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### Dissertation Abstract

My dissertation, “The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith’s Response to Rousseau,” explores the thought of one of commercial society’s first and greatest defenders, Adam Smith, and one of its first and greatest critics, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. At first glance these two thinkers seem to be complete opposites: Smith is usually seen as a hard-headed economist who advocates large, laissez-faire capitalist states comprised of selfish individuals, while Rousseau is typically portrayed as a passionate philosopher-novelist who advocates small, harmonious communities comprised of virtuous citizens. Yet I show not only that Rousseau’s writings had a significant influence on Smith’s thought, but also that Smith shared many of Rousseau’s severe misgivings about commercial society. While most scholars writing in recent years acknowledge that Smith was not the simple advocate of laissez-faire capitalism he is often thought to be, the full range and extent of his sympathy for the arguments *against* commercial society is not often appreciated, and a comparison with Rousseau can help us to gain such an appreciation and thus to take more seriously the depth of his thought.

Smith wrote a review of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* early in his career, and in this review he translates three lengthy quotations from the *Discourse* that summarize what I argue are Rousseau’s main critiques of commercial society. In his later writings Smith not only directly responds to the challenges posed by Rousseau, but also on occasion comes close to appropriating Rousseau’s own words in doing so. Smith concedes a measure of validity to each of the main Rousseauian critiques of commercial society: he too acknowledges that the division of labor produces great inequalities and can exact an immense cost in human dignity by rendering people feeble and ignorant, that people’s great concern with the opinions of others can lead to problems like ostentation and moral corruption, and that people tend to submit themselves to endless toil and anxiety in the pursuit of “baubles and trinkets” that ultimately provide (at best) only fleeting satisfaction. So far from being an unabashed champion of commercial society, then, Smith in fact shares a number of the same misgivings as the great crusader against this kind of society.

While Smith recognizes the deeply problematic character of commercial society and consequently concedes a measure of validity to Rousseau’s critiques, he also sees the less obvious and longer-term benefits of this kind of society and so provides a number of counterarguments and countermeasures for each of these critiques. He carefully assesses the effects of commercial society not only with respect to economic productivity but also in the moral, intellectual, and political realms. While life in a commercial society may not be perfect, Smith argues, it constitutes a definite improvement over the poverty, dependence, and insecurity that characterized most previous ages. Smith’s view is far from a triumphal one: he recognizes the great costs of commercial society but concludes that it is preferable, on balance, to other forms of society, since it provides the best chance for the most people to lead a decent life.

An examination of the full scope of Smith’s thought offers a salutary reminder not only to those contemporary critics of capitalism who mischaracterize Smith (and through him, capitalism) of being indifferent to things like inequality and the issues of character and morality, but also to those contemporary defenders of Smith who mischaracterize him in a similar way but for the opposite reason (to argue that we *ought* to be indifferent to these things). In an era when commercial society has triumphed in most of the West but when the questions and problems surrounding this kind of society loom as large as ever, a return to the thought of Smith and Rousseau is timely. Even if their works cannot provide specific policy prescriptions for us today, they can remind us of the most fundamental arguments on both sides of the debate over commercial society. Hence, my dissertation not only provides a much-needed comparison of the thought of Smith and Rousseau and uses this comparison to supply a more nuanced reading of Smith, but also seeks to use their deliberations to clarify and enrich the contemporary debate over the problems and promise of commercial society.