

Although the Episcopal and Presbyterian sects are the two dominant ones in Great Britain, all the others are perfectly acceptable and live quite harmoniously together, whilst most of their preachers hate each other with almost as much cordiality as a Jansenist [member of a Catholic religious movement condemned as a heresy] damns a Jesuit.

Go into the London Stock Exchange—a more respectable place than many a court—and you will see representatives from all nations gathered together for the utility of men. Here Jew, Moham- medan and Christian deal with each other as though they were all of the same faith, and only apply the word infidel to people who go bankrupt. Here the Presbyterian trusts the Anabaptist and the Anglican accepts a promise from the Quaker. On leaving these peaceful and free assemblies some go to the Synagogue and others for a drink, this one goes to be baptized in a great bath in the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, that one has his son's foreskin cut and has some Hebrew words he doesn't understand mumbled over the child, others go to their church and await the inspiration of God with their hats on, and everybody is happy.

If there were only one religion in England there would be danger of despotism, if there were two they would cut each other's throats, but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness.

Questions

1. Why is Voltaire's discussion of the Royal Exchange relevant to his discussion of religion in Great Britain?
2. What does Voltaire think of Presbyterian ministers? What motivates them? What effect have they had on the religious and social life of Britain? What do his comments in this passage suggest about his attitude toward religious belief in general?
3. Why does Voltaire believe that Britain enjoys religious peace?

Adam Smith, On Baubles and the Demise of Feudalism (1776)

Today, Adam Smith (1723–1790) is often called the father of modern economics, but this probably would have puzzled him: he was professor (at the University of Glasgow) of logic and of moral philosophy, and was at least as well known in his lifetime for his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) as for *Wealth of Nations* (1776), from which the excerpt below is taken. His economic vision focused on agriculture and commerce, with manufacturing and technological change playing relatively minor roles.

Yet in other ways, Smith did prophesy a new political and economic order. He insisted that people naturally pursued their rational self-interest, and that governments could best promote prosperity by accepting this rather than trying to change it. As long as people had to compete fairly, without force, collusion, or monopoly, self-interested competition would produce a good overall outcome. Moreover, he insisted that national wealth should be measured by the quantity of goods and services that people consumed, not, as the then-popular doctrine of mercantilism claimed, by the size of government gold and silver reserves.

In this passage, Smith argues that the temptations of exotic goods played a crucial role in dissolving western European feudalism, replacing it with a freer and more law-abiding society, and that markets could work a similar magic elsewhere. Few historians would accept this as a picture of how change actually occurred, but it provides a powerful example of Smith, the Enlightenment philosopher: relying on a few facts and supposed general truths, he reasons about how, under the right circumstances, a better world can emerge as an accidental by-product of people's vices.

In a country which has neither foreign commerce nor any of the finer manufactures, a great proprietor, having nothing for which he can exchange the greater part of the produce of his lands which is over and above the maintenance of the cultivators, consumes the whole in rustic hospitality at home. If this surplus produce is sufficient to maintain a hundred or a thousand men, he can make use of

SOURCE: Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1852), pp. 167–70.

it in no other way than by maintaining a hundred or a thousand men. He is at all times, therefore, surrounded with a multitude of retainers and dependents, who, having no equivalent to give in return for their maintenance, but being fed entirely by his bounty, must obey him, for the same reason that soldiers must obey the prince who pays them. Before the extension of commerce and manufactures in Europe, the hospitality of the rich and the great, from the sovereign down to the smallest baron, exceeded every thing which, in the present times, we can easily form a notion. * * * The great Earl of Warwick is said to have entertained every day, at his different manors, 30,000 people; and though the number here may have been exaggerated, it must, however, have been very great to admit of such exaggeration. A hospitality nearly of the same kind was exercised not many years ago in many different parts of the Highlands of Scotland. It seems to be common in all nations to whom commerce and manufactures are little known. I have seen, says Doctor Pocock, an Arabian chief dine in the streets of a town where he had come to sell his cattle, and invite all passengers, even common beggars, to sit down with him and partake of his banquet.

