

The Commercial Republic Project
Center for the Liberal Arts and Free Institutions
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Much of the political and cultural sociology of eighteenth century Enlightenment thought revolved around explaining how the burgeoning commercial and industrial practices of the age were transforming the mores of peoples in ways both subtle and profound. Adam Smith and David Hume, Montesquieu and Voltaire, to name only a few of the leading lights, wrote extensively about the effects of commerce on culture and character. This tradition of thought runs, in turn, through the grand sociology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the works of Tocqueville, Marx, Mill, Weber, and Durkheim, and to the more recent writings of A.O. Hirschman, Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Polanyi, C.B. Macpherson and a wide range of outstanding contemporary scholarship.

The Commercial Republic Project, housed in the Center for the Liberal Arts and Free Institutions (CLAFI) at UCLA, aims to continue this tradition of exploring the intellectual history, political economy, and ethical architecture of commercial society. Running through the three academic years beginning in Fall 2013, the Project will study the development of the idea of capitalism in Western thought and examine related changes in the economic, legal, and political institutions, as well as the religious, cultural, and moral dimensions, of modern market-oriented society. From a multidisciplinary perspective we focus on the revolutions in belief and practice surrounding the rise, and subsequent critique, of the commercial republic that took place through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in Europe and America.

Themes and Questions

At least since Plato's appraisal of the oligarchic regime and the associated human type, critics have questioned the way of life based upon money-making, the pursuit of private property and luxury, and contractual social relations. Plato, of course, was not kind to the oligarchic principle, arguing that it led to the sacrifice of the public good to private "interests" (as we would say today), and of the goods of the mind and the spirit to the desires of the body. Human flourishing was reduced to profit and happiness became synonymous with pleasure. Freedom was degraded to licentiousness and factionalism (class-warfare) was introduced into the city. The best that could be said of oligarchic man was that, while devoid of virtue, he at least acted *as if* he were virtuous so that others would sign contracts and do business with him. Two thousand years before Ben Franklin wrote, his advice for how to get by in society was apparently already in circulation.

By the seventeenth century a radical revolution in thought was under way wherein the commercial spirit was gaining social status. No longer just a matter of base appetite (or sinful avarice), money-making was coming to be seen as a socially beneficial ambition, a motive or "incentive" to productive labor. The paradoxical maxim that one best served others by serving oneself was taking shape. No longer just the solvent of community and

the civic virtues, private property (along with the concomitant liberty of conscience) was reconceived as the foundation of the rights of man. Factionalism was considered not only ineradicable, but also a matter of self-perfecting and society-advancing competition. No longer just corrupting, luxury translated to personal success, wealth creation, and general prosperity. And the contract became the symbol of a society of independent, free and equal individuals.

At least since Locke, commerce and money-making - and above all the act of *labor*, of productive action - have been deemed not only useful, but also honorable. The idea of virtue was not lost to the modern mind. Rather, in the social state of moral equality and personal freedom, virtue adhered to work, and so to the new middle class.

This revolution coincided with the concurrent rise of liberal democracy and modern science. Indeed, the commercial, democratic, and scientific revolutions seem so complementary that they are often conflated into a single, unidirectional, perhaps providential, movement (even as this obscures the deep tensions and cross-currents between the three revolutions).

The contract grounded a liberal democratic notion of legitimate authority among citizens, one based upon consent rather than natural hierarchy or inheritance. Moreover, the rise of a free-market spontaneous order promised to minimize the need for political authority as such, and so to frame a free society. In place of a long train of custom and privilege, civil society would cohere via an invisible hand and around the division of labor. Where material and spiritual life once seemed in opposition, liberty of conscience and free enterprise came to be seen as co-constitutive elements of personal freedom.

Modern science no less than modern economics took shape around a mechanistic and materialistic view of, and an instrumentalist approach to, nature. Technological innovation and economic development gave rise to a progressive view of history. And empiricism and the scientific method aligned perfectly with the pragmatic business practices of prudent fact finding and rational calculation.

Ultimately, commerce would serve as the material engine for the Enlightenment ideal of cosmopolitanism. Tolerance, civility, and the softening of mores would follow from economic prosperity supplanting religious salvation and aristocratic honor at the core of public life. The spread of commerce in turn promised an end to war as well as oppression. The outcome of this movement would be a progressive empire of reason, peace, and liberty - to expand on JS Mill's resonant metaphor, a world marketplace of interests and ideas.

The eighteenth century rise of the commercial republic thus followed from and contributed to new, characteristically modern views of freedom and equality, history and nature, human nature and the human condition. In a significant sense we can say that the idea of the individual was invented - the human being reconceived as the narrowly self-

interested but autonomous bearer of universal rights, competitive but compassionate, the building-block of the open society, and of mass society.

Program and Objectives

Taking up these themes and questions, the Commercial Republic Project aims to advance the study of the history, constitution, and ethos of commercial society. Few questions are as contested, complex, and of vital contemporary significance as the causes and consequences of the rise of capitalism and market society. How are we to understand and assess the radical shift in worldview - in the modern window unto questions of the good, the true, and the beautiful - that surrounded the commercial and industrial revolutions? Which aspirations of the Enlightenment proponents of the commercial spirit, and which fears of the critics of commercialism, have been realized? Are the commercial way of life and the spirit of republican self-government mutually reinforcing, or mutually exclusive? Are we currently witnessing the decline and fall of the commercial republic or its expansion into global empire? The mission of the Project is to pursue such questions by promoting inquiry into deep sources and profound impact of the rise of capitalism. We follow these questions across the spheres of human thought and activity, from politics and international relations, business and law, and philosophy and religion, to the natural and social sciences, art, literature, and architecture. We do so primarily through curricular offerings, collaborative undertakings within and beyond UCLA, and sponsorship of varied public events, including conferences, lectures, and seminars.

In the first year the Project will sponsor three undergraduate courses - Rights, Representation, and Revolution: The Making of Liberal Democracy in European Thought; Nature, Culture, and the Individual: The Making of Capitalism in European Thought; and Founding a New World: American Thought from Puritanism to Transcendentalism. Drawing on careful readings of the texts of Locke, Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and others, this sequence traces the currents of Enlightenment thought regarding human nature, value, and action as they converged on new norms of politics, law, and economics, and as they influenced the making of the American republic. Through these courses the Project aims to advance CLAFI's commitment to providing a forum for liberal arts learning wherein students have an opportunity to engage in enduring debates about the fundamental human questions in conversation with some of the great works of human history. Students work to develop not only the skills of critical reasoning and cogent writing, but also the civic and cultural literacy required of good citizenship in a free society.

We are currently organizing a faculty advisory group that will bridge standard disciplinary boundaries, and which will include scholars from other colleges and universities in the area. Our goal is to make CLAFI's Commercial Republic Project a regional hub for the study of the history and philosophy of capitalism and market society. The Project also benefits from collaboration with UCLA's Clark Library, with its strengths in English literature and history (1641-1800). And under the rubric of "Science,

Enterprise, and Law in the Making of the American Commercial Republic,” the Project works in partnership with parallel projects at Yale University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, the Illinois Institute of Technology, and the University of Wisconsin.

The Project also sponsors a post-doctoral fellowship, an annual speaker series, and colloquia and conferences for the university and general public.

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