

What was 'commercial society' seen to promise for politics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, what to threaten?

As commercial society began to emerge, the influence of Aristotle's politics was still very strong. It came to be seen by political scientists that to deal with the concept of commercial society, new developments in political thought would need to take place. 'Commercial society' can be defined as a society in which the main focus of the economy is manufacturing rather than agriculture. This structural change in the economy (only really recognised as a concept from Adam Smith's writings onwards) was to have far-reaching implications for politics.

The rise of commercial society went hand in hand with a philosophical change from a cyclical view of history, combined with a rather fatalist view of the future, to a view in which ordinary people could make a massive difference to the course of history. This was beginning to become apparent in Britain, where the first Industrial Revolution was beginning, and reached its apex in France when the aristocracy were overthrown and replaced as rulers by people from a new commercial class.

The feelings of the ruling classes certainly seemed to be dominated by fear. During the French Revolution many members of their class had been executed, and there was a general apprehension about modernity and progress. The French Revolution was seen almost as a return to mob rule, where Robespierre's Terror seemed to threaten every suggestion that the working classes were able to govern themselves peacefully. Machiavelli had suggested that as men were inherently greedy and selfish, there was a need for the political 'virtue' of the ruling classes. This virtue was based on the passionate concepts of honour and glory which dominated ancient republics. As individualism came to the fore, the security in such collective ends no longer existed, and there was anxiety that 'public virtue' would be subsumed by private interest. The threat was that the working classes, if given political power, would be ruled by members of their class who lacked such virtue. This conflicted with Robespierre's view that the will of the people was virtuous, while the ruling classes were vice-ridden and despotic. The potential was also seen for the 'despotism of democracy', which would unite the productive members of society at the expense of the unproductive. This certainly seemed true during the Terror – observers saw that the replacement for the *ancien regime* could be as despotic as that regime itself, not destroying absolute power but simply replacing one despotic system with another.

Alexis de Tocqueville talked of the difference between 'aristocratic character' – found in ancient regimes – and the 'democratic character' of modern ones. His aim was to try to find a solution to authoritarianism, which seemed to exist in both cases. The 'aristocratic character' was formed in the context of seemingly eternal social difference, later described as status or class. Each group was restrained by the others, but society was generally settled. De Tocqueville concluded that this 'character' went with liberalism, as there was no motivation for the ruling class to persuade the lower classes, with whom they rarely associated, to think like themselves. The democratic character on the other hand produced a sense of similarity between all people – each believed himself to be equal to another. Therefore the public had reason to impose its beliefs on private individuals, willing 'the mind of all' on 'the intelligence of each', producing intolerance of difference. De Tocqueville was perhaps the first therefore to notice the concept of 'public opinion' as the new despot, proving that the extension of political rights did not by itself prevent authoritarianism.

A particularly American view of the situation was a fear of the concentration of power into the hands of those with no inherent virtue, as the creed of Protestant individualism which dominated America saw all power as corrupting. The proposed solution, still in force in the United States today, was to devolve power as much as possible, giving citizens the chance to vote for representatives at many different levels of government. Only in this way could democracy act as a guarantee against tyranny. However there was another factor which might have led to this tyranny, and this was an increased rationality about the way the world operated. This was due to a scientific revolution which both fostered and was advanced by the new 'commercial society'. An increase in rationality necessarily leads to an increase in conformity, as shades of opinion are subsumed beneath an 'absolute truth'. This leads to intolerance of difference, but also may lead to a reduction in conflict as fewer competing viewpoints will exist.

Another perceived threat from the 'commercial society' was the constant seizure of property from the landed classes by those who had taken political power. However de Tocqueville, using evidence gathered in America, saw that this was not going to be the case. An extension of property rights had in fact led to an increase in respect for (and aspiration towards) property, as well as infusing the society with a political

culture where rights were expected, rather than handed down from on high. This expectation of rights is still very much in evidence in modern-day America.

To people of this age, the only conceivable alternative to absolute monarchy was the 'ancient republic' of classical Greece and Rome, where the *polis* would meet in communal areas to discuss policy. This however was irreconcilable with modern society – Aristotle had proposed that a republic was not possible if any member the community was 'unable to hear the herald's cry'. Commercial societies, approaching the description of 'nation-state', were so much larger than ancient republics that a political system in which every member had a constant and strong influence over policy was practically impossible. Another major difference was that the decline in slavery meant that citizens of the new society had less time to participate in politics, and new occupations from craft production to industrial manufacturing meant that there were no great periods of inactivity among the populace as had been the case when agriculture was completely dominant. The political liberty of the ancient republic was simply not viable in the new commercial society, so political philosophers began looking for reasonable alternatives which also provided some form of liberty. The new agenda was proposed by Benjamin Constant in his speech *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*.

