From Glorifying Violence to Praising Business

Even as the government became constitutionally limited, public attitudes towards commerce, business, and finance in Europe also changed considerably between the early sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century. It moved from mere Calvinist tolerance to positive enthusiasm. The market was now respectable. Why?

In *The Passion and the Interests*, the economist Albert Hirschman wondered if these attitudes were transformed because of the horrors of religious war, which ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The Peace of Westphalia enshrined the doctrine of national self-determination, and marked the advent of the nation state. The earlier dominance of established religion over public discourse gave way to freer debate during the Age of Enlightenment. To a Europe seared by years of war, the glory and heroism associated with military prowess were perhaps now seen as dangerous and foolhardy, especially in the light of Saint Augustine’s warnings about the lust for power. Indeed, in what is sometimes termed the first modern novel, *Don Quixote*, published in 1605, Miguel de Cervantes lampooned the code of chivalry and suggested the pursuit of glory bordered on insanity.

Moreover, the ability to win wars became more a matter of having vast numbers of well-trained disciplined soldiers backed by sufficient resources rather than individual military prowess and heroism. Aristocratic sons no longer perfected their swordsmanship, riding, and their jousting, when all it took was a peasant with a well-primed musket to bring them down to an unremarkable banal death in battle. Military traditions persisted in some English families but while three-quarter of the peerage had seen service in wars in the 1540s, only one in five had done so by the early seventeenth century. Brawn and the ability to inflict violence became less valued in society.

Perhaps business took its place because humans want something to distinguish themselves by, because they need something to satisfy their competitive instincts. Why, however, could this not be sports or intellectual achievement? Indeed, as historians such as E.L. Jones and Charles Tilly have emphasized, and we have seen in this chapter, there was something else at work in Europe around the time of the Peace of Westphalia that made the passion (for military glory) and the interest (for making money) complements rather than substitutes; the rise of nation states, and the associated struggle for external dominance. War, or the passion for national glory, needed funding, and lots of it. As important as the captain on the battlefield contributing to military might was the commercial farmer, businessman, or financier creating taxable national income. Echoing this view, Daniel Defoe, known now as the author of *Robinson Crusoe* but also known then for his astute political commentary, wrote in his influential periodical *The Review of the State of the British Nation*, “The Power of Nations is not now measur’d, as it has been, by Prowess, Gallantry, and Conduct. ‘Tis the Wealth of Nations that makes them Great.”
All this is best seen in what happened to the British aristocracy. As historian Lawrence Stone points out, “The difference between a Duke of Buckingham in the early sixteenth century, with his castles, his armories, and his hundreds of armed retainers, and a Duke of Newcastle in the mid-eighteenth century, with his Palladian houses, his handful of pocket boroughs, and his spreading political connection, is a measure of change in English society.” He could have added that dukes no longer disdained commerce and spent enormous amounts of time absorbing new agricultural technologies, investing in drainage and irrigation, and attending agricultural fairs. Indeed, King George III ran model farms and wrote in farm journals under a pseudonym, Mr. Robinson, about them. Money, especially if it came from land, ceased to have an odor. Of course, while the aristocratic pursuit of glory shifted from prowess on the battlefield to success in growing more turnips, the drums of war had not stopped beating. Now, however, professional soldiers, funded by the taxes on turnips, marched to it.

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i Stone, Crisis of the Aristocracy, 130-131.
iv Stone, Crisis of the Aristocracy, 97.