The occupiers of land were in every respect as dependent upon the great proprietor as his retainers. Even such of them as were not in a state of villanage [legal unfreedom], were tenants at will [whom the landlord could dismiss at any time] who paid a rent in no respect equivalent to the subsistence which the land afforded them. A crown, half a crown, a sheep, a lamb, was some years ago, in the Highlands of Scotland, a common rent for lands which maintained a family. In some places it is so at this day. * * * A tenant at will, who possesses land sufficient to maintain his family for little more than a quit-rent, is as dependent upon the proprietor as any servant or retainer whatever, and must obey him with as little reserve. * * *

Upon the authority which the great proprietors necessarily had, in such a state of things, over their tenants and retainers, was founded the power of the ancient barons. They necessarily became the judges in peace, and the leaders in war, of all who dwelt upon their estates. They could maintain order, and execute the law, within their respective demesnes, because each of them could there turn the whole force of all the inhabitants against the injustice of

any one. No other person had sufficient authority to do this. The king, in particular, had not. * * * To have enforced payment of a small debt within the lands of a great proprietor, where all the inhabitants were armed, and accustomed to stand by one another, would have cost the king, had he attempted it by his own authority, almost the same effort as to extinguish a civil war. He was, therefore, obliged to abandon the administration of justice, through the greater part of the country, to those who were capable of administering it; and, for the same reason, to leave the command of the country militia to those whom that militia would obey.

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But what all the violence of the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about. These gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their lands, and which they could consume themselves, without sharing it either with tenants or retainers. All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind. As soon, therefore, as they could find a method of consuming the whole value of their rents themselves, they had no disposition to share them with any other persons. For a pair of diamond buckles, perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the maintenance, or, what is the same thing, the price of the maintenance of 1000 men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them. The buckles, however, were to be all their own, and no other human creature was to have any share of them; whereas, in the more ancient method of expense, they must have shared with at least 1000 people. With the judges that were to determine the preference, this difference was perfectly decisive; and thus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest, and the most sordid of all vanities they gradually bartered their whole power and authority.

In a country where there is no foreign commerce, nor any of the finer manufactures, a man of L.10,000 a-year cannot well employ his revenue in any other way than in maintaining, perhaps, 1000

families, who are all of them necessarily at his command. In the present state of Europe, a man of L.10,000 a-year can spend his whole revenue, and he generally does so, without directly maintaining twenty people, or being able to command more than ten footmen, not worth the commanding. Indirectly, perhaps, he maintains as great, or even a greater number of people, than he could have done by the ancient method of expense. For though the quantity of precious productions for which he exchanges his whole revenue be very small, the number of workmen employed in collecting and preparing it must necessarily have been very great. * * * By paying [for his luxury goods], he indirectly contributes to the maintenance of all the workmen and their employers. He generally contributes, however, but a very small proportion to [the whole annual maintenance of any particular worker]. * * * Though he contributes, therefore, to the maintenance of them all, they are all more or less independent of him, because generally they can all be maintained without him.

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The same cause gradually led [great landowners] to dismiss the unnecessary part of their tenants. Farms were enlarged, and the occupiers of land, notwithstanding the complaints of depopulation, reduced to the number necessary for cultivating it, according to the imperfect state of cultivation and improvement in those times. By the removal of the unnecessary mouths, and by exacting from the farmer the full value of the farm, a greater surplus, or, what is the same thing, the price of a greater surplus, was obtained for the proprietor, which the merchants and manufacturers soon furnished him with a method of spending upon his own person, in the same manner as he had done the rest. The cause continuing to operate, he was desirous to raise his rents above what his lands, in the actual state of their improvement, could afford. His tenants could agree to this upon one condition only, that they should be secured in their possession for such a term of years as might give them time to recover, with profit, whatever they should lay out in the further improvement of the land. The expensive vanity of the landlord made him willing to accept of this condition; and hence the origin of long leases.

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The tenants having in this manner become independent, and the retainers being dismissed, the great proprietors were no longer capable of interrupting the regular execution of justice, or of disturbing the peace of the country. Having sold their birth-right, not like Esau, for a mess of pottage in time of hunger and necessity, but, in the wantonness of plenty, for trinkets and baubles, fitter to be the playthings of children than the serious pursuits of men, they became as insignificant as any substantial burgher or tradesmen in a city. A regular government was established in the country as well as in the city, nobody having sufficient power to disturb its operations in the one, any more than in the other.

Questions

1. How, according to Smith, did rich men with few attractive goods available to purchase use their wealth? How did this shape the social and political order?
2. Once such men began buying "baubles," how did their relations with poorer members of society change? How did this strengthen an emerging central government?
3. What does this version of history suggest about the likelihood and limits of human progress? About how such progress occurs?