended that "a penalty of the confiscation of their tools and merchandise as well as a stiff fine" be levied on machine-users. A few parishes in the bailliage, such as Roquemont and Cantelou le bocage, saw the crisis as temporary and wanted "machines . . . stilled and put into reserve until commerce is once again flourishing and no one lacks work."17 Here too the Normans' criticisms of machines reflected fears of burgeoning unemployment rather than a fundamental unwillingness to adopt new technologies.

La Heuze, in the bailliage of d'Arques, articulated a traditional moral economy interpretation of how to maintain a minimal standard of living for workers. This cahier stated that "the women and girls are convinced that if thread were made less cheaply, it would be of better quality, foreign goods would not be able to compete, and workers could receive a fair wage for their labor."18 For such a model of economic development to

16 The previous four paragraphs are based on: Cahiers . . . de Rouen, I:114, II:107, 112, 270, 342; Cahiers . . . d'Andely, 74, 113, 130-31, 183; Les cahiers . . . Calvados, 87; Cahiers . . . de Gisors, 183.
17 Cahiers . . . de Rouen, I:125, II:70, 98, 107, 274, 348.
18 Cahiers . . . d'Arques, 275.
function, a mercantilistic state would have to intervene to maintain employment and to cap the price of basic foodstuffs.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the "moral economy" model that had been so deeply rooted on both sides of the channel in the early modern period was clearly under assault in France and England. The public opinion expressed by the cahiers demanded a shift in the nature of the central state's intervention in the industrial economy. Instead of attempting to restore the past, however, the moral economy espoused by the Normans sought a middle way between traditional mercantilism and a liberal approach to state developmentalism. Like the assault on the machine, some of their demands were veiled attacks on privilege, whether used to stimulate economic development or not. The grocers of Rouen challenged the state to eliminate the privileged commercial trading companies, every royal manufacture, "and all other exclusive privileges. They also demand[ed] the suppression of the masterships located in the privileged enclaves."

These demands were a significant departure from the use of the privilege of liberty that had brought so much industrial development to the province over the course of the eighteenth century. Equality and liberty of opportunity—from the abolition of the corporate system of trades, to the foreswearing of all financial privileges, to the elimination of the hautes justices—were the central issues in an enormous number of Norman cahiers. These demands were, however, always subordinated to mercantilistic protections closely linked to a populist moral economy, most notably, the removal of machines, raising tariff barriers, and reinforcing the safety net for the poor.

The "machine question" made famous in nineteenth-century Britain was in the Norman economic environment of 1789 a question of privilege. The mechanization and nascent industrialization taking place in the hautes justices resulted from a deliberate state developmental strategy based on privilege. The

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economic crisis promoted a moral economy of popular mercantilism that led significant numbers of Normans to reject longstanding policies, thereby repudiating the province's economic success story of preceding decades. When the situation turned revolutionary that fateful summer, at the same moment that the Bastille fell, Normans began putting machines to the torch. By the end of October, seven hundred spinning jennies (44 percent of the French total) located almost exclusively in the hautes justices, had gone up in smoke. These bonfires were the Norman resolution to the "machine question" articulated in the cahiers.