

On Commerce, Letter X

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Voltaire

Leading intellectual of the enlightenment

Commerce, which has brought wealth to the citizenry of England, has helped to make them free, and freedom has developed commerce in its turn. By means of it the nation has grown great; it is commerce that little by little has strengthened the naval forces that make the English the masters of the seas. At present they have nearly two hundred warships. Posterity may learn with some surprise that a little island with nothing of its own but a bit of lead, tin, fuller's earth, and coarse wool, became, by means of its commerce, powerful enough by 1723 to send three fleets at one time to three different ends of the earth – one to guard Gibraltar, conquered and kept by its arms; another to Portobello to dispossess the King of Spain of the treasures of the Indies; and the third to the Baltic Sea to prevent the Northern Powers from fighting.

When Louis XIV was shaking Italy, and his armies, already in possession of Savoy and Piedmont, were ready to capture Turin, it was up to Prince Eugene to march from the depths of Germany to aid the duke of Savoy. He had no money at all, a thing without which towns are neither taken nor defended. He appealed to some English merchants. In half an hour he had a loan of fifty million; whereupon he delivered Turin, beat the French, and wrote this little note to those who had loaned him that sum: "Gentlemen, I have received your money, and I flatter myself that I have employed it to your satisfaction."

All this makes an English merchant justly proud, and allows him boldly to compare himself, not without some reason, to a Roman citizen; moreover, the younger brother of a peer of the realm does not scorn to enter into trade. Lord Townshend, Minister of State, has a brother who is content to be a merchant in the City. When Lord Oxford was governing England, his younger brother was a factor at Aleppo; he did not want to return home, and died there.

This custom, which unfortunately is beginning to go out of fashion, appears monstrous to Germans infatuated with their quarterings. They are unable to imagine how the son of a peer of England could be only a rich and powerful bourgeois,

whereas Germany is all Prince: there have been at one time as many as thirty Highnesses of the same name, with nothing to show for it but their pride and a coat of arms.

In France anybody who wants to can be a marquis; and whoever arrives in Paris from the remotest part of some province with money to spend and an ac or an ille at the end of his name, may indulge in such phrases as “a man of my sort,” “a man of my rank and quality,” and with sovereign eye look down upon a wholesaler. The merchant himself so often hears his profession spoken of disdainfully that he is fool enough to blush. Yet I don’t know which is the more useful to a state, a well-powdered lord who knows precisely what time the king gets up in the morning and what time he goes to bed, and who gives himself airs of grandeur while playing the role of slave in a minister’s antechamber, or a great merchant who enriches his country, send order from his office to Surat and to Cairo, and contributes to the well-being of the world.