

Antiquity as Lesson: Does Commercial Prosperity lead to the Ruin of Nations ?

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In 18th century France, *philosophes* criticized the education at *collèges* managed by monasteries for having a bias towards a traditional Latin education and the humanities, calling for more emphasis on the French language and modern science. Despite that, in their own writings, they never stopped referring to Greek and Roman antiquity. Here in my paper, I would like to focus on a controversy over luxury and consider what functions such reference to antiquity had in their discussions surrounding commercial prosperity and its resulting luxury.

The disapproval of luxury is linked to many factors. Above all, ancient republics (namely Sparta and Rome) played an important role in the discussion, emphasizing the contrast of a “rich but corrupt nation” and a “modest and virtuous nation”. The theme of Sparta’s victory over the hedonistic commercial nation of Athens and the Roman Republic’s victory over Carthage, the commercial powerhouse that dominated the Mediterranean trade, appears repeatedly in the arguments attacking luxury. Commercialism orients people to personal interest and pleasure, induces them to hate self-sacrifice for public interest and deprives them of virtue; the fate of Athens and Carthage exemplifies that a nation indulging in wealth and a lavish lifestyle never rivals a poor but virtuous military state.

On the other hand, those authors approving luxury stressed the expansion of consumption in the form of luxury, highlighting its economic aspect, although they could not disregard the counterargument pointing to moral as well as military decline. In other words, what they wanted was a rationale to show that commercial prosperity and luxury causes neither moral decay nor military decline. For instance, Melon thought that the defeat of Carthage was caused by

its immature commerce, rather than commerce per se, attempting to draw a new lesson from the Punic Wars. But a more important argument was put forth by Montesquieu: in a republic based on the principle of virtue, what is essential is modesty and equality as a foundation of the former, in which luxury is harmful; but under a monarchy based on honor, which is open to economic development, luxury is good. His discussion indeed opened up a possibility to establish a new model different from ancient republics. However, reference to ancient models continued even after Montesquieu. In fact, Rousseau and Mably's applause to ancient republics even strengthened the contrasting images of "virtuous antiquity" and the "vicious modern age". According to Rousseau, it is nothing but a perpetual truth proven by history that commercial prosperity and the luxury it entails leads to the decline of the nation.

But here we have to notice that their applauding of ancient republics did not lead to either attacks on the French monarchy or a request for a republican regime. On this point, Chantal Grell concludes that their idealization of a republican regime represented their disapproval of the aristocratic ideology that attempted to justify their status privilege; and that it never functioned as an attack on monarchy. But the situation is not as clear as that. In the controversy over whether to approve commercial activities by aristocracy, chevalier d'Arcq expressed his disapproval towards such activities on the premise that a hierarchical order is essential to monarchy (he applauded the reign of Louis XIV), positioning aristocracy as the bearer of virtue and military spirit, while looking to ancient republics to provide a model. In the Roman citizen's public mind, he found a parallel of noble bravery.

These discussions surrounding luxury indicate that the intellectuals who were aware of a historic change - the advent of a commercial society - were groping for different answers. For their criticism of the current situation and attempts to reconstruct the French monarchy, the antique world provided an important model. It was not so easy to create new ethics or an idea of a state when society in the real world was undergoing changes.