Constant proposed that ancient liberty was an entirely political liberty – one in which every citizen had political importance and some degree of influence over decisions such as whether or not to go to war. However this meant that whatever what decided by the *polis* would be imposed on the whole community – the 'complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community'. Laws regulated customs, and the ancients enjoyed none of the individual freedoms taken for granted by the moderns. This 'modern liberty' was an entirely social, rather than political, liberty. Rights to not be arbitrarily arrested, to express an opinion, choose a profession, dispose of property and to come and go without permission were enshrined in law. Commerce had brought about a love of individual independence which was viewed as more important than political standing. Constant said 'Since we live in modern times, I want a liberty suited to modern times'. This increase in individual liberty was one of the great promises to politics of the new commercial society.

Constant saw a 'lighter and more prudent hand' of government as being necessary. Commerce had made the action of arbitrary power seem more oppressive than in

the past. Speculations were more varied, and arbitrary power would have to multiply itself in order to reach them. The action of such power was easier to elude, as property had become so respected, and so much quicker in its circulation, that it was almost impossible for a ruler to seize. Charles Ganilh said 'Money hides itself or flees; all the operations of the state are suspended.' Authority had placed itself in a position of dependence on wealth. Constant saw a danger however that political power might be given up too easily. This he believed would be restrained by representative democracy and by the motivation of humans, which he believed was not the pursuit of happiness but the pursuit of self-development.

One of the major problems for political scientists was that in these commercial societies there were a large number of people who were simply not producing anything. The 'industry of the peasant', according to Adam Smith, would support the 'slothful landlord'. Before Smith it was difficult to imagine how this could be possible except through repression. Wealth was seen as being fixed in terms of available gold and silver, and an increase in the wealth of one meant the impoverishment of another. Smith proposed that in fact this was not a 'zero-sum game' – that the division of labour had increased productivity so much that society was able to support the unproductive without this being a burden. In fact, the delegation of unproductive functions (such as the creation of a standing army) were seen as essential to the increase in the productivity of labour itself. This in turn would reduce the propensity to moralise, as those who led decadent lifestyles were no longer seen as reducing society's wealth, but increasing it. As Smith said when talking about trade between towns and the countryside, 'the gains of both are mutual and reciprocal'.

The ultimate aim of most political scientists was to propose a society where conflict would not exist. The commercial society was seen as one such society for a number of reasons, mainly taken, again, from the philosophy of Adam Smith. War and commerce were seen by Constant as two means of achieving the same end – getting what one wants. Commerce was described by him as 'conquest by mutual agreement', and can be seen to produce a virtuous circle of gradually less conflict – for example, as safety at sea increases due to developments in shipbuilding, there is a greater chance of trade routes being established. Once these routes have been established, the greatest gains come from trade, not war, further increasing safety at sea, and providing funds for new developments in shipbuilding.

Adam Smith made a more detailed case based on the cost of waging war. In primitive societies, every man was suited to war, and was often called to be a warrior. In a society based on animal husbandry, some members of the community must stay behind during war to look after the settlement. Once we reach 'commercial society', nature does not take care of the work of individuals in any way, so an artisan who becomes a warrior must be compensated for lost income. The number of people able to fight becomes smaller as society becomes more civilised, and as wars become longer due to improvements in technology, the cost of supporting an army becomes greater. Martial training for the general populace is likely to be resisted as 'the great body of the people becomes altogether unwarlike', and the division of labour is necessary for an improvement in the art of war. A standing army is seen as the only defence of a civilised nation against a barbarous one which would wish to rob it of its wealth. The expense of a standing army is great, and increases with improvements in firearms, ammunition and defensive structures. Thus whole nations lose interest in conflict, keeping an army as a deterrent but seeking to gain by trade what in the past would have been plundered in war. This end to external conflict was one of the great hopes of the new commercial society.

But what of internal conflict? The conflict between the rich and the poor was to be resolved by the logic of Adam Smith's philosophy – that wealth was no longer competed for on zero-sum terms, but was increased by cooperation. There was a change in political discourse from talk of honour and glory to talk of prudence and hard work – practicalities which simply left no time for conflict. Smith believed that the prudent pursuit of individual interests would lead to an increase in 'mutual sympathy' among people, who would have reason, and use reason, to achieve social harmony. The importance of politics, as traditionally practiced, was under threat, as priorities in the commercial society changed to increasing individual liberty and collective wealth.